

Three Men in a Panic



Written by

Stephen William ROWE

Authors Note

Each of the stories was inspired by adventures or unusual events which happened either to me or to my friend Tegwyn at various periods in our lives.

After drawing up a shortlist of the most suitable ones, I went to work.

I have embroidered each tale with added events and characters, but I am convinced that these extra adventures might very well have happened, had things gone only slightly differently.

All the characters involved are products of my imagination and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Stephen William Rowe

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- 3) Volume 3 – in preparation

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Over the previous few days, we had been increasingly bothered by wasps. Nobody had been stung of course. Nevertheless, the Girls were always leaping about as soon as one of the little devils came sniffing around their plates.

'There's probably be a nest somewhere,' said Alun helpfully.

'Brilliant deduction, Watson,' sighed Margaux, looking from Alun to me, and finally at Mike. 'Well why don't you go and find it and dispose of it then?'

We didn't know the answer to this question but guessed that Margaux did.

'Well you three can make yourselves useful for once and do that while we're on the beach, this afternoon,' she said.

'OK,' I agreed. I got this in quickly before Alun had time to make the unfortunate comment, he was no doubt about to say, 'Will do.'

Alun made a face, then suddenly brightened. 'Let's go and see if we can find some insecticide in the lean-too.' He suggested, and we trooped off.

This cleaver manoeuvre neatly got us out of the task of clearing the table and washing up. Alun had once more startled us by the rapidity of his innovative thinking. Reflecting on this point I have often wondered why he had never considered going into politics.

Anyway, we took plenty of time over this job, and during the search discovered and studied all sorts of interesting objects. Many of these had been carefully hidden away behind other objects, to keep them out of view from the casual holidaymaker. All the same,

we did wonder why the owner had taken the trouble to hide several boxes of pipe-cleaners behind a cracked mirror.

Sadly, none of the exciting discoveries we made proved useful for wasp elimination. However, we eventually came on a wooden box full of suitably dangerous looking chemicals. Unfortunately, as the text on the bottles was either indecipherable or partially worn off, we had to go by the faded pictures on the labels. One of these had faded sketches of insects on it. On removing its rusted cap, the smell convinced us that, we were handling something which would certainly not do wasps any good. The dose was just legible, but Alun said that it would be a wise move to multiply this by ten, to be on the safe side. The bottle was big and almost full, so we saw no reason to disagree with the proposal.

I turned the container over in my hands, 'I bet this stuff was banned from the rest of the world several decades ago.'

'It's just what we need then,' smiled Alun, 'It'll do the job properly for once.'

Having got so far, we wandered around the house and outbuildings, carefully following the flight of each wasp we spotted. In this way, we discover the location of two big nests. The first was clearly visible, high up under the terrace roof and the second was under the tiles in the loft.

'The one on the terrace is easy to deal with, by hand. I've done that dozens of times,' said Alun. 'Don't tell the Girls though. If you do, they'll only get worried and worked up about a perfectly straightforward job.'

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We then walked back to the terrace, where he stood surveying the nest for some time. 'We'll wait for night, and when they've all returned to the nest, I'll show you how it's done.'

Accordingly, once the evening meal was finished, we suggested that everyone go off for a walk while we dealt with the wasps. Unsurprisingly, there was a marked lack of resistance to this idea, and we were left alone to our murderous pastime. Alun brought out some high steps and pulled on a pair of thick rubber gloves he had found under the kitchen sink.

'Now watch how I do this. No need for poison when you can get at the nest directly,' He nodded. 'The little devils are all asleep now, so I'll just grab it, crush the thing up and throw it down,' he paused as he surveyed the football-size nest.

'Once it's down you two, just stamp all over it. Just be quick about it.'

We gaped at him. 'Are you sure that's absolutely safe Alun?' I called up as he disappeared into the shadows.

'Done it often enough. Don't worry, flash me a bit of light from your phone so I can get into position.'

He was just poised ready to clap his hands onto the nest when Mike had one of his bright ideas. To help Alun see what he was doing, he stepped over to the wall and flicked the switch for the two 150-watt spotlights, one of which was only a foot or two from the nest.

Alun, momentarily blinded, swayed dangerously at the top of the steps and at the same instant the wasps decided that morning must have come early. The early risers, discovering an intruder, called up reinforcements. Thus, before we knew what was

happening, Alun was amongst us, and the three of us had made a strategic retreat to a safe location under the water the swimming pool. Mike had snapped off the lights again, and luckily for us, the pursuit was soon called off. Fortunately, also, the water was warm, and we also had plenty of time before the others returned from their walk to change back into dry clothes and pretend that nothing had happened.

When we told the Girls that, after studying the nest from close quarters, we had decided to put the job off until daylight, the Girls looked at us askance, but we pretended not to notice.

Next day Alun suggested that we deal with the two nests from a respectable distance once everyone was down on the beach. We had found a garden spray which sported the sort of long extension pipe used for treating trees. We filled this with a highly concentrated mixture from the bottle of Croatian insecticide. While we were doing this, Mike dragged a big empty water-butt around from the back of the house and positioned it directly under the nest.

'Now,' said Alun. 'I'm going to knock the nest down with this stick, right?'

We nodded.

'As soon as it falls into the water butt there, you flood it with the spray. OK?'

We nodded, but I made sure the spray was blasting at full power before Alun whacked the nest. As it plummeted down, I followed it with the long extension rod and kept playing the spray over the nest when inside the Water-butt.

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Then we dived into the pool and watched developments from a safe distance.

The results were eminently satisfying. Very few wasps seemed to have survived except those who were away at the time of our attack. So, reassured by the potency of our mixture, we decided to move on to the nest in the loft.

The trap door leading into the loft was in my bedroom. It was directly above the bed, so we had to shift this to be able to get at it. However, to move the bed, we had to move the wardrobe and to move this, the dressing table. Once we had finished, we found we couldn't open the door to bring the step ladder in, so Mike climbed out through the window and fell straight into the big outdoor dustbin. The thing rolled away down the slope towards the pool on its well-greased wheels, toppled over and emptied him and a week's rubbish, into the water.'

'Oh hell!' cried Alun as the detritus spread itself out leisurely across the blue surface.

'It all makes work for the working man to do.' I sang.

Alun blew out his cheeks, 'If Margaux discovers this...'

'When Margaux discovers it,' I corrected.

Mike had extracted himself from the mess and, removing some orange rind from his shoulder, heaved the steps over the windowsill, knocking the table lamp onto the floor where the bulb naturally burst.

'Balls!' cried Alun as a fragment of the glass got between his bare foot and his sandals. He hopped about, with his foot in the air, eventually coming to rest against the steps, which naturally enough

slipped away and folded up. The Alun-steps ensemble, crashed to the floor, bringing with it the suitcases we had stored on top of the cupboard.

I jumped back and stood looking down at Alun as he struggled to untie himself from the tangle of objects.

'All Ok in there?' called Mike from outside.

'Yes,' I called back, 'Just rearranging things a bit.'

'Oh, OK,' Came his voice. 'I'll pop down and start cleaning the pool, shall I? Before the Girls come back.'

'Hell!' cried Alun as a bit of glass pricked his big toe again. 'Hey Mike, keep an eye on the roof from down there and shout if you spot anything.'

'OK,' replied Mike. "What sort of things?"

'Wasps, for example.' sighed Alun, 'Or vultures.'

'Vultures?' called back Mike.

'A joke.'

'Ah! Will do.'

We eventually managed to get the steps up and pushing open the trap-door gingerly, I looked about me. I located the wasps' nest, about ten feet away. It was bigger than the first and humming with dangerous looking activity. I dropped the trapdoor. 'I'm not getting up there Alun, have you seen the size of that thing?'

'For heaven's sake!' cried Alun, 'surely you're not frightened of a few tiny wasps.'

'No. Not of a few, but a few million, yes.'

'There hardly any risk.'

'Do you know where the nearest hospital is Alun?' I asked.

'What would we need a hospital for?'

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'For saving my life after getting stung ten thousand times. That's what for.'

Alun screwed up his face. 'Look. If you're as frightened as that, I'll tell you what we'll do.'

'I think that is an exclusive "We". It means what I'll do, I think.'

'Let's not waste valuable time on details.'

'I have never considered my continued survival to be a detail,' I said looking down at him on the floor below.

'What we do then...'

'What you do,' I corrected.

Alun shrugged. 'The thing to do is for me to hold the trap just wide enough for you to get the spray boom through,' he said. 'Then you blast the nest, and you keep going until the devils discover where we are.'

'And then I get stung to death... Got it.'

Alun shrugged. 'Then you shout, and I drop the trap-door.'

'Or hatch,' I added.

'Hatch if you prefer.'

Saying this, he clambered up beside me on the rickety steps, pushed up the trapdoor and peered in. 'Oh, yes. Quite a big chap then.'

'That's what I thought. Except instead of the word "Quite", I would substitute "incredibly".'

'Come on, come on. You're surely not getting cold feet, I hope. Just because of a few wasps. Really.' Then he took the spray reservoir and weighed it in his hand.'

'Should be enough, but make sure you really flood the damn thing to blazes and keep going as long as possible.'

I glanced at him. 'Otherwise?'

'There's always the swimming pool. Come on let's get this done.' He swayed a bit on the steps, and I grabbed the edge of the trapdoor for support. 'Remember to flood it to hell,' repeated Alun, 'I'll drop the trap door as soon as they start to get snooty.'

I stepped down and pumped up the spray to maximum pressure and then tested it out of the window.

A small, brightly coloured bird chose precisely that exact moment to fly past and plummeted into the pool with a splash.

'Hey what are you two up to!' cried Mike from the poolside.

'Just testing,' I shouted back.

'Christ, for God's sake, don't inhale any of that stuff.' He shouted back.

Now, I hadn't thought about that aspect of things, so I pulled my tee shirt up over my face, before clambering back up beside Alun.

'What the hell...' he started, 'Oh Yeh. Good idea.' and copied me. He pushed open the trap, and I fed the long boom through it, took aim and pulled the trigger.

Within seconds the nest was dripping as the spray played over it. Then suddenly a cloud of wasps burst forth. Incredibly though, most of them got no more than a few centimetres before plummeting to the floor. I continued to play the spray over the rest and on the underside of the tiles until everything was dripping. I then inverted the spray nozzle and aimed it directly up into the nest opening. At this, another cloud of wasps burst forth and spread out in search of the invader.

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'Time to leave.' Shouted Alun, dropping the heavy trap door, slap onto my knuckles.

'Bloody hell Alun.' I cried; my hand held firmly in place by the massive structure.

'Oops! Sorry,' Alun clambered back up the wobbling steps and levered the trap up to free my fingers.

Unfortunately, the surviving wasps spotted the manoeuvre and made a rush at us. We jumped to the floor and leapt together out of the window, directly into the second bin. We then flashed past Mike, who had just finished clearing the pool. The container duly deposited us in the water, decorating the surface with plastic bags and seemingly hundreds of bit of watermelon rind.

Extracting ourselves from this new mess, we squelched up the pool steps and stood beside Mike who was surveying the roof. Wasps were still slipping out from the gaps between the tiles, only to drop dead seconds later.

'Well done,' he congratulated. 'You really swamped them.'

We followed his look and saw the tiles running with the liquid. It was running down the tiles into the gutter and from there down the drainpipe.

Suddenly Alun leapt into the air and pointed in an agitated manner. 'Oh Hell!'

Following his pointing finger, we saw that the pipe drained into the big ornamental pond full of lovely goldfish. The deadly liquid was already running into the water, forming a milky cloud which was billowing outwards across the surface.

'Oh, bloody hell,' was all I could think of saying.

Behind us, some of the plastic bags had started to empty themselves, and all sorts of rubbish had begun to spread out over the pool surface.

'Come on,' I shouted, 'Let's clear the pool before the girls get back,' I looked over at the pond, where some of the Goldfish had already started to react rather oddly. 'The fish have had it anyway.'

'Oh hell,' sighed Alun.

'Don't worry. We'll get some new ones,' smiled Mike, always ready with the reassuring comment.

We had just finished clearing the pool and putting my bedroom back together and were about to sit down and consider action with a beer or two. However, at this moment a rusty old van pulled up, and a man of about our age climbed out.

He was wearing a tee shirt with a big mauve fig printed on it. Under this, in bold letters was printed, "Figs are Big".

He strode up, a tall, thin man with a sharp, unpleasant face and far too much hair, for his age.

'Hello.' he held out his hand, 'You're English I believe.'

'British to be exact.' Said Mike, 'You too if I'm not mistaken.'

'Yes. Expat. Used to be head of the Environmental Agency at home. Moved here after retiring.'

He nodded, 'I grow figs for the UK market now and Orchids.'

'Interesting. How can we help you?' I asked.

'Well, I'm afraid I've had to come over to complain.'

'Oh, are we making too much noise?' I was going to add a sarcastic, note by adding "For the fig trees", but held my tongue.

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'Well, I couldn't help noticing that you were spraying insecticide.'

We wondered where he could have been stationed, to not have been able to avoid seeing, but we let this go.

'Yes, wasps. We had two huge nests in the roof.'

'As I thought,' he hesitated, 'I suppose you didn't know that Fig trees can only be pollinated by wasps.'

'Really!' we were amazed.

'Yes. If you haven't got Fig-Wasps, you don't get any figs.'

'Well, I never knew that,' I said.

'Figs are essential to the economic health of the Croatian nation.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Alun, 'that's stonishing. But those are a very special breed of wasp, aren't they?'

'Well yes,' The man hesitated, 'Fig-wasps, in fact.'

'I thought as much,' smiled Alun, but I frowned at him.

The newcomer went on, 'But that's not a reason to go killing off innocent, harmless wasps.'

'Harmless?' cried Alun.

'Innocent?' cried Mike.

There being nothing inspiring left to cry, I cried not.

'But anyway Fig-wasps don't build nests. They stay near the fruit,' said Alun who was forever gleaning useless information from newspapers.

The man frowned, 'That's true, but once one realises how useful some breeds are, one looks on them with a certain benevolence.'

Now here was my chance. 'Benevolence?' I cried.

'Useful?' cried Mike, not wanting to be outdone in this crying contest.

The man sighed. 'I don't suppose any of you knew that wasps are the only pollinisers for certain types of Orchid.'

Now here he had us. 'No. That, I admit,' nodded Alun. 'And I suppose that you grow precisely that sort of Orchid, and only a short distance from here.'

At this, he seemed a little embarrassed. 'Well no, not presently, but in the near future, perhaps.' He pulled himself up. 'But you must remember that wild orchids are one of the principal natural treasures of Croatia,' He nodded at us with satisfaction and went on. 'Did you know that there is an association for the prevention of cruelty to wasps, the SPCW. Its local headquarters are not far from here.'

We were amazed at this revelation. 'And what are their activities?' I asked.

'Well, prevention of cruelty to wasps, as the acronym suggests,' he said.

'I suppose that killing them comes under the heading of cruelty,' I said but was unable to finish my questioning.

'But these are no normal garden wasp.' cried Alun, apparently warming to the subject.

'Why do you say that?' frowned the SPCW agent.

'Because they attack goldfish.'

Mike and I turned away to hide our smiles.

'Wasps don't do that.' said the man.

'Not Fig-Wasps, of course not. But these fellows do.'

'That seems incredible.' The man was taken aback, but Alun continued.

'They seem to be some sort of mutated wasp... probably Russian.'

'Russian?'

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'Probably.'

'Why Russian?'

'Ask them. I don't know. No doubt because they were born there. Anyhow, they look Russian.'

'Would you like to see one?' asked Mike, 'Just to make sure they're not your Fig-wasps?' He pretended to have suddenly thought of something important hesitated, 'Yours are all branded I suppose?'

'Branded!'

'Yes, you know, marked. Like cattle.'

The man looked a bit troubled. 'Are you mad? How on earth could I brand ten thousand wasps?'

'Ten thousand!' cried Alun. 'Maybe you should make do with a dozen or so, and then you could brand them easily and deal with them on an individual basis.'

'Yes,' agreed Mike, 'Call them each by their Christian names.'

'Ten thousand sounds a bit like battery farming to me.' Frowned Alun. 'Not very ecological that.'

'Like to see one of the Russian mutant wasps then? There's one in Alun's Hair. Hey, pass it over.'

Alun shot into the air and danced about.

'It's dead Alun,' I said.

We extracted the dead wasp and handed it to the man.

'No, it's not a Fig-wasp.' said the man.

'Told you. But just look at that horrible, ghastly grin on its face.'

'It's not grinning. Wasps always look like that.' said the Fig grower.

'Not some sort of mutation then?'

'No.'

'If they always look like that, it can't help them much in reproduction.' Said Mike. 'I mean, who would want to mate with a grinning gargoyle, like that?'

'They don't reproduce with their faces, Mike,' said Alun, 'At least I don't think so. Perhaps you could clarify that point for us.' he said turning to our visitor. The man shrugged impatiently.

'Well, this one is unlikely to do much reproducing for the moment.' I said.

'No. Pity that,' said Mike.

At this instant, the man looked over at the pond and frowned. A couple of goldfish were floating, very much dead. 'What happened to them?'

Alun went back into innovation mode, 'I already told you,' he sighed heavily, 'The wasps attacked them. That's why we got rid of the wasps.'

The man looked at us with a look of astonishment. So, Alun went on. 'It was those damn wasps. They kill at least one every day. They swarm down, wait for a fish to come up for air and then attack it.'

'Yes,' I added, 'They sting them on the lips and their mouths swell up like balloons, and they die.'

The Fig grower gulped. 'Wasps don't attack fish!'

'Fig-wasps, no, but these Russian blighters, yes.'

'I don't believe it. And anyway, who says they're Russian?'

'We didn't believe it either until we saw it with our own eyes,' I said.

'That's why we thought they must be mutated Russian wasps.' said Mike.

'Those grins are sinister enough to kill the fish from heart attack alone,' added Alun, shaking his head sadly.

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'They are not grinning,' shouted the man. He then seemed to come to a decision. 'I'm going to report you lot to the police.'

'Do you speak Croat?' asked Alun.

'No, I don't.'

'Good luck then.'

'Get out of my way.' He frowned and shoved Mike to get past. Now Mike, having been a rugby player for twenty years, was all for a bit of friendly shoving now and then. So, he shoved back, with ex-rugby player vigour. The man went staggering backwards and with a nice splash, fell into the pool.

A few seconds later, it became apparent that he could not swim, so, in we went to drag him out again.

'You'll be hearing from me,' he shouted and stomped off.

Alun shook his head. 'No education. He didn't even thank us for saving his life.'

'I believe that's what too much expatriation does for you,' said Mike.

'I'll have to be careful then,' I frowned.

As we turned to go and get some well-earned beer, we noticed that some ten or so, big Goldfish were now floating on the surface of the pond. Several others were also swimming about in a decidedly unusual way. We fished these out and disposed of them as quickly as possible.

Next day the Girls were down on the beach when the police van came backing along the track again.

This time it was accompanied by another, larger one carrying four armed police officers. The vehicles parked and the group of six then tramped

menacingly up the path carrying their machine guns. Behind them came the Priest, walking at a more sedate and priest-like pace.

During their approach, the three of us remained sitting at the table on the terrace, preparing our defence. Then, while the Chief and the priest advanced on us, the main force remained at a distance.

There was a short exchange between the police officer and the priest during which the latter opened his eye as wide as saucers and made several sharp remarks. He then turned on us. 'I have once more been disturbed from my obligations to translate for you three gentlemen,' he followed with an impatient sigh. 'However, this time the reason appears to be of the utmost gravity,' He paused, but we remained silent, innocence and wonder written all over our countenances. 'The official SPCW representative has filed an official complaint about assault perpetrated in the pursuance of his duties.'

'And what might those duties be?' asked Alun.

The priest was taken aback. 'I could not say. but that is not the point.'

"Ah! But if his duties don't explicitly include provoking peace-loving holidaymakers, who are in the pursuance of their pursuits, then he wasn't pursuing his duties, was he?' This remark from Alun left the priest a little out of his depth. But anyway, he didn't have time to reply.

'He shoved me first.' retaliated Mike, 'I just returned the compliment.'

The priest conveyed this information to the police chief who nodded. However, the man's reply made the priest frown.

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'That may be the case,' He hesitated and turned to gaze at a further vehicle which was now making its way down the track. We exchanged surprised looks because this time it was an ambulance. 'Ah! here they are at last,' he said.

He then turned back to us and shook his head sadly, 'You seem surprisingly unconcerned by the gravity of the crime you have perpetrated,' He said, but at that moment the policeman made a sharp remark, and he nodded impatiently. 'Well, there's no use denying things. Perhaps you would like to tell us where we can find the bodies.'

We started and opened our eyes wide. 'The bodies?' I asked.

'Yes, The Bodies. That SPCW man said you killed them with poison.'

Alun laughed. All had suddenly become clear. 'Oh yes. The bodies. Yes, of course. I was forgetting.'

Mike and I caught on too and echoed his remark. 'Oh! The bodies. I forgot about those too.' I smiled. 'We used a highly concentrated insecticide, actually.'

'I told that man not to go to the police,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I added, 'That was a mistake.'

'I told him he might be misunderstood,' added Alun, exchanging glances with us.

The priest swallowed hard. 'Where are the bodies please? If you don't tell us, we will find them ourselves.'

'Do you like that man? The wasp man, I mean.'

'As a matter of fact, we have had a certain number of disagreements.'

We exchanged glances. 'Ah!' said Alun, 'A obstinate man then.'

'We are not here to talk about that expatriated trouble-maker. Where are the bodies?'

Alun looked across at us, 'Shall I tell them?' we nodded. 'I must admit that we were hoping to keep it all our little secret,' He said shaking his head sadly.

'Keeping five deaths by poisoning and secret?' cried the astonished priest.

'Ten in fact,' said Alun.

'Ten?' he cried, 'For heaven's sake, tell us where they are.'

Alun shook his head sadly again, 'Well if you must know,' he hesitated, 'They're in the pond.'

The priest started. 'In the pond! All of them?'

I smiled. 'Oh no. Not all of them. We've already disposed of five.'

'Disposed of them!?'

'Yes,' said Alun. 'We were worried about the smell.'

'And the vultures,' Mike contributed.

'Yes, the vultures,' agreed Alun.

'Vultures!'

'Yes. Horrible big birds which feed on corpses.'

The priest exchanged a few words with the policeman. 'There are no vultures in this part of Croatia.'

We laughed with relief, 'well that's a blessing,' said Alun. 'We worried for nothing after all then.'

'Good God! are you all raving mad?' burst out the priest and led the police off towards the pond. We pulled faces at each other, 'Not a very priest-like way of treating peace-loving tourists,' called Mike.

Ignoring this, and after a bit of disagreement and some shouting from the chief, two of the men waded out into the pond. They then spent a good half hour

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poking about in the mud and slime at the bottom. Eventually, however, they looked up at their boss and shook their heads. There was a short exchange, and the priest came back to us. 'They can't find anything. Where have you put the bodies?'

We stood up. 'I can assure you. They are there, in the pond. Those men can't be looking carefully enough.' Said Alun.

'They might have slipped under the leaves.' I suggested.

The priest snorted, 'A few leaves can't hide five bodies.'

'Yes, they can. I'll show you.' said Alun helpfully.

We were escorted to the pond by the armed policemen.

'I told you they weren't looking carefully.' smiled Alun. 'Look. There they are.' and he pointed to the far end of the pond.

The two soaked and muddy men waded across, and going down on their knees, splashed about in the slime. After a short pause, they turned and shook their heads again.

The police chief was getting very angry, so Alun stepped over. 'Look.' he pointed, 'There.'

The group assembled and gazed down at the dead fish bobbing against the grassy verge.

The priest was astonished, 'Goldfish!'

'Yes,' agreed Alun, 'I don't know the word in Croat.'

'Those are dead goldfish!' The priest repeated.

'Yes, that's right. Goldfish.'

The Croats exchanged a few words and looked over at us with astonishment.

'And these are the bodies that that damned CPCW man complained about?' cried the priest.

'Unfortunately, they were accidentally killed when the insecticide got into the water.'

There was a long pregnant silence.

I took a step forward and looked down sadly. 'We told that man that it would not be a good idea to go to the police. We warned him about possible misunderstandings.'

The priest was almost visibly smoking with anger, but Alun smiled. 'We'll leave you to explain to him how to say Goldfish, in Croat, shall we, or perhaps you would prefer us to do it...'

The priest snarled, once more in a rather unpriest-like way, 'No. I think it would be best for me to deal with that personally.'

When the truth was brought to the attention of the police, the younger officers burst into laughter and slapped their thighs with undisguised mirth. However, they were sharply reprimanded by their chief, who appeared almost as annoyed as the priest. The two men then exchanged a few words, and the priest smiled an unpleasant smile. 'The chief of police is very sorry for the mix-up.' We smiled and nodded. 'However, he would like to mention that the owner of this house was very fond of his fish.' He nodded, 'They were, as you say, the apple of his eye. He was breeding them.' We nodded, 'He also happens to be a rather important person around these parts and might become very angry.'

With this parting shot, he stomped off, followed by the police chief. The other four trailed some distance behind doing their best to hide their hilarity, but not succeeding very well.

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An angry and important Croat was not something which we were particularly fond of. Experience had shown such people sometimes to employ rather un-British ways of expressing their discontent. We, therefore, felt it a wise move to avoid unnecessary complications.

'We'll have to replace the fish,' Said Mike.

So, that afternoon, we visited the village and learned that the nearest pet shop was one hundred kilometres away in Split. All the same, as we wanted to avoid any further complications, we decided to take the following day off, and drive over. The expedition would probably cost more in petrol than the cost of the goldfish, but it couldn't be helped. However, late that evening, about an hour after dinner, Mike came over to us, a big smile on his face. 'Solved the problem,' He nodded.

'Sorry?'

'I found some goldfish. Plenty in fact.'

'You Found some.'

'Well, I found an abandoned house. The pond was full of them. So, I caught them all and put them in our pond.'

'An abandoned house!' I stammered, 'You're sure that it really was abandoned, Mike?'

'No doubt. No one has been near the place for ages. It's all closed up.' He smiled. 'I'll take you over and show you tomorrow.' We nodded and went over to the pond to have a look.

They were indeed very nice, plump and visibly robust goldfish. Classy goldfish to be precise. Not your common sort but ones with lovely gossamer

fins. We looked up at Mike with new respect. 'Well done, Mike.'

'I thought that would save us a four-hour drive.' he nodded, 'I think I deserve an extra beer.'

We agreed with this as being a good move.

'We can put them back as soon as they start reproducing.' He finished. I glanced at Alun, but we decide to let this one go. Timing was not one of Mikes' strong points.

The next morning, we were finishing breakfast when a new Range-Rover came purring up the track.

A well-dressed man jumped out and came briskly up the path.

'Oh hell!' sighed Alun, 'What now!'

Margaux cast a look at my wife, and they smiled and shook their heads.

'Hello, Hello. Pleased to meet you,' the man called as he approached. 'Just got back from six weeks in the States. They told me about the trouble you had yesterday. Thought I had better come around straight away.' He held out his hand and gave his name. 'I'm the local MP, you see. I felt I had to apologise for the misunderstanding. Stupid of course,' He went on, 'That CPCW man and his ideas, is always causing trouble.'

We explained that we had not taken it badly and had been more amused than anything else. Then suddenly, something caught his eye, and he stepped to the edge of the pond. 'Good heavens!' he cried. 'You have already replaced them. I suppose you went over yesterday afternoon. A long drive though.' Then kneeling he nodded, 'You must have been to

the same place as I use.' He nodded, and we exchanged looks. 'Same breed as I have. Quite rare too. I didn't even know they had any left. You must have paid a small fortune.' He stood up and turned, 'How much does that old bandit ask for them nowadays?'

'Oh!' said Alun, 'It was Mike who paid for them. Mike?'

But Mike was no longer where he had been a few seconds earlier. 'Probably the oysters didn't agree with him,' I suggested.

'Oysters? For breakfast!'

'We told him that it was a bad idea,' said Alun.

'Well, that's the first time I heard of anyone eating oysters for breakfast,' the M.P. seemed stunned.

'Oysters on toast, actually,' I added, and he pulled a disgusted face.

'Well. The man's Welsh you see,' I said. 'And his mother was Polish.'

Oddly, this information seemed to reassure the mayor. However, at this point, I spotted Mike who was gesticulating wildly from behind the man's back. 'Excuse me just a moment,' I said and quickly followed Mike around to the back of the house.

'Hell,' he cried, 'That must be the owner of the abandoned house.'

'Not quite as abandoned as you thought then,' I smiled.

'He must have come over as soon as he got home from the States. If he goes back and finds his pond empty, we are in for trouble.'

'You're in for trouble.' I corrected.

'We'll have to put them back.' he said.

'You'll have to put them back.'

'Oh, OK, Ok. You'll have to get the guy out of the way and keep him occupied.' He jumped, 'I got it! Take him and show him the beech.'

Well, we did as request and spotted Mike as he dived over the fence at the end of the garden with a big plastic bag in his hand.

The mayor was duly impressed with our new sandy beach and thanked us profusely before he left.

The following day we drove the nearly two hundred miles and brought back a big glass bowl full of goldfish. The girls insisted on filming the release of the new Goldfish population into the pond and also took a series of photos.

Strangely enough, we were not torn to pieces by Margaux and my wife, who seemed to have something of pressing importance to deal with on their computer.

So, after exchanging looks of incomprehension, we shrugged, fished out a bottle of chilled rosé wine, and took this and our glasses down on to the sandy beach.