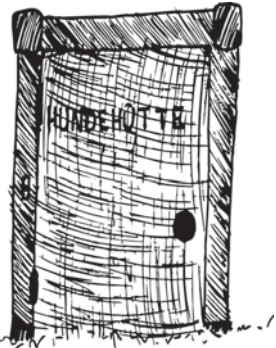


Hounded

I expect that you've noticed the odd behaviour of your neighbour – a wrinkled old basset hound named Mr. Basset-Basset – who lives just around the corner from you in a tidy bungalow with the charming name of The

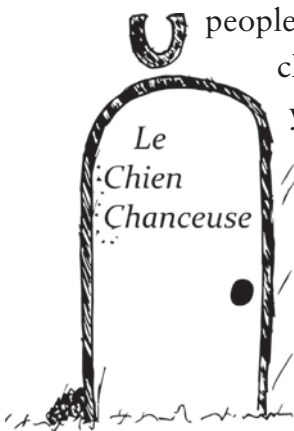
Hundehütte. You have undoubtedly observed Mr. Basset-Basset arriving home from work, or from shopping, or from taking himself for walkies in the park, and upon stepping onto his porch, you have seen him bow deeply and say something like, "Greetings, my liege," or more simply and emphatically, "My King!" You have



surely noticed that Mr. Basset-Basset, though sane in most respects, is not so in this one, as he is clearly bowing to nothing but molecules of air and saying hello to none other than Mr. Nobody (a friend of yours, I know, and indeed of all children who throw the occasional baseball through a window, or shave the family pet, or bury all the plates in the back garden. You know who you are.). If you have ever slipped in unnoticed behind Mr. Basset-Basset and followed him around his house – which would have been very, very wrong of you, by the way – you would have seen him bowing to the couch in his living room, bobbing his head twice and saying "William," and then "William," once again, as if there were a double helping of Williams sitting right there in front of his eyes. He would then have turned to one of the wingback chairs and said, "Henry," in a warm voice, shaking

an invisible hand, and then, turning to the other, you would have heard him say in a stern tone of voice, “Now, Matilda, Stephen, that’s very naughty of you. *No fighting!*” You would then have seen him clicking his tongue in disapproval while pretending to separate them, muttering under his breath, “You *know* you can’t win, Matilda – and besides, nobody likes you. I’m sorry, but that’s just the way it is, all right?”

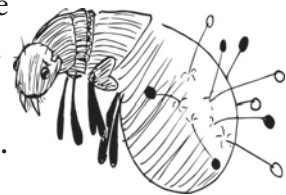
If you had decided to risk arrest and had continued to follow Mr. Basset-Basset through his tastefully decorated home (with the exception of that horrible paint-by-number of dogs playing poker), you would have seen this bizarre behaviour continue in much the same fashion. You would have seen him salute three invisible Edwards sitting on the piano bench, four Georges around the kitchen table, some more Henrys in the fridge, somebody named James hugging a book in the oven, a woman named Victoria in the bath, and embarrassingly enough, a final Henry sitting on the loo. All in all, Mr. Basset-Basset would have greeted 46 invisible



people before returning to one of the wingback chairs in the living room, asking, “May I sit in your lap, Your Majesty?” and then curling up with the latest detective novel, a rubber hotdog chew toy, and a refreshing goblet of toilet water.

No less strange, however, are the antics of Mr. Basset-Basset’s neighbour, a diminutive and highly strung Pomeranian

dog whom you have probably met, and so you already know is called Mrs. Pompadoo. Mrs. Pompadoo lives in an equally neat little bungalow named Le Chien Chanceuse, whose grounds boast many attractive lawn ornaments – a donkey, grazing deer, the Virgin Mary – as well as an irresistible bright red fire hydrant. As you are doubtless aware, Mrs. Pompadoo spends a great deal of time in her back garden, hanging her washing on the line, and then removing her washing from the line, and then hanging it back up again. She does this as an excuse to spend as much time outside as possible, because the fact is that Mrs. Pompadoo is a snoop, and the person she most likes to snoop on (for obvious reasons) is Mr. Basset-Basset. This is not the odd thing about her, however. The odd thing about Mrs. Pompadoo is that she smells less like a dog and more like a Caesar salad, as she wears a string of garlic about her neck, in addition to her collar, which is studded with birthstones and four-leaf clovers. You often see her whirling about seven times in a clockwise direction (particularly after breaking a mirror, dropping a dishcloth, or falling asleep on a table), throwing salt over her shoulder, crossing her fingers, knocking on wood, distributing earrings to pirates, throwing cutlery to the floor, deafening telemarketers by screaming into the phone, and poking pins into the backside of a little doll shaped like a pregnant flea. This is bizarre behaviour indeed, and it is hard to say who is the bigger crackpot – Mr.



Basset-Basset, with his 46 imaginary friends, or Mrs. Pompadoo, with her pirates, her stuffed flea, and her garlic necklace.

Funnily enough, however, even though Mrs. Pompadoo and Mr. Basset-Basset are each card-carrying members of the subspecies *Canis lupus familiaris*, and both of them appear to be teetering dangerously on the knife edge of sanity, the reality is that they could hardly be more unlike. As for Mrs. Pompadoo, she is what is called a magical thinker – that is, someone who believes nutty things for no good reason. Mrs. Pompadoo believes that some things bring you good luck, and some things bring you bad luck – hence the clockwise twirling, the salt-tossing, the finger-crossing, the wood-knocking, and so on. Mrs. Pompadoo does not wear a necklace of garlic to be fashionable – far from it. And she doesn't wear it because she keeps misplacing it, like she does her reading glasses, and finds that keeping garlic about her person at all times avoids this problem. No, she wears garlic for another practical purpose, and that purpose is to ward off vampires and other blood-sucking creatures of the dead. She sticks pins in a stuffed flea because, being a dog, she has a vested interest in keeping fleas at bay and believes that, in addition to flea powder, sticking pins in a voodoo flea works an absolute treat. She is in the earring distribution business because legend has it that a sailor who wears an earring can never drown. This explains the steady stream of peg-legged men with eyepatches and parrots coming and going from

Mrs. Pompadoo's back door. She also believes that seemingly chance events can foretell who will visit in future – thus if she drops a spoon, she concludes that she will be visited by a small child at some unspecified date. Dropping a knife means a man will visit, and a fork means a woman will visit. Dropping individual hairs and skin cells means a vampire will visit – hence the ever-pressing need for garlic. Mrs. Pompadoo also believes that it is bad luck to chase someone with a broom, that every time a bell rings an angel gets its wings, that if you shiver it is because someone is casting a shadow on your grave, and that screaming into the phone will deafen a telemarketer. Note that, unlike the others, this last belief is *not* a superstition – rather, it is an assertion based on reason and the satisfying results of empirical testing, and not on any sort of fuzzy, irrational, magical thinking. In fact, as you have undoubtedly noticed, *all* of Mrs. Pompadoo's assumptions are based on magic or chance, and her belief about the effects of screaming into telephones is a refreshing exception.

There are those who are superstitious and those who are not, and the two groups can generally be counted upon to drive each other crazy – especially if they are neighbours whose hobby is not something innocuous like stamp collecting, or crosswords, or sock puppet construction – but rather, spying and snooping, each on the other. Mr. Basset-Basset, you see, is quite as guilty as Mrs. Pompadoo when it comes to neighbourly surveillance, as he is in turn fascinated

and repulsed by her daft antics. This is because Mr. Basset-Basset is not in the least bit superstitious – he is, in fact, appalled by the whole notion – which is an outrage to Mrs. Pompadoo, and so she makes it her business to prove Mr. Basset-Basset wrong whenever the occasion arises.

As an example of a fairly typical altercation, the other day Mr. Basset-Basset thought he smelled something amiss outside, and when he ventured forth, what should he find but a baby chickadee fallen from its nest under the old oak tree in the front yard of The Hundehütte. Unlike some dogs who are trained in the hunt, a basset hound would never dream of harming his quarry, and so after retrieving a ladder from his

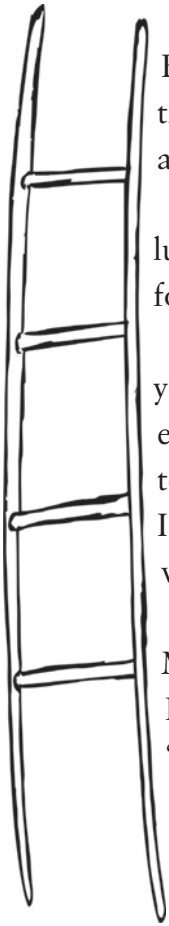


garden shed, Mr. Basset-Basset gingerly settled the baby chickadee in amongst the wrinkles between his ears, climbed into the topmost branches, and by degrees gently inclined his head, tipping the chirping little fluffball back into its cozy nest with its peeping siblings. Mrs. Pompadoo had been watching all this from the picture window of Le Chien Chanceuse, and snatching the opportunity to reinforce the truth of her convictions, she dashed outside to the tree with a copy of the daily newspaper in her mouth, hastily folded up the ladder, and hauled the collapsed remains off to one side so that poor Mr. Basset-Basset could not descend from his precarious perch.

“What are you doing, you silly . . . woman?” cried Mr.

Basset-Basset, tactfully refraining from using the word for a female dog. "Put that ladder back at once!"

"I couldn't possibly!" Mrs. Pompadoo replied, after removing the newspaper from her mouth. "Someone could walk under that ladder and have bad luck for the rest of the day."



"Don't be ridiculous!" huffed Mr. Basset-Basset. "I myself walked under that ladder several times while putting it up and have had no bad luck as a result!"

"I'd say me taking away your ladder is bad luck, wouldn't you?" Mrs. Pompadoo retorted, folding her arms smugly across her chest.

"But my bad luck is *not* the fault of the *ladder*, you silly ninny!" Mr. Basset-Basset barked. "It is entirely *your* fault, and once again I implore you to put the ladder back where you found it so that I can come down there and smack you on the nose with that rolled-up newspaper!"

"Actually, it says here in your horoscope," Mrs. Pompadoo continued, ignoring Mr. Basset-Basset's pleading and unfolding her paper, "that 'Your lack of planning leaves you up in the air today.' I'd say that's an accurate description of what's happened here, wouldn't you, Mr. Basset-Basset?"

"Ah! You do infuriate me, Mrs. Pompadoo!"

Don't you see that *you*, and you alone, are the cause of my bad luck?"

"*Me?*" Mrs. Pompadoo shot back defensively. "*I* didn't put up that ladder and force you to walk under it. That was your own doing! Now," she continued, "it also says here, 'Don't give in to negative moods. Life is what you make it. Learn to be happy in any circumstance. Also, you're going to take a trip and come into money.'"

"Mrs. Pompadoo!" Mr. Basset-Basset shouted. "I insist that you stop your blathering and put the ladder back where you found it this instant! The branch upon which I am balanced is cracking even as we speak!"

"Not until you apologize," Mrs. Pompadoo said in a hurt tone. "You've been terribly rude to me. I won't have it."

"You took my ladder!" raged Mr. Basset-Basset incredulously. "What did you expect me to do? Hire an airplane to write 'Oh, thank you, thank you, Mrs. Pompadoo' in the sky in fluffy pink letters a hundred miles high?"

"Me taking your ladder isn't the point, I think you'll find, Mr. Basset-Basset," huffed Mrs. Pompadoo.

"It's the whole point, you fatuous birdbrain!" he cried as he tottered to and fro, the branch creaking ominously under his weight.

"No, Mr. Basset-Basset. The fact is that you walked under a ladder and were unlucky because of it, and now you can't admit it. *And* your horoscope was bang on, you have to

admit. I think you've made yourself look a bit of an ass today, wouldn't you say so, Mr. Basset-Basset?"

"No, Mrs. Pompadoo, I would not! I would say, without reservation or hesitation, that you yourself are the ass, and that your views are nothing but cowplops soiling the bucolic pastures of skepticism and rationality! Furthermore, you are a menace to all, but especially to me and –"

But Mr. Basset-Basset didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, because at that moment the branch upon which he was half-squatting and half-hanging gave way, and he came crashing down onto Mrs. Pompadoo, flattening her in the process, and she yelped in pain and alarm and cried, "Help, police!" and "Mad dog, mad dog!" Mr. Basset-Basset rolled off Mrs. Pompadoo in some agony, and Mrs. Pompadoo raced into her house, yelping, "I should have known – it's just like it said in my horoscope – 'Negative thinkers will only bring you down!'"

This kind of interaction was commonplace, and it only reinforced the opinion each of them held that the *other* one was a narrow-minded, empty-headed, vacuous idiot (although, almost against her will, Mrs. Pompadoo thought of Mr. Basset-Basset as an exceptionally handsome idiot). But, you are undoubtedly wondering, if Mrs. Pompadoo acts the way she does due to her belief in superstition, voodoo, horoscopes and the like, why is it that Mr. Basset-Basset also appears to be absolutely barking? You would never guess it from plain observation, but Mr. Basset-Basset's admittedly

strange behaviour can be accounted for in the most commonsensical of ways. Mr. Basset-Basset, you see, is an expert in the art of memory (*Ars Memoriae* is the Latin name – and now would be a good time to laugh at the word *ars* if you are so inclined). As a memory expert, it is Mr. Basset-Basset's business to help people remember things long forgotten, and also to teach them interesting ways of remembering things in the here and now. Obviously, in order to teach others to remember things, one has to be able to remember things oneself – thus Mr. Basset-Basset gives his memory a regular workout, and one of the ways he does this is by reciting, entirely by memory, the names of the 46 kings and queens of England, from Harold to Elizabeth – which he can do backward or forward, right side up or upside down, in any weather or season or location, wet or dry, hungry or sated, drunk or sober. The only prerequisite, it seems, is that he be conscious, but Mrs. Pompadoo, who would never dream of eavesdropping – goodness, no – swears she has even heard him recite the list in his sleep.

How has Mr. Basset-Basset accomplished this extraordinary feat? He has done it by using what is called the method of loci, *loci* being the Latin word for location. If you have studied the art of memory in school – which I know you haven't because it hasn't been taught for hundreds of years, and teachers these days just expect you to remember things without telling you how – you will know that the method of loci is a system whereby you memorize the layout of a

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Basset-Basset and Mrs. Pompadoo!