

The

Crown



**Crescent
Chronicles**



Guy Bullock

*The Crown Crescent
Chronicles*

Guy Bullock

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*To Mary Bullock, for editing and
proof reading the manuscript,
as well as suggesting ideas
for cover design*

ONE

Landlord's Lament

Colin Bentley had been undecided whether or not to let the property at 48 Crown Crescent—until Roxanne, a letting agent, helped him make up his mind.

“You can’t go wrong by letting, Mr Bentley, provided, of course, that you have the right agent. We’ve been in the game for more than ten years. We’ve never yet placed a bad tenant, and believe you me there are some bad ones out there. But we know how to sort them out.”

Colin was a little uneasy to hear about the bad ones, but the prospect of cash flowing into his bank account was tempting.

“Tell us more about your property, Mr Bentley. You don’t actually live there, do you?”

“It’s more of an investment, really. My wife bought it some years ago. Then I knocked down the original house and we have built four units on the site.”

“Four units! So will you be letting all four?”

“Yes, that’s the plan.”

After the mandate was signed, she went ahead and soon found a family of four, who were installed in the top house and had so far been ideal tenants.

Not long afterwards she phoned to say she had found people for the house at the bottom of the driveway. They had already signed the lease and were on their way to the property.

Colin waited for them to arrive. After a while a hatchback came down the driveway. The driver was thin,

and in his fifties and next to him a grey-haired woman. It stopped in front of the house and was followed by a van driven by a youth, who got out and began unloading furniture.

The driver of the first car climbed out and went to check the unloading and the woman came round and shook hands.

“My name’s Connie Lawson,” she introduced herself, “and that’s my husband Reggie with my son Harry.”

A third car arrived driven by a ginger-haired man. “Hi, I’m Benny, Connie’s brother,” he told Colin. In the back were an elderly couple.

“I see you’ve brought your parents with you to have a look at the place.”

“Well, no – they’ll also be moving in,” said Benny. “I’m an electrician and I’m doing Connie a favour by helping them to connect the stove.”

“Have you have brought the connecting cable with you?”

“No, but it’s no problem, I can use an old kettle cord. It’ll work just as well.”

Benny took a folding wheelchair out the boot, and managed to get the father out the car and installed in it.

“It’s a bit hard for Dad,” he said as he lowered the wheelchair down steps leading to the front door. “He’s a bit unsteady on his pins.”

His mother followed them, walking with difficulty. “I hope we will have a little more space here. We were very cramped in our last place.”

Colin paid a visit to Roxanne, soon after they had moved in.

“It’s about my new tenants,” he said.

“Yes, I suppose I should have introduced them before sending them around. Aren’t you happy with them?”

“Well, I’m a bit worried about whether they will be able to afford the rent. I believe only Mrs Lawson has a job. The rest of the family have no income. Her husband is in poor health and her parents are both elderly.”

“I’m sure there will be no problems, Mr Bentley. We have done the usual credit check and contacted their previous landlord. I’ve dealt with Connie for a long time and she always pays the rent.”

“But the whole thing seemed a bit rushed.”

“Yes perhaps it was,” she admitted. “But I understand the owner of the house they were in wanted to do urgent renovations. They were lucky to find somewhere that was ready for immediate occupation.”

Roxanne assured him that the deposit had been paid into their trust account. The first month’s rent would, of course, be retained as their commission, she pointed out.

TWO

Fiery fireworks

Connie was the decision-maker and organiser of the family. However moving in had not gone smoothly thanks to Benny, her youngest brother.

An unqualified electrician, he thought going by the book was a waste of time. His own methods were easier and saved a lot of expense. Connie was not happy when she saw him hacking through her kettle cord with a bread knife.

“Look, Benny, don’t think I’m not grateful for you bringing Mom and Dad here – but what are you doing to my kettle? How are we going to manage without a kettle?”

“Well, we’ve got a bit of a problem here. We don’t have one of those stove connectors which would set you back plenty. So what do you want me to do? Which would you rather have – a stove or a kettle?”

“You know how Reggie and Dad love their tea. What am I going to tell them? Sorry Benny has broken the kettle so we can’t boil water. So no tea. Is that what you would like me to say?”

“How about, Benny can’t connect the stove, so no supper. Which would they rather have? Tea or supper? Anyway if I connect the stove you can boil water in a pot; and so problem solved, get it? They have tea and supper and everyone is happy. See.”

Connie grumbled but could not fault his argument. “All right then go ahead. But I still don’t like the idea of using a kettle cord. Maybe it’s not strong enough.”

“Look, I know electricity. Are you telling me how to do my job?”

She shrugged and moved off to other pressing matters. She was trying to arbitrate in an argument between her parents about who was to have the bed nearest the window, when there was an explosion, a cloud of black smoke and the smell of burning rubber. All members of the family stumbled out their bedrooms. There was a search for the father’s crutches, and, her husband, Reggie, had a dizzy spell.

Benny came out the kitchen. “Look everyone, there’s no need to panic, it’s nothing serious. It’s just a fault in the stove cable. This could happen to anyone. It’s easy to fix. Just a bit of insulation tape...”

But no-one was listening. They were grouped around Reggie, who came round after Harry had poured water over his head. “What’s happened? Is there a fire?” He struggled to his feet. They restrained him before he could get to the front door.

“Benny, are you trying to blow us all up?” Connie said. “What sort of useless electrician are you?”

“Look, you can’t blame me for that kettle cord. I did you a favour. It could have blown up anytime you were making tea.”

Connie grabbed a feather duster and hit him over the head, releasing a cloud of dust, which was something she should keep away from. During the new panic, when a search was going on for her nebuliser, Benny decided it was a good time to leave.

He usually parked his car on a slope in case it wouldn’t start, but this time it was on a level asphalt apron in front

of the house. He pressed the starter, but nothing happened. He got out and decided to abandon the car, which he could fetch some other time when everything had settled down.

-He hurried up the driveway, fumbling for his cell phone and dialled Marcella, his ex.

“Hi Marcella. It’s me, Benny.”

“Yes I know it’s ‘you’, Benny’. What do you want now?”

“Hey, Marcella, don’t be like that. I’m in a bit of trouble here.”

“Tell me something new.”

“I tell you, this is an emergency. I’ve got people here who want to lynch me.”

“Well let them do it.”

“Look Marcella, this is no joke. Who’s going to pay you maintenance if I’m gone?”

“That’s a joke. What do you want me to do?”

“I’m stuck here at Crown Crescent with a flat battery. Can you come and pick me up? It would be a life saver.”

“You can forget it. Nice try. Call a taxi. Or get one of your boozing buddies to help you out.” She slammed her phone down.

THREE

Saintly Samaritan

The nearest neighbour, Ron Goodfellow, was pottering in his garden next to the concrete-slat wall separating the two properties. Hearing the disturbance, he poked his head over the wall and called, "Hello-a."

Connie looked round the front door, "Yes, who is it?"

"Are you people having a spot of bother? I'm Ron your neighbour. Any way I can help?"

"Well, I don't know. My stove has blown up, my husband has had a fainting attack, and my Dad can't find his crutches."

Ron was surprised. "That sounds bad. I'm not a medical man, but maybe I could have a look at the stove. Is it on fire?"

"It could be. There's a lot of smoke coming out."

"Well don't throw water over it, or someone might get electrocuted. Best to switch it off."

"Yes, I think it's off. The whole house is off. There's a buzzing noise coming out the electric box in the wall."

"I think I'd better come over. The house could burn down. Hang in there. I'll get a ladder to climb over the wall."

He managed to climb over but hurt his ankle landing at the other side. He hobbled in with a torch and a screwdriver. "Yes, I see the trouble. It's this funny wire going into the back. It looks as though a hole has been blown through it. But this is crazy. Did your husband put this wire in?" "My husband couldn't swat a fly. No, it was my brother. That wire is my kettle cord. I told him it

wouldn't be strong enough. And he calls himself an electrician."

"Well he shouldn't be in the trade. In fact he is a menace if he does this sort of thing. Where is he?"

"That's a good question. His car is here but he has disappeared. Just as well for him. I could do him harm if I caught him."

There was a spare connector in his garage. He managed to sort everything out and declined Connie's offer to pay for that or the spare kettle cord he gave them. "I think your brother should be locked away," he said, before limping home. "Don't let him touch your stove again."

"Who was that?" asked Reggie, who was in the bedroom recovering from his dizzy spell.

"That was our new neighbour. He's a person who knows his duty to his fellow man. I wish there were more like him in this world. There are so many people who turn a blind eye and walk away from those less fortunate than they are."

"You mean do-gooders," said Reggie. "They only do it because that's the way they get their kicks."

"You should be grateful. I don't know what we would have done if he hadn't fixed the mess Benny left."

"I've always said that brother of yours is no good. He only offered to help because he thought he could get a free meal off us. Can't even do a simple job like connecting a stove."

"Well you couldn't do any better Reggie. I don't know what you would do if it wasn't for me. It's not easy being the only breadwinner."

"Where is Harry? Why isn't he helping?"

“He is in his room resting. It’s been hard for him moving all that furniture. He deserves his rest.”

“Yes, yes,” Reggie said. “How about you make us a cup of tea now that the kettle’s fixed.”

FOUR

Just junk

A letter arrived next day from their previous landlord demanding that they remove all the junk they had left in his garage.

“Junk! They don’t know valuable stuff when they see it,” said Connie scornfully.

This “junk” was the last of the stock they had used while running a stall at a flea market.

“There’s no room here for it,” said Reggie. “The house is full of junk as it is.”

“So where shall we put it, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Throw it out. We don’t need it anyway.”

Nearby was a one-bedroom flat, number three in the complex. Their landlord, Colin, had recently finished building it and it was vacant waiting for a new tenant.

“That empty flat next door — that’s a waste. Some people are so selfish. That greedy person, Mr Bentley; never wanting to share anything. He has no compassion.”

“Yeah, that’s the way he is.” Reggie was having a lie in, after the exertions of moving. “The way I see it he shouldn’t be charging us rent. We’re like caretakers you could say. He should be paying us to stay here.”

“I was thinking...” said Connie. “Here we are with this valuable stuff with nowhere to put it and right next door is this empty flat.”

“Yes, I see your point. But what about this Mr Bentley. Do we have to get permission from him?”

“Who would notice if we store a few bits of stock in there. It would be doing nobody any harm, seeing it’s empty anyway.”

Connie was due for her stint at work next day so nothing could be done, but another urgent note arrived from their former landlord.

“I can’t understand some people,” she said, throwing it in the rubbish box. “What’s it matter to him if we’ve left a few things there. It’s not as though he’s even using the garage.”

“He’s trying to get at us, We owe him a few bucks, nothing to speak of, and this is his way of getting nasty.”

It was going to be a nightmare to get all the stuff out, and they had just the hatchback to do the job. The van they had used to move in had been returned to the cousin Connie had borrowed it from, who had said she would never lend it to them again because Harry had dented it.

Benny had not collected his car, which was still in the parking area. They decided to requisition it. They got it started with jump leads borrowed from next door and left in convoy with Reggie driving the hatchback, though his licence had expired; and Harry driving his uncle’s unroadworthy vehicle. Connie, who had never passed her driving test, insisted on coming with them to make sure nothing was damaged. The parents were left in the back room to fend for themselves.

FIVE

Showing shock

They had underestimated the amount of unsold stock left in the garage. Though both cars were crammed there were still carloads that had to be fetched in a second trip. There were several close calls when the police eyed them.

Most of the stock was small items, fish-moth riddled paper backs and old magazines, children's games and toys, mounds of second-hand clothing, old ornaments, cutlery, kitchen utensils and so forth, but there were also bulkier items such as wash-baskets, even a dog kennel (complete with fleas).

"This stuff is really junk. No wonder no-one bought it," said Reggie.

"You have no idea of value, Reggie."

They were looking at the once empty flat and even Connie was surprised at how much space had been taken up. There was even a battle to shut the front door.

Colin had given up on Roxanne, the agent who had introduced Connie and family. There were two other flats still vacant — number three, above the bottom house and a smaller unit, number two, above that. The top house was occupied by a couple and their two children. He decided not to entrust any further properties to Roxanne, and instead enlisted another letting agent, Rina.

Soon after lunch Rina phoned saying she had clients who would like to view unit number three.

"Have they have been vetted," Colin asked.

“Of course I’ve done our usual background checks and there were no problems. I think your one-bedroom flat would be just right for them.”

“How many of them are there?”

“Oh, just the two of them. They run a hair styling salon not far off. They stay out of town at the moment and are looking for something nearer.”

“Well by all means bring them.”

He assumed they were a middle-aged couple but was surprised when the agent arrived with two youngish men.

“This is Shawn,” said the agent, “and this is Andy.”

Andy was the younger, with longish blond hair and dressed in white denims with calf-length cowboy boots, a mauve shirt and white leather jacket. Shawn was thin and dark-haired with a fluid walk, and a ramrod straight posture. He was more conservatively dressed in jeans and a white shirt.

“Well let’s go in and look round,” said Colin. “As you can see it’s in new condition. We have a family in the house below but they are quiet people and should be no problem. There is plenty of parking — that old car you see there belongs to a visitor,” he added hastily.

When he opened the front door an insect-eaten dog kennel tumbled out. The scene inside looked like a second-hand shop full of unsaleable goods.

The agent tried to block the view from her clients. “We’ve got a problem here Mr Bentley. I can’t show my clients a place like this.” (She turned to her clients.) “I’m sorry, Shawn and Andy, to have brought you all the way here for nothing. But I wasn’t told about this,” she added, glaring at Colin.

“I don’t know anything about it,” Colin protested. “Someone has dumped all this stuff in here without telling me. I don’t know who could have done it. But it will have to be cleared out. It’s just unfortunate that it has given the wrong impression.”

The agent was a little appeased. “Well it looks okay from the outside. What do you think, Shawn?”

“Wow,” said Andy, craning his neck to look past Rina. “That’s quite a mess in there. Come and have a look Shawn.”

Shawn pulled a face when he saw the junk, which was piled almost to window level.

“I must say I quite like the position though. I wouldn’t mind having another look once it’s been cleaned up. What do you say, Andy?”

“Okay it’s not too bad. It seems to be what we’re looking for.”

SIX

Sale sorrow

After they left Colin went to the bottom house, noticing the twitching of a curtain in the front bedroom. He knocked and after a delay the door opened a few inches and a hostile face peered at him.

“Yes?”

“Is Mrs Lawson here? I need to speak to her rather urgently.”

The door opened a few inches more showing a shirtless Reggie, barefoot, and wearing baggy shorts.

“No, she’s at work. If it’s the rent you’re after it’s already been paid to the agent.”

“I’m trying to find out whose belongings have been dumped into my flat.”

“You’ll have to ask Connie about that.”

“But didn’t you see who put them there?”

“I think it was a friend of Connie.”

“Will you please tell Connie that it must be cleared out.”

“Right, right, I’ll tell her. I don’t know where it can be moved to, but that’s not my problem,” he muttered, closing the door.

When Connie got back from work she was in no mood for any more problems than those she had faced at work. But Reggie had been looking forward to showing how unsympathetic the landlord was.

“That Mr Bentley has been on about the stuff we put in the flat,” he said, meeting her at the door. “He says he wants the junk in there taken out.”

“He had the nerve to call my stock ‘junk’? It’s people like him who can’t see the value of my merchandise. Can’t he understand that stuff of that quality must be properly housed?”

“Anyway, he wants the flat cleared out. I don’t know where you are going to put it.”

“I’m certainly not going to throw that stock away, if that’s what you are thinking. It looks as if we will have to have a car boot sale, so at least I can get my money back.” A thought occurred to her. “Perhaps we can have a sale here in the parking area.”

“Do you think Bentley will allow that?”

“I won’t even stoop to ask him. We’ve a right to do as we like here under the Rent Regulations. There’s not a thing he can do to stop us. I know the Law.”

That Saturday soon after breakfast Colin had a phone call from Winston Thornton, the tenant in Unit One, the top house. He sounded worried.

“A notice on a piece of cardboard has been put up near the driveway gate. I didn’t like to complain. Thought you knew about it.”

“No, I don’t. What does it say?”

“Something about a sale of second-hand goods. I think it’s those new tenants in the bottom house. What I’m worried about is a lot of people have been going down to the bottom. There’s a crowd of them there and more pouring in.”

So far the sale had gone well. Connie had roped in Benny to help and Harry as well as Reggie were selling items behind improvised cardboard-box counters.

Connie complained they were letting her goods go too cheaply. Reggie said at least they were getting rid of the stuff.

The crowd began to build up. The word had got around that there were bargains to be had, but soon genuine buyers began to be outnumbered by those who had other ideas. Trouble began when Connie spotted a youth walking off with clothing not paid for. Harry ran after him, the crowd jeering, and during the diversion other opportunists tried their luck.

Things began to get out of hand. Customers pushed to get in front. One of the cardboard box counters overturned, spilling goods, which disappeared.

“Enough is enough,” shouted Connie. “Let’s pack up.”

The crowd surged forward grabbing goods, the honest ones holding out cash and shouting for attention. The less honest ones didn’t worry about paying and vanished up the driveway. A free-for-all quickly developed. Connie grabbed the cash box before that could also vanish and retreated into the house leaving her helpers to deal with the crowd.

Connie’s stock disappeared. The crowd moved into the street outside the front gate where a scuffle broke out, with those who had failed to secure anything grabbing from the others.

Connie’s helpers were left looking at a bare parking lot. Even the cardboard boxes were gone. They were lucky they still had clothes they were wearing.

SEVEN

Teargas target

When Colin reached Crown Crescent he found a line of cars blocking his way. He was told by the driver ahead that a crowd was fighting in the middle of the road and the police had cordoned off a section until order could be restored. They had fired off teargas.

He parked on the verge and continued on foot. In the street at the gate of number forty-eight the police had dispersed most of the crowd but the smell of tear-gas still lingered as he got near. The road was strewn with broken bits of Connie's stock. He was met at the gate by Winston Thornton, wiping his eyes, which were still watering from the gas. His family had been watching but were now indoors bathing their eyes.

"I believe there was a sale that got out of hand," he reported. "It's under control now. But I hope it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, I'm going down there now, to speak to Mrs Lawson. Of course she should have asked permission before holding this sale."

"A miserable eight hundred and fifty and all my stock gone," Connie said. "We could have done much better if you lot had kept your eyes open. Bad organising, that's what it was."

"Main thing is we've got rid of the stuff," said Reggie. "Anyway you were also there. Too bad you sneaked away just when we needed you."

"How about we get a share of the takings," said Benny. "I could do with a bit of cash."

Connie glared at him. "You get nothing. You owe us for the mess you made of the stove."

Colin approached the front door and rapped, hearing raised voices inside. Connie opened the door.

"Morning, Mrs Lawson — it's about that sale."

Connie stared defiantly. "Yes — I had every right to hold it."

"Well, I don't know about that. Did you know there was a riot outside our gate and the police had to be called?"

"No, I don't know about a riot but even if there was I can't be blamed if it happened in the street."

"You can't just go ahead and hold sales on private property. You need to get permission. The police could open a case against you."

After Colin left, Connie sat down on the nearest chair. "Reggie, go and make me a cup of strong tea," she ordered. She recovered a little after gulping her tea. "I don't believe a word of all that anyway. I know the Law."

"Don't be too sure," Benny sniggered. "I wouldn't like to be you, with jail hanging over my head."

"So now you're a lawyer as well as a useless electrician. Go on, Benny, I've seen enough of you for one day. It's time you got into that car of yours and drove it away from here."

EIGHT

Andy's anguish

Cleaning up the flat was not going to be easy. Although most of the stuff had been cleared there was still a lot of rubbish lying around — broken cardboard boxes, crumpled paper, a layer of dust and several kinds of insects that had crawled out. It was not fit for showing.

Colin had a discussion with the Lawsons. In Colin's view, they had made the mess so they should clean up. Connie thought otherwise. She was not, she said, a well person and being the breadwinner was mostly at work. It was out of the question for Harry to do it; he toiled at a surfing shop and needed his rest when he came home. The aged parents had difficulty even getting out of bed so they could not be considered. This left Reggie, who had plenty of time. After less than an hour, though, Reggie felt dizzy and he was carried home to bed with a fainting spell.

In the end Colin had to use a cleaning service.

Soon after the cleaners left an urgent call came from Rita, the agent. She said there had been a serious quarrel between Shawn and Andy, caused by a disagreement over toothbrushes. It ended in violence and Andy had moved out the house. He wanted to move into the flat immediately and had paid a deposit and a month's rent.

"Don't you think this is a bit rushed?" asked Colin.

"Shawn has moved all Andy's belongings out, so it's urgent. Andy has hired a removal van to collect his furniture and they are on the way to you."

Soon afterwards hooting called Colin to the front gates, where he was met by a motorcyclist on a Harley

Davidson. When the rider took off his crash helmet Colin saw it was Andy, with a bruised eye. He was followed by the furniture van.

The van had left, the removal team glad to see the last of Andy, who had constantly changed his mind where each item should be put. His cowboy boots were packed away and now after removing his motorcycle gear he wore ankle boots, green corduroys and a pink long-sleeved shirt.

“I am absolutely shattered,” he told Colin, who had called round to see how the move was getting on. “My nerves are in tatters. I can’t understand what got into Shawn. And I’m not a violent person. I abhor unpleasantness. See, my hands are still shaking. I must have something to calm my nerves — please join me in a brandy.”

Andy poured two glasses from his liquor cabinet, which was the first thing he had unpacked.

“I absolutely dread going to the salon tomorrow. I suppose Rita has told you, we are partners in the salon. But if Shawn thinks he can intimidate me into giving up my share he is wrong.”

“I’m sure you will be able to work something out.”

“I’ve no idea what Shawn is going to do. We were looking for a place for the two of us, nearer the salon but that’s impossible now. But I’ll tell you this, Shawn is going to regret he attacked me,” he added, fingering his bruised eye. “And don’t imagine he got the better of me. He has a lump on his head the size of a pumpkin — well a small pumpkin at any rate.”

Colin left him to simmer.

NINE

Hairdressing havoc

A hair salon is filled with equipment that could be used to damage one's fellow man (or woman). There are sharp scissors, razors, red-hot curling irons, hair dryers that could be used as flame throwers, many dangerous chemicals that could burn the hair off one's scalp.

Being a pacifist, the thought of these dangers didn't cross Andy's mind the next day, when he arrived early on his motorcycle to open the premises. He had spent an uneasy night, with flashbacks of the previous day's row. And it was all so trivial. What did it matter that he had accidentally used Shawn's toothbrush, which was easy to do since they stood side by side in the same rack and were a similar colour. Shawn was a germophobe who was never without antiseptic tissues for wiping his hands and any suspect object.

They had reached a truce about this obsessive behaviour. In the long run Andy had accepted it as something that couldn't be helped, like a squint or bow legs. That is, until yesterday's episode.

The cleaning person was waiting to be let in and she raised her eyebrows when she noticed Andy's swollen eye, which had now turned purple. She clucked in surprise and asked if he had fallen off his motorcycle. "Don't even ask, Betty. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She shook her head and followed him in. After preparing his equipment for the first appointment Andy retired to the men's room with bottles of lotions, cotton wool and make-up to doctor his eye. It wouldn't be good for business to be seen with a black eye.

He was relieved that Shawn didn't appear at his usual time. The two apprentice hairdressers, Jackie and Megan arrived and business went on as usual, customers having hair washed cut and tinted, some in chairs swathed in towels having hair styled and others immobilised under dryers.

Andy later heard Shawn's car in the parking lot and the door slamming but he carried on chatting to an elderly customer as he trimmed her hair. Shawn strode through the entrance with a stony face and a plaster on his head. The temperature in the salon dropped and chatter died away. Jackie moved out his way as Shawn sailed to his corner, where his chair and equipment stood facing a mirror with his name inscribed in pink letters. Several customers waiting in chairs looked up from their magazines.

He glared at Andy. "I see you have poached my customer, Mrs Bernardo. You know very well she has always been with me. You had no right to do that."

Mrs Bernardo looked flustered. "Oh, no, Shawn. It's quite all right, my dear. Andy very kindly offered to fit me in because we thought you weren't coming in."

"I'm only a few seconds late for the appointment, so there was no reason for Andy to take it upon himself to interfere. It is highly unethical. I must ask you to come over to my chair, Mrs Bernardo. I will take over. He has made a mess of your hair anyway. He has no idea of how you like your hair done."

"Well I don't know, Shawn," said Mrs Bernardo. "Don't you think now Andy has started he might as well finish."

A glint appeared in Shawn's eye. "No, I insist, Mrs Bernardo. This is a matter of principle. Andy must abide by the rules."

"Well, I don't want to be the cause of a quarrel between you boys. If it will make things easier I suppose ...". She started to get up from her chair, only to have Andy push her down again.

"You stay just where you are, Mrs Bernardo," said Andy. "I've almost finished, and I've done a much better job than Shawn could do. I'm sorry Shawn is making such a scene. You mustn't mind him – he's not himself today."

Shawn snapped, "Take care Andy. I would hate to damage you and the salon and frighten off customers because of your petty behaviour. But I am in no mood to put up with nonsense."

The customers were riveted. Mrs Bernardo tried to get up, but Andy pushed her down again.

Shawn moved to his counter and grabbed a pair of scissors, and Andy seized a broom. Mrs Bernardo took the chance to jump out her chair and make for the door with a towel round her neck. One of the customers screamed and everyone rushed to the entrance.

Shawn went for Andy with the scissors while Andy fended him off with the broom. They struggled in the middle of the salon shouting. It looked as if the scuffle could end in serious injury or even worse. Chairs were knocked over and glass broken. Neighbours in a motor spares shop rushed in to separate them but they still carried on a shouting match and struggled to attack each other again.

It ended in the nearest police station, where both made statements and laid charges against each other.

TEN

Spiteful split

“That was the final straw,” said Andy. “I never for the tiniest moment thought there was such an evil side to Shawn. You can be friends with someone for years without realising a dark demon lurks inside waiting to burst out. It took me so much by surprise. I still can’t believe it has happened.”

Andy’s sister, Ada, shook her head sympathetically. She had urged Andy to stay with her family for a while to allow him to get over the shock but he said he wouldn’t allow himself to be driven away by Shawn’s threats. His bruised eye had cleared up but he now had a sprained arm in a sling. It was a consolation to know that Shawn had a dislocated shoulder and his hand had been gashed when they wrestled the scissors away from him.

“I think he seriously meant to harm you with those scissors,” said Ada. “Where is Shawn now?”

“I believe he is at home and he has asked that slimy friend Mark to stay with him in case I go there and attack him. What nonsense. The police have been completely useless. They won’t have anything to do with what they call domestic violence. It seems they only act after someone has been murdered.”

The salon had been shut until they decided what to do.

“I don’t know which way to turn,” Andy said. “Who’s going to keep the salon running?”

“Perhaps you’ll have to cut it in half.”

“Don’t joke Ada; I’m not in the mood for jokes.”

“But that’s what you could do. You could each have your own half and still keep the salon open.”

Andy considered. “Well maybe there’s something in what you say. You mean divide it with a wall or something? But what if we meet unexpectedly at the entrance?”

“You could have separate entrances and have nothing to do with each other. I’m sure the property owner would allow it if you paid for the alterations. Your letting agent could arrange everything so you wouldn’t even have to speak to Shawn.”

“I can’t bear thought of having Andy anywhere near me,” Shawn stormed when the agent phoned him.

She held the receiver away from her ear. “Yes, I’ve been told that you don’t see eye to eye. But isn’t it possible you could come to a decision about the salon? You both could lose out if your business closes. Perhaps you could divide the salon in two with you in one half and Andy in the other.”

Shawn was silent a moment. It seemed ridiculous on the face of it — two rival hairstylists in direct competition for customers.

“Well, it might work out,” he admitted reluctantly. “As long as our salons are completely apart.”

“You would have separate entrances and even different parking areas. I’ve already spoken to the owners and they would have no objection. You could share the rent just as you do now. I’m sure there would be no problem.”

ELEVEN

Loony loggerheads

Eventually there were two large signs outside the shop.

CHIC 'n SLICK HAIR SALON

Modern and with-it.

Superb and

Affordable coiffeur

And to the right of it:

SHAWN'S BEAUTY BOUTIQUE

All-in-one nails, hair styling,

facial massage and more.

Unbeatable value.

Andy continued to use their original signage under which the business was registered and licensed. Shawn wanted his own sign, although he would still be operating under the partnership licence. To save costs they kept their original partnership agreement. Shawn insisted on having a new name for his business and they would no longer share the profits. He would employ his own staff and keep his own accounts. Andy would run the original salon. It would be an unofficial arrangement without the expense of dissolving the partnership and having to apply for separate business licences.

Both entrances were apart, with a dividing wall between them, and they had separate parking areas. But Andy found that in a weird way bad vibes seemed to pass through the brick wall dividing the two salons. He moved his work station to the far side of his section but the negative aura seemed to follow him across the room. It didn't bother Shawn. Andy's theory was that Shawn somehow had the ability to direct sinister thought waves at him through the atmosphere.

Mrs Henshaw, a widow in her fifties, had been installed in a small separate office, with access to each salon, from where she could act as receptionist for both of them.

Andy was eager to tell her his side of the story.

"Adele, please don't think I'm trying to be mean about Shawn," he said, "but I think you should know the truth about this thing between him and me. In complete confidence, of course."

Mrs Henshaw frowned. "Andy you should know it's not my place to take sides. I just work here. I do my job and look neither right nor left."

"Of course, I would never expect you to take sides. Don't get me wrong. But I would hate you to be influenced by any unfair rumours you may hear."

"I am not one to listen to idle gossip."

Andy lowered his voice. "Adele I've got to tell someone this, in case anything should happen to me. I think Shawn wants to get rid me."

Mrs Henshaw stared. "Get rid of? What do you mean?"

"It may sound incredible Adele. But he has already tried to stab me with scissors."

Mrs Henshaw was taken aback. Perhaps Andy was paranoid, though he looked normal. Maybe stress had unhinged him.

"If what you say is true, Andy, you should go to the police."

"Please, not too loud Adele. If he caught me talking to you there's no telling what he might do. Don't say a word of this to anyone."

At that moment a customer came in and Andy left, ushering the client into his salon. Andy was probably being over-dramatic she thought. It was well known that he was an excitable person and prone to outbursts.

Not long afterwards Shawn stalked in.

"I believe, Mrs Henshaw, that you have had Andy in here."

"Yes, he was here. He was asking about an appointment."

"Was that was all you spoke about?"

"Why are you asking all these questions, Shawn? Surely Andy is allowed to speak to me if he wants to. Is there some problem?"

"In a way, yes there is."

"Shawn, I don't think it's appropriate for me to be involved."

"That may be so, but for your own safety there are one or two things you should know about Andy." He lowered his voice. "I think he is mentally unstable."

"I don't know what you mean, Shawn."

“Well, perhaps I could put it in stronger terms. I believe he is certifiable. He should be locked away. He could be a danger to the public.”

“Surely not. He can be a bit flighty at times, but that’s his nature. He is a naturally flighty person.”

“I can’t blame you for being deceived, Mrs Henshaw. Insane people are expert at concealing their true condition. They are cunning. And Andy is like that. On the outside he behaves like a friendly person, calling everyone by their first names, chatting like an old friend. But I can see through that. Just underneath that is a monster. He is vicious. As you can see my arm was nearly wrenched from my body when he attacked me. I was on my way to a client with my scissors to cut her hair when Andy nearly decapitated me with a broom. He ripped my scissors out my hand and gashed me so badly the blood simply gushed out”

TWELVE

Cheerless chess

Ms Emmarentia Calvert lived in a small bachelor flat in a high rise building; just her and her pet parrot named Jackass. She had not chosen this name herself; in fact she disliked her parrot being called Jackass, which she thought was disrespectful for such a distinguished bird. But he had been named by a previous owner, and Jackass himself was attached to the name, unaware of its unflattering connotations.

Emma had been quite happy in her flat for a number of years and she and Jackass had gone about their daily routine, neither annoying or being annoyed by her neighbours. She was a bit eccentric, dressed in dowdy skirts that dragged on the floor as she walked and were even dangerous when she rode around on an ancient moped, with Jackass in a cage strapped to the back carrier.

She worked in a book exchange in a nearby centre owned by an old friend. Emmarentia took the morning shift and the owner, Mrs Stapleford, worked in the afternoons. Excelsior Book Exchange was no gold mine, in fact only scraped by, but Mrs Stapleford had been left well off by her late husband and kept the shop afloat.

Jackass was something of a drawcard, so Mrs Stapleford didn't mind if he was sometimes raucous. At home in the flat too, nobody objected to Jackass, though he did have his noisy moments.

There were no problems – until Mr Rubin MacFaddam moved in next door. Jenny, who had lived there previously, got married and Emma came back from work one day to find him installed there.

It had not gone well from the start. They met in the corridor and Rubin, spotting the bird on her shoulder remarked acidly, "You have a pesky parrot I see. Well, I hope, madam, that it's not a noisy bird. That sort of din goes right through my head; not a good thing for my migraines."

"He was so rude, Edna," Emmarentia complained to Mrs Stapleford. "Such an unpleasant person. Small, foxy, bald and smokes a pipe. He's a retired lecturer I've heard. I can see that we are not going to get along."

"I know the type. Reminds me in some ways of my brother Rigby. The so-called intellectual. Dry as dust, living in a world of their own, and so scornful of anyone they consider less knowledgeable than they are."

"He took an instant dislike to Jackass. And to me too. Perhaps he is a woman-hater as well as a bird-hater."

"I would have as little to do with him as possible, Emma. Just keep yourself to yourself."

Rubin MacFaddam was a person of solitary habits, though he kept up ties with his faculty and colleagues, part-time lecturing and tutoring. A kindred spirit, Horace Nuttal, often visited for a friendly game of chess in the evenings.

"I see you've settled in well in your new abode," he said when he called round soon after Rubin had moved in. "Very cosy. Much more space than your suite at the hotel."

Rubin produced the usual decanter and they settled at the chess board with their port and with Rubin puffing on his pipe of aromatic tobacco. They were fairly evenly

matched though each privately considered himself the better player. Rubin started off with a staid pawn to king four, which Horace followed rapidly with the usual book sequence.

Rubin morphed into a complicated wait and see attack, unlike some pathetic players he had faced who loved smash and grab tactics. Rubin liked a complex situation where you really had to think ahead. He slowly developed a pincer movement, which, he thought would really crush poor Horace.

He loved to crush people, though to look at him you would never guess he was capable of crushing anyone. He slowly surrounded Horace's queen with hostile pieces. This was brilliant, he thought. The way he had developed his pieces was splendid. He was even surprised at his own brilliance. It was fantastic; it was even worthy of the great Kasparov. He glanced at poor Horace with a barely concealed smirk and noted that Horace wore a look of despair.

He extended his hand dramatically to administer the *coup de grace*, which would result in a forced checkmate in three moves. Horace winced at the realisation that nothing could save him.

But the gods, it seemed, were on Horace's side. Just as his fate seemed sealed, along the corridor came the most blood-curdling scream. It was a terrifying screech, as though someone was being attacked and dismembered with a bowie knife.

They both leaped to their feet, upsetting the chess board and scattering the pieces on the floor.

THIRTEEN

Rubin's revenge

A note in spidery handwriting was thrust under Emma's front door a little later.

For some reason Jackass had been unsettled that evening. He had been slightly noisy, just a small whistle and squawk once or twice but nothing that anyone could complain about, thought Emma. But she knew the reason. Jackass was allergic to tobacco smoke and she had detected a strong smell of Turkish tobacco in the air. It had even made her sneeze once or twice.

It was most annoying. She had never smoked, even in the days when everyone did and when a non-smoker was more or less a social outcast. In the cinemas, the buses, the office, everywhere you went, was a blue haze of cigarette smoke. The stale smell clung to curtains, carpets, and even to the clothes and hair of abstainers like herself. The hacking coughs of addicts kept one awake at night. The most distressing part was that even those who resisted the pernicious habit were passive smokers. As a passive smoker she could even become a victim of the dreaded big C.

All that had changed now, thanks to the anti-smoking activists and the air was fresh again. There was however a loop-hole in the laws. There was nothing to stop you smoking to your heart's content in your own home. Emma was in favour of banning this too, and she would go as far as advocating a year in jail for offenders, without prison privileges.

Everyone on her floor was a non-smoker, so the tobacco smoke must come from the new tenant. Knowing he was the culprit made her even more

indignant when she read the note that had been pushed under her door.

Dear Madam, in flat No 48,

As I feared when I first saw your parrot, the loud noise it makes has ruined the evening for me and a guest who visited me. It even caused my guest to leave early. I do not wish this to cause conflict between us. But in the spirit of good neighbourliness I appeal to you to try to keep your bird under control. Hoping for friendly co-operation,

Sincerely,

Rubin Macfaddam, in flat No 49,

Emma read the letter several times, her indignation increasing each time. She seized pen and paper and immediately wrote a reply.

Dear Sir in flat No 49,

I have received your letter, which you put under my door. In the first place my bird Jackass is usually very quiet and you are the first to complain of a noise. He sometimes sings, but that is not really a noise. Please note that it is not easy to stop a bird singing because that is their nature. They love to sing, and most people like to hear them singing. It is so sad that you do not like birdsong.

Another thing I would like to tell you about is smoking. My bird is allergic to cigarette smoke; it is very bad for his lungs and also for my own lungs and gives me bad nose congestion. My doctor will tell you so.

So please Sir in flat No 49, I would be very pleased if you would stop smoking or if you must please keep your windows and doors closed.

I love to be friends with my neighbours, and I'm sure you also do. So let's be friends and respect each other.

Yours truly,

Madam, in flat No 48.

A new letter arrived under Emma's door a few days later.

Dear Madam in Flat 48,

As you know I have complained about the fearsome noise your parrot makes in the evening. I do not consider this singing (and I am fond of birdsong incidentally). The cacophony your bird makes could never be described as song. Your parrot must be tone deaf. I must warn you that I really cannot continue to put up with the noise which is having a bad effect on my migraine headaches.

As for my pipe smoking, I have every right to do as I please in my own flat. It is regrettable that you have not accepted my plea to behave in the spirit of good neighbourliness. Please note that I may be forced to take the matter further if you cannot control your parrot.

Thanking you,

Tenant in flat No 49.

The smoke from flat number forty nine did not diminish, in fact it barrelled into Emma's flat more than ever. Worse, it seemed that out of pure nastiness Rubin had changed his tobacco brand for a much stronger and more pungent one. Keeping her front door closed was no help because it came in through the windows.

Jackass was not nearly as perky as he used to be. His feathers started to droop and his eyes lacked lustre. All he could do was show his unhappiness in loud squawks, which made Rubin increase his smoke output.

Emma wrote back.

To the man in flat No 49

You are a really nasty person and you don't care at all about kindness to animals and birds. To you a bird's happiness means nothing. Shame on you for torturing my poor Jackass with your unhealthy pipe smoke. I am going to report you to the SPCA. I

hope you will be punished. I have also asked my doctor to write to you about my nasal congestion.

Lady in flat No 48.

PS A pity Jackass can't peck your eye out.

FOURTEEN

Exit Emma

A final letter appeared under Emma's door, this time in a red envelope.

To resident in flat No 48,

Since you have ignored all my reasonable requests to curtail the abominable noise from your parrot I have now approached the administrators of our flats. Mr Phelps, the chairman, has kindly looked up the lease you signed. A clause in it states that no pets of any description may be kept in the building.

You will soon receive a letter advising you to get rid of your parrot, or failing that you will be given notice to vacate.

Yours truly,

Rubin Macfaddam BA Hons.

This letter upset Emmarentia. She and Jackass rushed across to her friend, Mrs Stapleford, on her moped.

"I have just had the most shocking news, Edna," she said, holding out the red letter. "It's that man in number forty eight. He says I've got to get rid of poor Jackass or they will turn me out of my flat."

"Why, that's ridiculous. Of course they can't do it. You've been living there for years with Jackass. They can't throw you out like a piece of garbage. Not that I'm implying for a moment that you are a piece of garbage," she added hastily.

"But perhaps they can. That's the worst of it. They've got a copy of my lease, which I lost years ago. And they claim it says I'm not allowed to keep a pet in my flat."

“Nonsense! They must mean a wolfhound or a python, or something like that. A tiny mite like Jackass can hardly be a nuisance. He’s kept in a cage, after all.”

“Do you really think so Edna? But it’s that man. He’s determined to harm me because I said I would report him to the SPCA.”

But the law seemed to be on Rubin Macfaddam’s side. A lease was a lease even though it was just a scrap of paper. To get rid of Jackass was unthinkable. To take the matter to court was too expensive, even though Mrs Stapleford offered to share the costs.

As the deadline approached Emma slowly reconciled herself to the inevitable. Relations between her and Rubin Macfaddam, which had been frosty to begin with had dropped from frostiness to iciness. Emma was tempted even to let down the tyres of Rubin’s car in revenge, but resisted the urge in case he did the same to her moped.

“Edna, I’m at my wits’ end,” said Emma. “I haven’t any idea where I can go. The flat is so convenient and I’ve been so contented there, before that man arrived. I don’t know how Jackass is going to cope with a change of homes. Parrots are home lovers and any sudden change in what they are used to upsets them.”

“It will be very hard for that poor bird,” Edna agreed. “I will keep a sharp lookout for anything suitable.”

A few days later Mrs Stapleford came across a message on the communal notice board in the super-market downstairs.

GARDEN COTTAGE TO LET

Stand-alone flatlet in well-kept

garden. Close to all amenities.

Small pet welcome. Suit

single working lady.

Tel 500002

It seemed ideal and she hurried to tell Emma. A quick phone call and Emma made an appointment with the landlord, Mr Bentley, to view the flat. Mrs Stapleford didn't think it would be a good idea for Emma to arrive on a moped with a bird cage on the carrier, which might not create a good impression. She offered to take Emma there in her car.

Colin had not really expected anything to come of the notice, but he had had enough of agents who claimed the first month's rental as commission. Besides that, one had not much choice in selecting tenants. It was safer to vet prospective tenants himself.

"Afraid there's parking for only one car," Colin apologised when he directed their car down the driveway leading to the cottage. "Is this the car?"

Mrs Stapleford explained that Emma was the prospective tenant, and that she rode a moped, which needed very little parking space. "Really, a moped? Those went out of fashion years ago didn't they?"

"Yes, my Bertha is one of a dying breed, I'm afraid," Emma explained. "But she still runs beautifully, not like those noisy buzz bikes. She's never lets me down and starting is easy, because you get going by pedalling."

Colin blinked. An elderly lady in a long skirt riding a moped was not often seen on the roads. An alarm bell sounded. Could this be another weird tenant?

"Do you ride far on it?"

“Oh, no, just to work and back and sometimes to the shops. I work at a book exchange, you know, not far from here.”

“You understand, of course, that the cottage is suitable for one person only.”

“That will be no problem. There’s just me and Jackass.”

Colin stared. “Do you mean you want to move in with a donkey?”

Emma and Mrs Stapleford laughed. “Oh, sorry, Jackass is a bird. He stays in his cage, so I’m sure there would be no difficulties. And I take him to work with me on the back of my moped, so he is never left alone.”

Colin was relieved. “Yes, a bird would be acceptable. I did say small pets welcome. And a bird is far less trouble than a crocodile or porcupine of course.”

They were impressed when Colin showed them over the flat, which was larger than Emma’s bachelor pad. “It’s just what I’ve been looking for,” said Emma. “So much more fresh, smoke-free air for Jackass than at my old flat. And the neighbours are quite far off.”

“We’ll take it,” said Mrs Stapleford briskly. “I’ll give you a cheque immediately for the deposit and a month’s rent.” She delved into her bag and was writing the cheque before Colin could refuse.

FIFTEEN

Reformed Reggie

It had been comparatively peaceful in Unit Number Four since the sale of Connie's business stock. Benny had removed his car. But the ramshackle Golf, just as much an eye-sore as Benny's car, still occupied its usual spot. Colin would have liked to ban it from the parking area, but it was used to take Connie to and from work. Reggie drove it, even though his licence had expired and could not be renewed for medical reasons.

"We don't worry about regulations," Connie had said. "What are we supposed to do? A person in my state of health can't be expected to walk and there's no bus service." So far they had dodged the traffic police.

A sore point was that Connie was the only breadwinner in the family. Reggie suffered from dizziness, which made it difficult for him to return to his former job. This led to Reggie being demoted to the second class status of house-husband.

Another annoyance was that though Reggie's dizziness kept him from working in the formal sector, he made no effort to enter the informal sector. They had for a time run a stall in a flea market once a week on a Sunday. But the rental for the stall ate up most of their profits. They resorted to car boot sales, where anyone could park on public property and sell second hand goods without having to pay rent. But nosy officials said it was illegal and the boot-sellers were hounded out.

"Look Reggie I know it's hard for you with your problem, but couldn't you do more to help. I mean it's not as though you have dizzy spells all day long. You've got plenty of time between them to do things."

“To do things? Such as what?”

“There’s plenty you could do. You could make the bed in the morning instead of lying in it most of the day. I don’t expect you to do hard work like hoeing the garden or climbing ladders to paint the ceiling. But couldn’t you help my Mom with washing the dishes and sweeping. She’s old with a sore back. It’s hard for her too. She brings you cups of tea in the morning while you relax watching TV and makes your lunch as well as my Dad’s.”

“Look, she likes doing it. It’s her hobby. I don’t like to take her hobby away from her.”

“Well it’s time you had a hobby. It’s time you helped with the expenses.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“What about selling things?”

“We tried that and look what happened. They wanted to take me to court for selling without a licence. Besides you know all our stock has disappeared. We’ve got nothing to sell, unless we start selling the furniture and kitchenware.”

“What about bananas?”

“I know nothing about bananas, except you eat them.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Reggie, the yard is overflowing with bananas. This place used to be a banana farm at one time. That Mr Bentley has left a whole row of them next to the fence. We’ve been eating bananas until they come out our ears and there are bunches of them rotting on the stalks. Bananas cost a fortune in the shops. We’ve got a gold mine right here in our garden.”

SIXTEEN

Meddling monkeys

Growing and marketing bananas is tricky. In the first place the banana plant is inconsiderate in that it produces bulky and weighty bunches each with a large number of smaller clumps that have to be detached from the main stalk. Selecting the bunches ready for cutting must be done carefully. Too late and you have an overwhelming number of bananas all ripening at once and you have piles of rotten bananas.

Cutting down a large bunch can be dangerous. Sharp knives are needed for a clean cut. Once the stalk is sliced through the bunch must be supported, otherwise it will crush the foot of anyone not nimble enough to leap out the way when it falls. The fruit at the bottom of the bunch will end up as mashed bananas, and many others will be banana splits.

Reggie heard growing bunches should be covered with blue plastic bags. He didn't know why, but it looked professional. They didn't have any of these special bags, so they collected black garbage bin liners and put them over the bunches instead. Connie said it was a waste of effort and would make no difference to the bananas, but it might solve another problem.

Bananas were popular not only among the local population, they were also attractive to another group of inhabitants, which considered food was provided by nature and could be eaten free of charge. Bananas were a magnet to these furry tree-climbers. Connie found black plastic bags were no barrier if they came between them and their favourite fruit.

They tried chasing them away with brooms but they came back as soon as the broom wielders left. Reggie had once been a member of a rifle club, and held several trophies for marksmanship. He still had his point-two-two rifle, hidden in a cupboard because his gun licence had expired years ago.

He had taken it out from its hiding place and was oiling the barrel and testing the firing mechanism, when Connie came in. "And what do you think you are doing with that gun, Reggie?"

"As you can see I'm oiling it. The barrel has to be checked for rust or it could be ruined."

"Put it away. I can't stand the sight of that gun. We should sell it before we land in trouble for having an unlicensed gun in the house."

"You know I would never do that. We may need it for protection if we are attacked."

"That's nonsense and you know it. I hope you are not thinking of shooting those monkeys with it."

"Look, I wouldn't actually kill them. If I fire shots into the air it'll scare them and they won't come back again."

"You will do no such thing, Reggie. Don't even think about it."

"Okay, okay, if that's the way you feel. Then you can think of something. Perhaps we should drop the whole banana thing anyway."

Reggie reluctantly put the gun away.

Below Unit Number Four lived a large and quarrelsome person called Delius Gubbins. He kept poultry in his back yard, including some roosters which often woke his

neighbours by crowing in the middle of the night. Delius was home resting when the sound of gunshots nearby woke him. He feared the worst. Someone must have shot one of his birds, and was carrying it away to roast for supper. He ran out to confront the culprit.

Reggie had caused more of a disturbance than he intended when he fired his rifle — he succeeded in scaring off the troop of monkeys invading his bananas, but all the dogs in the neighbourhood were upset. He quickly hid his rifle in the kitchen broom cupboard. Delius spotted Reggie standing near the back steps of the house and ran to the fence.

“Hey. Did you hear those gunshots? I think someone is trying to shoot my birds. Have you seen anyone with a gun?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Those shots were fired close by. Sounded like right here in your yard.”

“That’s impossible. They couldn’t have come from here. May have been kids with crackers across the road.”

Delius checked his fowls, then finding nothing wrong went indoors. But it seemed to him the gunshot had definitely come from next door. It had to be someone trying to annoy him. Like most of his neighbours, the people who had just moved in were probably trouble makers. He had noticed the woman staring at him.

He had found there was one way to deal with troublemakers, and that was to get the authorities onto them. It usually worked, though it didn’t make him popular. This issue of the gunshots — it was obvious to him that Reggie knew more than he was saying.

He put through a call to the local police station.

SEVENTEEN

Gun guilt

When Connie got back from work she sensed something evasive in Reggie's manner. She soon found out the reason for it when she opened the broom cupboard in search of a mop.

"Reggie, can you explain to me why that gun is in the broom cupboard?"

"Well I thought it's a good place, rather than having it hidden away. It's no use having a gun if you can't get hold of it quickly in an emergency."

"Have you been firing that gun in spite of what we spoke about yesterday?"

Connie's mother called from the bedroom. "He *has* been firing that gun. And he scared us half to death."

"Well in a way that's true," Reggie admitted. "Connie you don't know about guns. You can't just stick them away in a cupboard and not use them year after year. They've got to be used now and then or they will seize up."

Connie glared. "You know what I think. You've been shooting at the monkeys — that's what I think."

"They did happen to be around while I was test firing. And it was a good thing. They took off and I don't think they'll be back again. I didn't shoot *at* them of course."

"Have you thought what this could mean? Everyone around here would have heard and you know how people talk."

"They won't know where the sound came from. I already had that nosy person next door snooping around."

I told him nobody could have been shooting here or else I would have seen them. So he bought that.”

“He bought that? Maybe he didn’t. We’ve got to hide that gun. Get it right out the house. And make sure there are no shells lying around.”

Connie wouldn’t listen to arguments. Next day the gun and ammunition were wrapped in towels and Harry was told to hide them somewhere in the shop where he worked.

Returning in the Golf after fetching Connie, Reggie was surprised to see a police van parked near the gate. An officer got out as they turned into the driveway and approached the driver’s side. For a moment they thought he was going to ask to see Reggie’s licence or inspect the car for defects.

“Are you the people who live in the bottom house?” he asked.

“Yes we are; what of it?”

“There’s something I’ve been asked to check on, Sir. Do you mind if I come down with you? It shouldn’t take long.”

“I can’t understand what you could want,” Connie complained after they parked the car at the bottom. “We are law abiding people. In my whole life I’ve never even had so much as a library fine.”

“This is just a formality, madam. We’ve had a complaint, and we have to follow up on these things; just routine.”

“Who has complained?”

“We are not allowed to say who it was. But it’s about gunshots being fired. Do you own a gun, Sir?”

“Of course we don’t. I would never have a gun in the house. I’m against gun ownership,” said Connie.

“I’m sure you won’t mind if we take a look round, Madam.”

“You are supposed to have a warrant for that, Officer. I know the Law. I don’t like anyone poking around in my house – but we’ve got nothing to hide. Go ahead, if you must.”

No concealed rifle was found; only a high-powered bow-and-arrows, a hunting knife, a spear gun and a cross-bow.

“It’s not hard to guess who complained,” said Connie after the law had left. “We will have to watch that Gubbins. He’s one of those who can never leave innocent people in peace. I know the type. It gives him pleasure to make trouble for others.”

“Yeah and what about all those fowls he’s got there,” Reggie added. “I wouldn’t mind having a go at them. He’s not the only one who can make trouble.”

“Just leave him alone, Reggie. We’ve got enough troubles of our own. We don’t need any more complications.”

EIGHTEEN

Banana bonanza

The storage of ripening bananas was a headache. They had to be kept indoors away from free-loaders and to prevent them ripening too quickly. First the kitchen was draped with lines of hanging bunches strung from wall to wall; then the bathroom became so crowded that it was difficult for the parents to get through the door. Next even the living room began to be used as an overflow. Fruit flies were a nuisance.

Benny was roped in to help with marketing. He and Reggie loaded the Golf and found parking places from which they could sell to passers-by. Reggie complained that they needed a hawker's licence and that they risked being fined. Connie's said just make sure you don't get caught.

Although Benny was a help, when cash was involved he had a weakness. He had an urge to put some of it into his own pocket. Their first day on the road was encouraging — the car-load of fruit was disposed of within a few hours. Because they had no profit-draining overheads they were able to sell cheaply. The secret was to park close to factories in industrial areas and wait for the stream of workers at closing time.

Connie helped count the cash when they got home. The takings seemed substantial but there was a suspicion at the back of Connie's mind.

"Did you count how many bunches you sold?"

Reggie explained that out there in the battle zone it was difficult to keep a tally. "We can't count every banana."

“That’s no excuse. You should count before you leave. Did you do that?”

“No, we were in a hurry to get going.”

“You can’t sell stock without knowing how much you’ve sold. Make sure you count it next time.”

Benny crashed on the sofa that night so they could leave early next day. Loading the car was tedious and they were half way through when Reggie remembered they were supposed to be counting.

“Forget it,” said Benny. “Too late now. Just tell her, yes we counted – she’ll never know the difference.”

Again sales were brisk and they cleared the stock without difficulty. Reggie got through the day by taking extra medication to ward off medical problems and they evaded traffic officers.

When they got back they found Connie, who had organised a lift to and from work, was waiting to count their cash. Benny was a little disturbed when she produced a notebook and pencil and a calculator.

“Are you an accountant or something? What’s with the books and computers?”

“You should know I’m a careful person with money. I like to plan out my budget to the nearest cent.”

“You mean you’re a skinflint.”

“A pity you don’t take a leaf out of my book, Benny. Then you wouldn’t be on the ropes like you are. So before we cash up, how many bunches did you load, Reggie?”

“I think it was two hundred, wasn’t it Benny?”

“You think? Didn’t you write the total down?”

“Yes – it’s somewhere in the car,” said Benny.

“Well get it.”

Benny came back and said, “Sorry, it’s gone. The paper must have blown out the window. Don’t worry, let’s put it down as two hundred.”

Connie threw down her pencil. “Look, you two, this is not good enough. How could it be exactly two hundred?”

“Okay, two hundred plus or minus a couple. What does it matter?”

“It matters to me. I told you I like to keep my finances straight. All right, let’s put it down as two hundred. So what did you charge per bunch. Then we can see if it balances out.”

She counted the takings and after a quick calculation she looked up. “There’s something wrong here. It’s dozens short.”

“So maybe we miscounted,” said Reggie.

“Either that or some of the cash has disappeared.”

“Don’t look at me,” Benny protested. “You know there’s nobody on earth more honest than me.”

“Show us what’s in your pockets,” Connie demanded.

Benny threw up his hands. “You can’t expect me to slave all day for nothing. Maybe I kept a buck here and there,”

“I want to see how much.”

Benny removed a wad of notes from his pockets. Connie counted and kept them.

“Nearly one hundred, Benny. In future we can do without your help. Please get in your car and don’t come back.”

As he drove off Benny fumbled in the top pockets of his shirt, and whistling cheerfully transferred two more wads to the glove box of his car.

NINETEEN

Jolly Jackass

Jackass developed a smoker's cough through tobacco smoke inhalation. Emma wanted to take him to a vet, but found parrots were not welcome because they disturbed other patients in the waiting rooms. She got him right with vitamin pills, special high protein diet and plenty of fresh air.

As a companion he was easy to get along with and listened dutifully to whatever she had to say. He would cock his head wisely and nod in agreement, sometimes offering a small squawk of encouragement. He learned new phrases easily and made more sense than the politicians on TV.

Jackass loved to ride on the pillion of Emma's moped. They were a well-known pair on the route to the book exchange. Jackass was a showman and enjoyed being the centre of attention. The change of route upset him at first, but he soon built up new fans along the way. His favourite catchline "Shut up polly" was always good for a laugh at a stop street.

Mrs Stapleford was busy with a customer at the back of the shop when Emma arrived and put Jackass in his cage in the usual spot near the entrance, before settling behind the counter. It was not a taxing job because there was a dwindling number of book lovers, now that so many readers were migrating to e-books, though there were those who preferred print books. They still had loyal supporters.

Emma could see only the back of the customer talking to Mrs Stapleford, but it looked familiar. Then the voice confirmed her suspicion. He had already bought and paid for an obscure tome Emma saw lying on the counter, and was interested in a further purchase.

“Academic publications are becoming something of a rarity, madam,” he was saying. “The library has a limited selection. They seem to cater for the baser tastes of the hoi polloi. Trashy novels. Tasteless, pandering to the lowest strata.” He cast an eye over the shelves and added, “I see you also have a dubious choice of books.”

“We have to cater for popular taste,” said Mrs Stapleford. “A pity we don’t have that volume you are looking for. But we’ll keep a lookout. Perhaps something will turn up.”

Jackass gave a mild squawk and ruffled his feathers as he settled in for the day.

Rubin Macfaddam froze, then slowly looked round to see his old enemy preening himself in his cage near the entrance. He spotted Emma seated at the counter and glared. “It’s you, madam, from the flat. Are you following me around, hounding me with that abominable bird?”

Emma got up from her chair. “I happen to work here. You are the last person on earth I would follow around.”

Mrs Stapleford looked bewildered. Then the penny dropped. “You must be the man who had my friend chased out her flat. You should be ashamed of yourself, behaving like that to a defenceless woman.”

“I was entirely within my rights, madam. That confounded parrot was making my life unbearable with its incessant screeching.”

“That is no excuse for what you did to my friend. You are a bully. What you did was unforgivable as any right minded person would agree.”

“Hello Robbie,” the parrot said loudly. “Dirty dog.”

Rubin flushed. “You have trained that malicious bird to insult me.”

“Dirty dog,” Jackass repeated.

“I won’t stay to be slighted. I no longer wish to purchase that book. Will you please refund me my money, madam.”

Mrs Stapleford pointed to a notice on the wall. “As you can see, sir, we don’t give refunds.”

Rubin picked up his book. “You will be hearing more of this madam. I won’t take this sort of treatment lying down.” He stalked out the shop.

Although Jackass was content to be confined to his cage he did enjoy stretching his wings outside the cage when all windows and doors were closed. Clever as he was Jackass had little knowledge of the outside world and would easily lose his bearings if he got out. She would never consider clipping his wings. “It would be like chopping someone’s arms off,” she said.

After the trouble with Rubin Macfaddam Emma was wary of involvement with her new neighbours. In the unit below she had noticed the owner of a motorcycle that dwarfed her moped. Below that was a family who appeared to have seen better days. Her nearest neighbour was the top unit occupied by a couple with two children. She met them at the gate one day and the young daughter

was fascinated by Jackass in his cage strapped to the back of her moped.

“What’s your parrot’s name?” she asked.

“He’s called Jackass.”

The girl, who said her name was Karen Thornton, said she thought Jackass was a donkey’s name. “Yes it is, but he seems to like his name. He’s very clever but I don’t think he realises he’s not a donkey.”

“Does he talk a lot?”

“Yes he does, but only when he is in a talking mood.”

“Can I come to your flat and talk to him sometime when you’re at home?”

“Yes certainly,” said Emma. “Jackass loves people paying attention to him. I’m sure he would like a visitor.”

“He won’t bite will he?” asked Karen that afternoon, after Emma had shut the door and windows before letting Jackass out his cage.

“Oh no Jackass is a gentle bird though he has a wicked beak. He has never bitten anybody.”

Jackass perched on Karen’s shoulder and ruffled his feathers and said, “Naughty Robbie.”

“I wonder who Robbie is?” Karen asked.

“I think he’s a dog. Jackass lived with another family before I got him. I suppose that’s how he learned to say all those strange things.”

“Can he fly around?”

“Yes he flies beautifully, but only indoors. He would get lost if he got out and I wouldn’t like to clip his wings to stop him flying.”

Jackass took off and perched on the back of a chair in front of the TV. He whistled and cocked his head, looking accusingly at Emma.

“He wants me to turn on the TV. He loves watching the soapies.”

“Really! Can he understand what he sees?”

“I think he does. You know all about soapies don’t you Jackass?”

“Dirty hands,” Jackass replied.

“There you are,” said Emma. “He knows you use soap to wash yourself.”

Jackass ruffled his feathers and perched on Karen’s shoulder again.

“Oh, excuse me a moment,” said Emma. “Talking of soap, I must wash my hands. I’ve got some oil on them from my moped.”

While Emma was busy Karen’s mother called her. Without thinking Karen opened the door and walked out with Jackass still perched on her shoulder.

TWENTY

Wicked wanderer

Karen was halfway up the pathway before she realised Jackass was still on her shoulder. Emma called from the flat, "Where are you Karen?"

"I'm here, on the path."

"Where is Jackass?"

"He's here with me."

"Don't move Karen; just stay right where you are," Emma said. She hurried out then slowed, fearing that Jackass might take flight if she approached too fast.

"Aren't you the naughty boy, coming out here?"

Jackass bobbed his head. Emma held out an arm and he waddled across and perched on it. She gingerly began to walk back to the cottage. Concentrating on keeping her eyes on the parrot she stumbled and moved her arm to keep balance. Jackass took off for the nearest tree.

"Don't worry, there he is," said Karen pointing to a branch where Jackass was clinging to a twig and swaying in the wind. He was out of reach and took no notice of Emma coaxing him to come down. Perhaps it was the lure of the unknown or just mischievousness that made Jackass decide to ignore even the peanuts, his favourite treat, that were offered to entice him down. He could be a stubborn bird at times. He flew off to a larger tree with Emma, hampered by her long dress and Karen chasing after him.

Jackass settled near the top and there a stalemate was reached with Jackass refusing to budge. Alice Thornton, Karen's mother, joined them, wondering what the excitement was about.

“It’s my bird Jackass,” Emma said. “I don’t know what naughtiness has got into him, but he refuses to come down from that tree.”

“Couldn’t I climb up there?” suggested Karen. “I’m good at climbing trees.”

“No it’s too dangerous,” said her mother. “Rather let’s try with our avocado picker.”

The net, attached to a long pole, was cautiously raised by Mrs Thornton while Emma tried to distract Jackass by offering him tidbits. But he refused to be drawn. He eyed the approaching net, ruffling his feathers.

“Oh do be careful,” cautioned Emma. “I think he’s getting restless.”

They suspended operations for a while, hoping Jackass would lose interest in an immobile net but he was not easily fooled. He hopped onto a higher branch. Further attempts to net him only made him more irritable and he flew into a neighbour’s tree. Then with a final squawk he took off and disappeared over the rooftops.

It was difficult to know which direction to take but Emma was determined to track him down as she randomly drove up and down streets on her moped stopping to ask passers-by whether they had seen a grey parrot. She had the empty cage on the pillion to confine the delinquent once she found him. Karen and her mother in their car also joined the hunt. Jackass was unpredictable. Even Emma, who considered she had a wide knowledge of avian psychology, found it difficult to guess where he might have headed.

Alice Thornton was a member of the neighbourhood watch, and after Emma eventually suspended the hunt she posted an urgent plea on the local message board. Emma phoned her friend Mrs Stapelford, who also pinned a message on the communal notice board near the book exchange.

Next morning Emma redoubled her scouting efforts. Who knew what perils might have overtaken Jackass; she had visions of him being pounced on by a cat or attacked by an eagle or even run over by a car. After an exhausting morning of searching she went back to her flat for lunch. Mrs Thornton came rushing in to say a member of the neighbourhood watch, Robin Parker, had found a parrot in his garden and wondered if it was the missing bird they were looking for.

He lived not far off, he said. He and his family had been having tea in the garden when Jackass descended on them and helped himself to their plate of biscuits. He then perched boldly on the nearest shoulder and was taken indoors, where he put their inquisitive puppy in its place by pecking it on the nose.

“He acts as if he owns the house,” said Mr Parker when Emma was shown into their dining room, where Jackass had established himself on the back of a chair. He spotted Emma and squawked in recognition. When he saw his cage he flew into it and began eating his parrot food.

“This naughty boy has led us on such a chase,” said Emma. “Thank goodness you found him.”

“He has been an entertaining chap, though he can be a handful when he doesn’t get his own way. The children loved him.”

They helped strap the cage onto Emma's moped and watched her ride down the driveway.

TWENTY-ONE

Hilarious hairdo

For a time having two separate salons seemed to be effective. There was an uneasy truce. Each had his own customers and thanks to the dividing wall there was no contact between them.

It wasn't long before the truce ended. Shawn suspected that Andy was poaching some of his clients. His appointment bookings were not as full as they had been and he became convinced Andy was responsible. Mrs Henshaw, their receptionist, had the details of their respective clients but she was cagey about giving away information to either of them.

Since Andy's departure from their cottage in the country Shawn had found a flat in a high rise block nearby and moved in with a friend, Mark Buttery, who was a chef in a local restaurant.

Andy settled in the garden flat at Crown Crescent though he didn't spend much time there, being at the salon most of the day. At other times he partied with friends at a club in the city.

The people in the bottom house were not overly friendly, particularly the husband, Reggie, who was disapproving. The wife, Connie, seemed worthwhile cultivating as a possible customer. Her hair looked as though it could do with some attention.

He greeted her as she was watering a plant in the front garden. "Hi, Mrs Lawson, I'm Andy. I'm a hairstylist you know; I was just admiring your hair."

"Well thanks for the compliment."

"I was thinking it has so much potential. Just a few touches here and there and it could be even more smashing. Have you had it done recently?"

"Well I'm the breadwinner of the family, so we live on a tight budget. I don't have much to spare on luxuries."

"But looking after your hair is not a luxury, Mrs Lawson. After all it is a woman's crowning glory. You owe it to yourself to keep it looking super."

"Oh, I agree Andy. But we less fortunate people have to cut our coat according to our cloth."

"Oh no, Mrs Lawson. Your hair is more important than a coat. I'm sure I could help you, seeing that we are neighbours."

"How could you help me?"

"Well I could arrange a free introductory offer. No obligation."

"You mean you would do my hair for nothing?"

"That's right. You won't be charged a cent. It's a way to create goodwill, plus it would be a favour for a neighbour. Anyway don't make up your mind now. Here's my card. You can let me know any time."

When she went inside Reggie demanded, "So what's with that oddball next door?"

"You mean Andy? He's a hairstylist. He wants to give me a free hairdo."

"What for? Your hair is okay the way it is. Don't fall for any of those hard sells. I know the type."

"Look, I haven't had my hair done in years. I deserve a bit of pampering and it's a free promotion."

“Free promotion? There’s always a catch with those things. He’ll try to hook you in afterwards.”

“Anyway Reggie, I’m the breadwinner, so you don’t have any say.”

Connie was stressed out when she was dropped off outside Andy’s salon half an hour late for her appointment. Reggie had assured her he would have no trouble finding the address. Predictably he got lost and wasted time asking passers-by for directions and then the Golf developed engine trouble and Reggie fumbled under the hood for at least ten minutes before he got it started.

When they eventually arrived she was confused to find that there seemed to be two entrances, one in the front and a second one on the other side of a dividing wall. She rang the bell on the gate and was ushered in by a severe-looking woman.

“You must be Mrs Lawson,” she said. “We have been wondering what had become of you. Your appointment was for ten, you know. I’m afraid you might have to wait a while before we can fit you in.”

One of Shawn’s customers, Mrs Bernardo, had come in unexpectedly while they were waiting for Connie to arrive. Shawn had been busy, so Mrs Henshaw had sent her to Andy.

Andy welcomed Connie, after removing a towel from Mrs Bernardo’s shoulders and installing her under a hair dryer. “So glad to see you, Mrs Lawson. We were beginning to worry that something had happened to you.”

He cast an eye over Connie's hair as she settled in the chair. "I'm going to work magic with you, Mrs Lawson. We'll start off with a nice reddish tint, then a special protein conditioner and after that I'll give you a cut and blow dry. You won't know yourself when we're finished with you."

Even the cynical Reggie was impressed when she went back to the car. "But don't let him hook you in," he warned.

TWENTY-TWO

Clarinet cacophony

Karen Thornton's brother, Rodney, a few years older than her, went to a local High School. He arrived home later than usual one afternoon with a long object in his satchel. It was inside a fancy sheath.

"What's that?" Karen asked.

"*That* is a musical instrument." He took it out its case.

"Where did you get it?"

"I didn't 'get it'. It was presented to me – by our Music Director, Mr Queek. He has decided to form a school orchestra for people with a proper feeling for music — not just strutting around in the cadet band blowing bugles that can play only five notes. He was looking for talent so naturally I applied."

"But you can't play anything at all. So how are you going to play that flute thing?"

"Don't call it a flute thing. This is a B flat clarinet. There's a big difference."

"Well to me it looks round not flat."

"Naturally I can't play it professionally yet. But it won't take me long to master it, even though it's not an easy instrument to learn. This reed in the mouthpiece is tricky for a beginner. Here, try it yourself. Just blow through it and you'll see what I mean."

Karen took a breath and blew into it. It made a noise like a duck. She pulled a face and handed it back.

"I don't like it. I think a flute is much nicer."

“Flutes are okay; we will have them in the orchestra as well. But comparing a clarinet and a flute is like comparing a Rolls Royce with a Beetle.”

He began practising later that afternoon. Mrs Thornton, busy in the kitchen, came out. “What on earth is that horrible noise?”

“Don’t worry, it’s only Rodney playing on his foghorn,” said Karen.

“Tell him to close his bedroom door,” said Mrs Thornton. “That noise is already giving me a headache.” She went back, closing the kitchen door, but even then the noise was disturbing. Closing doors and windows was not enough to block the sound.

Mr Queek was able to provide guidance to him and other members of the orchestra at school but he urged them to practise at home. The theory of music was fairly easy to explain, but mastering the techniques of actual performance needed much more.

“How are you doing with your music?” Mrs Thornton asked, after enduring several weeks of aural agony and hoping that Mr Queek had given up the idea of a school orchestra.

“Mr Queek says we’ll soon be able to take on the City Philharmonic Orchestra. He says all we need is plenty of practise,”

“That’s all very well, Rodney. But you must also consider the family at home. Karen says it’s hard for her to concentrate on her homework with the noise of your foghorn.”

“I keep telling her that my clarinet is not a foghorn.”

“It’s even louder than a foghorn.”

Eventually a compromise was reached and Rodney practised in a makeshift studio in the garage. At school the orchestra rehearsed after school hours in the main assembly hall separate from the main buildings. In the sports field the cadet band paraded in their cadet uniforms, with bugles and drumbeats.

Mr Queek battled with the orchestra, which privately was not highly regarded. But they became more respected when it was announced that the orchestra was to perform at a ceremony welcoming a famous Old Boy, who was due to visit the school.

The orchestra put all their efforts into practising the National Anthem, the opening event.

“Well, at last our orchestra is going to be famous,” Rodney told Karen. “You’ll soon be reading about us in the newspapers.”

“Why should you be in the newspapers? Are you going to play in the City Hall or something?”

“No, but we have been chosen to play in front of an important Old Boy who is coming to visit the school.”

“If he’s old how can he be a boy?”

“Never mind that. The point is it’s an honour to play in front of him. The cadet band thought they would be chosen, but then it was realised all they can do is march around playing the same old tune over and over.”

“I hope it doesn’t mean that you are going to practise more than ever.”

When Mrs Thornton heard the news she was in two minds whether to be pleased or disappointed. She was pleased Rodney would be performing at such an important event; on the other hand she was also worried

that Rodney might not be ready to perform in public. There were so many odd squawks and whistles while he was practising. It was difficult to point this out to Rodney because he didn't take criticism kindly.

"Well, Mr Queek is happy with my playing. He said all I need is a bit of practise at home. And that's what I'm doing."

"Well I hope it turns out well," she said doubtfully.

Her husband, Winston, was non-committal. "Well at least he's out of the way in the garage."

Mr Queek was called in to the Headmaster's office to report on the orchestra's progress.

"Look Queek, your orchestra is a fairly new project, and some of your members are, hum, shall we say beginners — and the visit is not far off. I must have your assurance that the orchestra will be ready to perform. The honour of the school is at stake."

Mr Queek looked uneasy. He could hardly admit that his pet project was not up to scratch.

"Well the boys are all making a valiant effort. Maybe they aren't one hundred percent ready. But we still have time before D-day."

"Well, be that as it may, Queek, but I have heard rumours that the, hum, standard of musicianship, hum, could be improved."

"These are malicious rumours, Headmaster. Mostly spread by supporters of the cadet band."

"Yes, yes, Queek. I am no music aficionado so I have to depend on the views of others. And since you are the Musical Director I must, hum, rely on your judgement."

“Thank you, Headmaster. I am confident that by the time of the visit our orchestra will be able to put on a fine performance. The boys are making a splendid effort.”

But Mr Queek had an uneasy feeling that his reputation was on the line. If they failed to impress he would be held accountable. Rodney and the other members had no such qualms. They were convinced that any flaws in their performance were easy to fix. Rodney was confident the occasional squawk from his clarinet was lost in the general sound level. Luckily Mr Queek led the music with loud chords on the piano, which also drowned out false notes from the other players.

“I have just been talking to the Headmaster,” Mr Queek said at the next rehearsal. “I have told him we will be note perfect for the function, which isn’t very far off. I hope that you boys will not let me down.”

Mr Queek was encouraged by the chorus of reassurance. He put doubts out of his mind and threw himself into the task of making sure the event would be a success.

TWENTY THREE

Fainting Flint

Shawn was convinced that he was losing customers to Andy. Many of his regulars hadn't made appointments and he suspected that they were being poached by Andy.

One of Shawn's favourite customers, Mrs Bernardo, had been introduced to Andy by chance when Shawn was late for an appointment. Now she wanted to switch to Andy permanently. Mrs Henshaw tried to dissuade her.

"I'm afraid Andy is booked up today. You usually go to Shawn, don't you?"

"Yes, that's true. But my husband seems to think Shawn makes me look old fashioned."

"Well, of course you have every right to choose who you wish. But please don't let Shawn know."

An appointment was made for that week.

Andy was delighted. "I'm so pleased you have chosen to come to me, Mrs Bernardo."

"I was quite happy with Shawn. But I felt it would be nice to have a change. Perhaps a more modern look."

"Of course that's what you need. You are so young looking, Mrs Bernardo. It is such a mistake to spoil your appearance with the terribly plain styling that Shawn loves."

"Well please don't say anything to him, I would hate to upset him."

"Of course, Mrs Bernardo. In any case Shawn and I go our separate ways nowadays. So there is no chance of that."

The salon was busy as usual. His apprentice, Jackie, was doing a wash and tint at Andy's second chair. He was seriously thinking of installing another chair or even two more, though lack of space was a problem. But splitting the business was the best thing that could have happened, from his point of view—it was a relief to be running his salon without interference.

Andy was lax about appointments. If customers arrived unexpectedly he was always willing to fit them in as "casuals" though he would give preference to those formally booked in. Today there were several casuals waiting their turn.

He preferred younger clients but also had elderly customers though some of them could be trying at times. He saw that Mrs Flint, an elderly widow, had arrived, dropped off by her chauffeur and was sitting impatiently tapping on the floor with her walking stick. She hated to be kept waiting. "Excuse me a moment," he whispered to Mrs Bernardo. "It's old Mrs Flint. She is so demanding."

He hurried to Mrs Flint. "Oh dear, we are running a little late, Mrs Flint. But we shouldn't be long."

Mrs Flint glared. "I am not used to be kept waiting, young man. I always make an effort to be punctual, and I expect others to do the same."

"Yes, of course, Mrs Flint. I'm just finishing off Mrs Bernardo's hair. Then you will be next."

In a chair near Mrs Flint, Mrs Abbot was glancing through a magazine while she waited her turn. She was large, in her early forties with ginger hair.

She called Andy over. “Look Andy, I bin waiting here long before her highness over there came in. Why are you pushing her ahead?”

There was a murmur of agreement from some of the others, who turned hostile stares on Mrs Flint.

“No, no, let me explain. Remember I am fitting you ladies in. Mrs Flint has an appointment.”

Mrs Flint got unsteadily to her feet with the help of her walking stick. “I will not stand here to be insulted by these people.” She waved her stick. “How dare they refer to me as ‘your highness’ in that sarcastic way.”

Andy rushed to Mrs Flint, who was swaying and looked like falling, only to receive an accidental blow on the head from Mrs Flint’s walking stick. The other customers jumped up to help Andy. Mrs Abbot, towering over Mrs Flint, shouted, “Here, give me that stick,” and wrenched it away. Mrs Flint lost her balance and collapsed.

Andy was in a panic. Not only did he have a lump on his head but his salon was in an uproar. And Mrs Flint was unconscious on the floor.

“Call an ambulance,” he shouted to Jacky.

Mrs Bernardo joined the customers grouped around the fallen Mrs Flint, and Mrs Henshaw hearing the noise hurried from her office, leaving the interleading doors between the two salons open.

When the ambulance arrived paramedics added to the confusion and as Mrs Flint was wheeled off on a gurney the staff from Shawn’s salon came in, led by Shawn. The first person he saw was Mrs Bernardo.

He stared at her for a moment. “Mrs Bernardo! What are you doing here?”

TWENTY-FOUR

Ferocious fray

“Please Shawn, let me explain,” said Mrs Bernardo. “Andy has been giving me a New Look.”

“I’m just as capable of giving you a New Look. Let me tell you that I have ten times more talent than Andy will ever have. Look at the mess he has made of your hair.”

Andy was unhappy at this attack on his artistic ability, particularly in front of witnesses. “Mrs Bernardo loves her New Look,” he snapped. “She is tired of the frumpy disaster you make.”

Insults flew back and forth.

Paramedics parked outside were giving first aid to Mrs Flint. One of them went to investigate the noise in the salon. He put his head round the door just as Shawn hurled a bottle of hair lotion. It missed Andy but hit the paramedic, knocking him down. Andy ran to help him.

Mrs Abbot pushed him aside. “Mind out the way,” she ordered.

Other medics arrived and tried to restrain Mrs Abbot. The fallen man tried to get up. “Get her off me,” he pleaded.

Mrs Abbot shouted, “I saved this man’s life thanks to my first-aid training. He would have suffocated if I hadn’t bin here.”

“Yes, lady. Just leave him to us now. We are trained for the job.”

They helped their team mate to his feet and supported him back to the ambulance. “That’s a nasty bash you took there, Vince. We’ll have to have you checked out.”

Shawn had meanwhile gone back to his own salon, before anyone could accuse him of being the bottle thrower. His biggest regret was that the bottle of hair lotion had hit the wrong target.

That evening Mark, Shawn's flat-mate, was startled by the slamming of the front door. He was used to Shawn's outbursts but this one seemed worse than usual.

Shawn stormed in. "I've caught Andy stealing one of my clients. I can't go on like this, Mark. I've got to do something about it."

On the surface all seemed calm next day at the salon. Business went on normally but there was an underlying tension. Mrs Henshaw was expecting a confrontation with Shawn. But he arrived without saying anything. In the other salon Andy was his usual self, seeming to have forgotten yesterday's events. After lunch Shawn told Mrs Henshaw he was going out.

"Will you be back later?"

"I'm not sure about that," he said as he stalked out.

Shawn seemed subdued when he arrived at his flat later.

"So what's the story now?" asked Mark. "You look like you're going to a funeral."

"Maybe I am — the business's funeral."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you one thing. Andy is going to be sorry for what he's been doing. Maybe we'll both suffer, but I think he'll suffer more than I will."

"What have you done, Shawn? I hope it's not something we'll regret."

“Maybe it is. But I don’t have much choice. I’ve decided to sell the business.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Salon shock

Shawn phoned the salon next day to say he would be coming in late. He arrived in the afternoon. "He acts as though he isn't interested in the customers," Megan complained to Mrs Henshaw. "A lot of people are put off by the way Shawn is carrying on."

A visitor Mrs Henshaw didn't remember arrived soon afterwards. Reaching for her appointment book she asked, "Would you like to make a booking with one of our stylists?"

"Oh no, I'm not here for a hair-do. I'm Rita. Didn't Shawn tell you I would be calling? I just want to get an impression of the salon. You know, the equipment and shop fittings; that sort of thing."

"Shawn didn't mention anything to me. I'm sure no repairs are needed in the salon. We had a complete re-fitting not long ago."

"Yes I remember that. In fact our firm, Dillion and Williams, did most of the organising for the revamp. We're property agents, you know."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand. Shawn is happy with the salon the way it is."

"Yes of course. I just need to refresh my mind, so I can describe things to prospective clients."

Shawn hurried in and took the agent by the arm steering her away from Mrs Henshaw's office. "Good of you to come, Rita. We don't want to disturb the staff. We'll have a quick look around the salon and then we can discuss things outside in your car."

Mrs Henshaw picked up her phone. “Andy, are you and Shawn planning to sell the salon?”

“What on earth are you talking about Adele?”

“An estate agent has just been here. Shawn showed her the salon and they are outside talking in the parking lot.”

“But that’s ridiculous. Could you hear what they were saying?”

“It sounded as if she wants to show clients around the salon.”

“We’ll see about that. Shawn can’t do anything without my say-so.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Mrs Henshaw said quickly. “It may have nothing to do with the salon.”

As Shawn was coming back, Andy stood on a chair and popped his head over the dividing wall at the entrance,

Shawn was startled by his unexpected appearance.

“What do you want Andy?”

“Who was that you were talking to?”

“No business of yours. Keep your nose out of my affairs.”

“I know that woman. It was Rita the agent. What are you cooking up behind my back?”

“Don’t try your luck with me Andy.” Shawn advanced towards the wall. He aimed a slap at Andy, who lost his balance and fell off the chair.

Mrs Henshaw quickly locked both her doors, fearing an altercation in her office. Andy phoned her a short while later. “I have just spoken to Shawn. He more or less admitted he is trying to sell the salon behind my back.

There's only one thing to do. I'm going to see my lawyer."

Mr Michael McGruff, of Stubbins, Hawkly and Redcrest, sighed when his secretary announced Mr Andrew Fulton had arrived. Andy, he remembered, was flighty and temperamental and bad for his acid reflux.

"It's about my partner," Andy announced as he flounced in and seated himself.

"Ah, yes, you have a hair salon," said Mr McGruff, opening a folder. "The contract we drew up was standard. Ah, yes, I have a copy here."

"For a start you can tear up that contract," said Andy.

Mr McGruff frowned. "Tear it up? You can't just tear up a contract. It has legal force, you know."

"I don't care a turnip for legal force. All I care about is fairness."

"The contract as I recollect was perfectly fair. You and your partner, Mr Fairweather, were both happy with the terms when you signed."

"We are not happy. That's why I want the contract torn up."

Mr McGruff sighed and reached for his antacid tablets. "Is there a reason for this sudden decision?"

"Without a word to me he has put the business up for sale."

"Tut tut, but that may be covered in the agreement."

"Andy leaned forward and snatched the contract from the startled attorney's hand. "Here's what I think of it." He tore it up and tossed the pieces in the air.

“Well, that’s it. The deed is done,” Shawn told his flat mate Mark. “I’ve given a sole mandate to the agents, and an advert should appear in this evening’s newspaper. That should set the cat among the pigeons.”

“But you can’t do that, Shawn. What about Andy?”

“What about him? I’m perfectly free to sell the business if I want to. There’s nothing Andy can do about it.”

“Okay, but what then, Shawn?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got plenty of options. And it’s a marvellous feeling to kick sand into Andy’s eye.”

At the salon the news spread. Shawn refused to say anything to the staff.

“I’m glad it has come to this,” Shawn confided to Mark, “I’ve been thinking for some time how nice it would be to shake the mud of this backwater from my shoes. What would you say, Mark, to a long voyage to distant ports?”

“Wishful thinking. How could we do that?”

“What about a luxury cruise ship?”

“You’re joking, of course.”

“Not at all. You’re a chef; I’m a hair stylist. We sign up as crew members and away we go.”

TWENTY-SIX

Orchestral ordeal

After a rehearsal in the school hall on the day before and a practise session, even Rodney was on edge when the day of the event arrived. The rehearsal had not gone as smoothly as they had hoped. There were embarrassing incidents when one of the performers knocked his music stand over and when the violinist dropped his bow while performing a solo flourish. Mr Queek did his best to keep calm but had doubts.

The school hall was transformed. Extra chairs had been hired and a red carpet rolled out from the marble portico at the entrance, to the stage. The hall was packed. The Headmaster was on stage and the school orchestra was assembled below as a limousine glided to the entrance of the hall and the VIP was shown to his seat.

The Headmaster gave the signal for the orchestra to play the anthem, and Queek raised his baton. The orchestra readied their instruments and as the baton came down there was a loud discord.

Queek raised his baton for another attempt but it was worse than the first. The ushers hustled Queek and the orchestra out of sight. Someone in the audience started singing the opening verse of the anthem and the audience joined in. After that, doing his best, the Headmaster gave an address and the ceremony continued on a somber note.

After the guests had gone the orchestra was called to the Headmaster's office. Mr Queek and the musicians were lined up in front of his desk.

“Well Queek,” the Head began, “I don’t think it’s necessary to explain why you are here.”

“May I put in a word, Headmaster, before we go any further. I must take full responsibility for this unfortunate *faux pas*. The boys can’t be blamed. They have spent long hours practising at home, as well as rehearsing here after school hours.”

The Head held up a hand. “It was indeed a serious lack of judgement on your part, Queek. The worst of this, hum, sorry affair is that the school’s reputation has been damaged. We will be the laughing stock of the City. Other Headmasters will, hum, pretend to be sympathetic but will really gloat over the mishap.”

“Of course you have my unreserved apology, Headmaster — and my assurance that it will never happen again.” Turning to the orchestra, Queek added, “You boys fully understand the position, don’t you. You will make every effort to build the orchestra up until it is an asset to the school.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the orchestra.

The headmaster took off his spectacles and polished them with a handkerchief. “I’m afraid, Queek, that you are underestimating the gravity of the situation. You cannot escape from this unforgivable incident with a mere slap on the wrist.”

“Headmaster, as I have explained, we must take into account the boys’ lack of experience in performing in public. In fact this was the first time they have done so...”

“And, I’m afraid, also the last time,” interrupted the Head. “I allowed you to start the orchestra as an

experiment, against my better judgement. But we have been too ambitious. We cannot allow the project to continue.”

There was a chorus of dismay from the orchestra.

“But, Headmaster, may I ask you to reconsider. Surely after the boys have put so much time and effort into the project it would be heartless to discontinue the orchestra at such short notice.”

“I’m afraid my decision is final. The, hum, orchestra is disbanded herewith, with immediate effect.”

The stunned group trooped out.

Rodney got home later that afternoon. He threw down his satchel.

“Hey, what’s the matter with you?” asked Karen. “Have you got into trouble at school?”

“Not that it’s your business, but we’ve had trouble with old Wrinkles, you know—the Headmaster. He wants to fire the school orchestra.”

“What about your foghorn? Have you still got it?”

“You mean clarinet? I won’t be playing that any longer; I handed it back. I’m finished with the orchestra,” he added. “They have let me down. I was the only one who mastered his instrument properly. The others made a mess of things during an important performance.”

“So you won’t be practising any more?”

“No, I’ve got better things to do than wasting my time on that.”

Mrs Thornton was hard put not to reveal her true feelings when she heard Rodney had left the orchestra.

“Don’t be too disappointed Rodney. It was taking up too much of your time anyway.”

“Well in a way I’m glad to be out of that bunch of losers. Half of them were battling to read music, let alone play properly. They don’t understand practising is not going to help if you don’t have talent.”

“Well, thank goodness you’re out of it. Just put it down to experience and concentrate on other things.”

One of Rodney’s former colleagues on the orchestra, Philip Gillespie, had decided to put aside his poor opinion of bugle players and join the cadet band.

“I can’t understand how you can like marching around in that uniform blowing that thing,” Rodney said, when he heard.

“Yeah, it is a bit of a come-down from the orchestra, but at least everyone admires the band. And the bugle is not such a mission to learn, once you get your lip right. Why don’t you give it a go? There’s room for another member.”

Rodney arrived home and dropped his satchel on the floor with a flourish. There was a metallic clang.

“What have you got in there?” Karen asked. “I hope it’s not another foghorn?”

“Well, you’re quite close. It is a kind of a horn. It’s a bugle.”

From the knapsack he took out a tarnished brass instrument with a slight dent on one side.

“What a horrible old thing. It’s much worse than your foghorn.”

Rodney put it to his lips and blew a note that echoed through the house and set the dog next door barking. Mrs Thornton rushed in.

“What’s that ghastly noise?”

“It’s Rodney’s new foghorn,” Karen told her. They both glared at him.

“Okay, so I haven’t got my lip one hundred percent right yet. This is the first time I’ve tried it out.”

“I hope it’s the last time, specially inside the house. That thing must be faulty. Did you find it in the rubbish dump?”

“Of course not. This is a bugle, and they are expensive musical instruments. A little bit of polishing and it will look like new.”

“But what do you want it for?”

Rodney was not sure that it was the right moment to break the news. “Well, actually, I have joined the school cadet band.”

Mrs Thornton stared. “You can’t be serious, Rodney. You have just left the orchestra, which you hated, and now you’ve joined a band.”

“And what about practising?” asked Karen.

“Well it may be a little noisy, but you’ll just have to get used to it.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Computer catastrophe

“Well, today’s the big day at the office,” said Winston Thornton at breakfast, just before leaving for work.

“Oh,” said Mrs Thornton. “Are you having an office party?”

“No, nothing like that. Today we’re getting our new computers. We’ve been struggling with the old ones for too long. Maybe we will throw our old Windows through the window,” he joked.

“Don’t be silly Dad,” Karen scolded. “How can you throw one window through another window?”

Rodney got up in disgust. “Well I’m going early to bugle practise,” he said.

The office was a shambles when Winston arrived. The technicians were already there setting up a network. Cables were everywhere, like spaghetti. The Editor, Wally Williams, always the first to arrive, had taken one look at the disorder and retired into his office.

Winston’s own office nearby was as yet unaffected. On his desk stood the old Windows machine. It gave a beep when he switched it on and the black and white screen slowly lit up. In a way he would be sorry to see it go.

He looked up to see Chief Sub-Editor, Charlie Stonehead, peering round the door. He was a small grey-haired person with spiky eyebrows that twitched when he was upset.

“I don’t see why this lot shouldn’t do the job at a more convenient time, like after four.”

“Don’t worry. Most of the pages are finished. There shouldn’t be a problem.

“Yes, but Eric Pogson is still sitting on the last four.” His eyebrows twitched. “I’ve complained to Wally. It’s no use though. He and Pogson are Free Masons. They are pledged to help each other.”

Eric Pogson was stocky, in his sixties. He suffered from gout.

For years the magazine had used a manual system. At last they were switching to desk-top publishing. Computers would take over. Everything would be done on-screen in the editorial office. The first step was to switch to more powerful computers all networked together.

Eric was the first to complain. “How can I be expected to carry on with these pages when I’ve got people pushing past me and moving my desk around. This wouldn’t happen if we had a competent Chief Sub.”

Charlie, at his desk on the far side of the room didn’t look up but his eyebrows twitched.

A workman staggered up to Pogson’s desk and put down a computer and keyboard. He walked off to fetch more computers. Eric stood up. “Hey, you, come back here. What’s this thing you have put on my desk?”

The worker said he thought it was a machine.

“Who told you to put it here?”

He said his boss had told him to do so.

“Take it away. I’m not having this thing on my desk.”

He took it off and stood in front of the desk holding it. He wanted to know where to put it.

“As far as I am concerned you can throw it out the window.”

He compromised by putting it on the floor and then went off.

Charlie wanted no part of the dispute and sat at his desk without looking up. Soon afterwards one of the managers came in to see what the trouble was.

"I hear you are complaining about your computer Eric. That's it on the floor is it?"

"You want this magazine to meet the factory deadline, don't you?"

"Yes of course. But, Eric, we are switching to desk-top publishing. It's going to be difficult for everyone..."

"So how am I supposed to work with that great thing pushing everything off my desk?"

"No, calm down Eric. Alright it can stay there on the floor until later. I'll tell the computer people to leave yours till last."

He eased himself out the office waving to Stonehead as he went past.

A foreman from the typesetting department came in. "So what's this I hear, Eric?" He slapped him on the shoulder. "You're not happy with your new machine?"

"You know what you can do with it."

"You don't mean that do you. Wait until we've got it hooked up. You won't know how you ever did without it."

"I can do without it like I can do without a dose of diarrhoea."

"Look, tell you what we'll do for you. We'll set your computer up on a separate desk, then you can shift over to it when you are ready."

Gradually with much hammering and drilling the cables were installed around the office and the process of connecting the computers together began. Special network cards had to be installed into each computer. "We are going to use the SCSI system," a technician told Winston."

"Shouldn't take much longer, should it?"

"I wouldn't say that. Putting in the cables is only half the job."

The Editor, Wally Williams, came out his office. "You can come in if you're ready," he said to the technician who had been hovering near the door. The general office was in a chaotic state with more computers, old and new, than there were members of the staff. He was spotted by the Chief Sub, who had been waiting for a chance to talk to him.

"Wally, mind if I have word?"

"Yes Charlie, I know we have a bit of a shambles here. But we have to put up with it for a while."

"I realise that, Wally. But this is about Pogson," he said lowering his voice, in case he was overheard.

"What about him, Charlie?"

"My problem is that Pogson is sitting on pages urgently needed by the factory. He claims he can't work because of the disruption."

"Well, I suppose we must make allowances for the present circumstances," Wally said, edging away.

They were interrupted by Pogson calling loudly for a messenger to take pages to the despatch department. "The whole system is a mess," he complained. "I can't

seem to get any co-operation around here. I'm the only one who can get anything done."

There seemed to be no end to the disruption. Next day the cables were in place but the PCs were not happy with the SCSI network cards they were trying to install and they spat them out making a chattering sound through their loudspeakers. The technicians had to take the cards away and get replacements. "It's a compatibility problem," said the expert who was called in. "Sorry for the delay. I hope we are not inconveniencing your staff too much."

Not that he really cared.

"Give us back the old computers," Pogson complained. "They have left us with a basket of rotten apples."

Hal Snyman, the long-haired layout artist, had never been involved with computers. His new computer sat unused on a table next to his desk, which was mostly taken up by a drawing board, tilted at an angle, on which Hal practised his art with special blue clutch pencils on pre-printed layout sheets. He had perfected his technique over the years, so that he was able to churn out pages like an automated machine. This left him with plenty of spare time.

Stonehead did not approve. "What a waste of a young man," he would complain when he saw Hal sitting with nothing to do. He would have liked to see Hal move on to another job. This switch to desk-top publishing had one consolation that pleased Stonehead. It would mean a much heavier workload for Hal.

TWENTY –EIGHT

Quirky Quark

The programme chosen for desktop publishing was called Quark, like some visitor from another planet. It was a system designed to outwit them. If you pressed the wrong button everything on the screen would often disappear

For Hal the layout artist, it was even more difficult — graphic design on a computer is tricky. Everyone was more or less on their own in wrestling with their machines. It was a case of adapt or cry.

To begin with they still used the old manual system in tandem with the new system. But everyone tended to cling to their old Windows machines. It was something like weaning a baby from milk to solids. Then management got tough. Their Windows machines were to be taken away altogether. This was like telling people on crutches that their crutches were to be confiscated.

Pogson was in favour of sabotaging the new machines by pouring tea into their keyboards but was dissuaded when told this might cause the entire office to be blown up. It was a day of mourning when a team of removers arrived to take the old machines away.

Other departments such as the typesetters and proof-readers suddenly became redundant. Journalists in the editorial department could now replace all these departments at no extra cost. Members of the Board rejoiced. A special celebration in the Board Room was held with much toasting, speech-making and self congratulation.

Hal, who was previously a “layout artist” (also called a “layabout artist” by Stonehead) was now given the more glamorous title of “Art Director”. But he missed the leisurely pencil and paper days. Winston helped with cover design. He chose the picture and wrote headlines, and Hal designed the cover. This was finicky work and made more difficult because a printout had to be approved by the critical eye of the Editor.

“I’ve got the cover for you to have a look at,” Hal said, handing Wally a coloured print of his newly completed effort.

Wally turned away from typing an editorial.

“Bit late, isn’t it?” he said peering at the print through a magnifying glass. “That bar code seems to be badly positioned.” He produced a ruler and a pair of dividers and carefully took a measurement. “Yes, I thought so. It should be at least half a millimetre closer to the edge. Look, see for yourself.”

“But surely nobody is going to see half a millimetre, Wally?”

“We must be perfect with covers, Hal. The cover is the showcase of the magazine.”

He looked further. “That top headline is crooked I think. Let me see.” Using a clear plastic overlay with black parallel guide-lines he pointed out that one of the letters was a hairsbreadth out of line. “And I don’t like the spacing between the words. They must be equal. Even a tenth of a millimetre makes a difference, you know.”

He continued examining the layout, noting several other points he was not happy with. “No. I think this needs a

complete make-over, Hal. And some of those headlines will have to altered and reset. Bring it back as soon as you're finished. We are running a bit late."

Hal went back to his desk, where Winston was waiting to hear if the cover had been approved.

"You don't look happy. Something wrong with the layout?"

"There is nothing wrong with it. It's with him that something is wrong. Maybe he is squint. I don't know. He wants it done over."

Winston looked at it. "Seems okay to me."

"It is, man."

Hal laboured over the new version. Winston noticed that his neck and shoulder muscles seemed stressed as he manoeuvred his mouse. He took the layout through and came back with it after a delay during which Winston could hear raised voices from Wally's office.

"I could thump him," Hal said. "He still wants to find something wrong."

After the third attempt Wally reluctantly let it pass, but was still convinced some of the print was crooked. "He is giving me a stiff neck," Hal complained. "I think I can feel the bones clicking."

Next day Winston learned that Hal was off sick. He had suffered a frozen neck and shoulder in the night.

TWENTY-NINE

Raucous rooster

Connie was having a problem with her elderly mother, who complained that she was woken night after night by the crowing of the rooster next door. Her father was not affected because he was hard of hearing. He could hear better when he turned his hearing aid on, but he often found it more convenient to switch it off so he could turn a deaf ear to the complaints of his wife.

“Just when I get to sleep, after battling for hours, that bird crows and I’m wide awake again.” She prodded her husband. “You hear it too, don’t you, Eddie?”

He fumbled with his hearing aid. “What’s that, what’s that? Is it breakfast time?”

Connie interrupted, “Yes Mom. It is a nuisance. It’s worse for me because I need a good night’s sleep so I can get to work to provide for all you people.”

“So what can be done about it? That man next door must be told to stop his rooster crowing,”

“It’s not easy to stop them. They enjoy crowing.”

Connie broached the subject with Reggie, who was watching TV in the lounge. “Don’t ask me,” he said. “We don’t want trouble with that man next door.”

“Maybe we could offer to buy it from him. It would make a nice roast.”

“So who does the offering?”

“We can get Benny to do it. Then if there is trouble we won’t be involved.”

But Benny was not keen. “Why me?” he asked. “What’s the catch?”

“There’s no catch,” said Connie. “You would be doing it for Mom. You don’t want your mother to have sleepless nights, do you?”

“You know how bad my nerves are,” the mother said from the bedroom. “It’s about time you did something to help, Benny.”

Outmanoeuvred and out-voted, Benny was forced to agree.

“So what am I supposed to tell this man?” he protested. “I knock on the door and say ‘I want to buy your chicken.’ He’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Just think up something to convince the man.”

“Such as what?”

“That’s up to you. Just get on with it. And don’t let him over-charge you for that chicken. You know I’ve got to watch my budget.”

The house next door faced onto a separate cul-de-sac, which was ideal in Connie’s view because there would be no connection between Benny buying the offending chicken and the family at forty-eight.

Benny parked some distance away and walked to the gate. His first problem was that it was fastened with a heavy chain and padlock. The property was protected by a high concrete wall. Rattling the chain brought no response, so Benny resorted to loud hellos as well as rattling the chain. He was about to give up when the front door opened and a face glowered at him.

“What do you want, making that racket?” the face demanded.

Benny was flustered for a moment, intimidated by the angry expression. “I’m looking for number forty-nine. Sorry to bother you.”

“This is number forty-nine; so what?”

“Are you Mr Gubbins, the poultry expert?”

“Yes I’m Mr Gubbins. How do you know my name?”

“Well, you see,” said Benny, thinking quickly, “I’m into poultry myself, in a small way. I do some breeding and I’ve been asking around trying to get a bit clued up. I heard you know a lot about breeding. Thought you could give me a few tips.”

The face seemed slightly appeased, and the rest of Mr Gubbins emerged. “Yeah, well I’m not all that much of an expert; don’t know where you heard that. I do know a bit about it. I do some breeding right here. What do you want to know?”

“Well, it’s just basic stuff, you know, like how to get started, the best breeds to get hold of — that sort of thing,” he said eagerly. “I’d take it as a great favour if we could have a chat.”

“I dunno about that.”

Benny’s face fell. “Hearing things straight from the experts is better than reading a hundred books. It would be a big help.”

“Okay then come in. But I can’t talk for too long.”

Delius Gubbins’s home was austere, the minimum of furniture, no carpets, and faded curtains. It needed a coat of paint. Benny battled to carry on a conversation with the laconic Mr Gubbins. Benny had little knowledge of poultry, and he had to duck and weave to avoid giving himself away.

“So what breed have you gone in for?” Benny asked, giving up on the hope that he might be offered a cup of tea, or even something stronger.

“Plymouth Rock. Got a few bantams as well.”

“Do you do much showing?”

“Yeah a little. But I’ve had a bit of trouble with the Judges.”

“I’m also a fan of those Rocks. I’d love to have a look at yours. You’ve got them in the back yard have you?”

Delius frowned. “I don’t like to give away my secrets.”

“No, no. I’m just after the basics. I wouldn’t have a clue about all that high-tech stuff.”

“Don’t often let anyone near my poultry. Anyway okay. You can have a look but don’t go too close. I don’t want them disturbed.”

The back looked badly in need of a garden service — an overgrown lawn choked with weeds, a pile of garden refuse in one corner and near the back fence a makeshift run enclosed by rusty chicken wire. Some dispirited black-barred hens were scratching for food, overseen by a large aggressive rooster — the source of the crowing.

“That bird’s a beauty! What I wouldn’t do to have one like that.”

“Yes, that’s my star. Won several prizes on show.”

“It’s just what I’m looking for.” Benny hesitated. “I was wondering ...” he said diffidently.

“Yeah, what were you wondering?”

“Well maybe it’s too much to ask — but would you consider selling that bird. I could offer a good price.”

Delius's face darkened. "What did you say? Selling! Are you out of your mind?"

"I would pay a top price — I would go as high as two hundred bucks."

Delius exploded. "That bird is worth thousands. You talk about two hundred. Why, I'll ..." He advanced on Benny who backed away nervously.

"No offence Mr Gubbins."

"Look, just get out of here. Get out before I do something we will both be sorry for."

Benny lost no time in taking the hint.

He went back to Crown Crescent that evening.

"Well, how much did you pay for it," asked Connie. "Where is it? Did you leave it in the car?"

He wouldn't sell."

"What! How much did you offer him?"

"Two hundred bucks."

"So much! Then why didn't he sell?"

"He got nasty. He said that chicken is worth plenty. It's supposed to be a breeding bird. I had to get out of there fast — he threatened to beat me up."

Connie shook her head. "You deserve to be beaten up. Couldn't you see the man was trying to haggle with you? He was trying to get you to up your offer."

"He's a mean dude. I'm done with him. You can send Reggie next time."

THIRTY

Rooster riddle

There was no end to the nocturnal crowing. It was as if the rooster had forgotten that it was supposed to crow at dawn and not at unscheduled times in the night. Perhaps one of the circuits in its brain had malfunctioned – or else it was a malicious bird intent on annoying the neighbourhood. Unfortunately the rooster's harem was also confused by the wake-up calls and cackled loudly, adding to the nuisance. Mr Gubbins seemed to have become so used to the noise that it didn't bother him.

One of the consequences of loud crowing though, was that it was a form of advertisement to any hungry prowler that there was a dinner nearby. Delius had built a high wall around his property, but did not realise that high walls were not an insurmountable obstacle to peckish prowlers.

The thought occurred to Connie's mother that a solution to her problem if all else failed was for the rooster to vanish.

"If he won't sell that bird we will have to steal it."

"We can't do that Mom. Do you want us to land in jail?"

"We won't be caught if we are careful."

"Who do you think will climb the fence in the dead of night to steal a chicken?"

"Benny can do it. Or else Reggie."

Connie wouldn't hear of such nonsense. It confirmed her suspicion that her parent might be at an early stage of dementia.

At that point a stalemate was reached. It was well known that appealing to Mr Gubbins's better nature or social conscience would not help because he had neither.

One morning a roar was heard from Mr Gubbins's back yard. Connie opened her kitchen door a crack and observed Mr Gubbins stomping about. Delius's yard was in full view through a fence between the two properties. She opened the door and peered out, curious to know what had annoyed Delius so much. He caught sight of her and stormed to the fence.

"My Plymouth Rock has been stolen. Do you know anything about it?"

"Of course I don't. Where was it?"

"It was in the chicken coop, where it usually roosts. It's gone. It's a valuable Show bird. Have you seen it? Maybe it got through the fence into your yard."

"No, definitely not. There is no way it could have got through the fence. There are no holes — we always check."

"Well watch out for it. I'm going in now to phone the police."

"What's with him?" asked Reggie, joining her at the door.

"I can't stand that man. He's got no manners. The way he talks to a person is a disgrace. He seems to think I've stolen his fowl."

She glared at Reggie suspiciously.

"You and my Mom had nothing to do with it, did you Reggie?"

The ancient mother's voice came from the bedroom. "It wasn't me."

“Or me,” said Reggie. “So it must have been Benny.”

A headline appeared in the local tabloid newspaper.

POLICE SEEK POULTRY THIEF

Mr D. Gubbins, a poultry breeder who lives in the Neighbourhood Watch area, has reported to the police that a valuable Plymouth Rock breeding bird has been stolen from his premises. Mr Gubbins is convinced that the thief was not a casual intruder but someone who was well aware of the show bird's value.

“My Plymouth Rock has won several prizes at poultry shows, and is valuable breeding stock. I recently had a suspicious inquirer who offered to buy it. Of course I refused and the inquirer left. Unfortunately I did not ask his name or address, but I have given a description of the man to the police,” Mr Gubbins told our reporter.

Mr Gubbins is circulating a photograph of the bird (see picture left).

Police are investigating.

That evening the familiar but unwelcome sound of Benny's car was heard coming down the driveway.

“It's that brother of yours again,” said Reggie. “What's he want now? Thinks he can get a free supper.”

But the figure that got out the car was not the scruffy form they were used to. It was shrouded in a shapeless overcoat with collar pulled up and a peaked cap and dark glasses further hiding the face. A moustache completed the picture.

Connie peered through the curtains as the figure approached the front door and knocked.

"I'm not at home — you ask him what he wants, Reggie," she said, prodding him in the back.

Carefully slotting the emergency chain in place, Reggie opened the door a fraction.

"Yes, what do you want?"

"Quick, open up."

Reggie opened the door a little more. "Who are you? Why are you driving Benny's car?"

"I'm driving my car because I *am* Benny. Let me in before I'm seen."

"Is that you Benny?" shouted Connie. "Are you crazy scaring us like that."

Benny took off his coat and peeled off his moustache. "Take a look at this," he said, holding out a rolled-up newspaper. "Read that story. The police are after me!"

"What's that about Benny?" came the voice of the mother from her bedroom. "Is he in prison?"

"No I'm not — but I could be, thanks to these people."

"Well it's your own fault, Benny," said Connie, handing back the newspaper. "It was stupid to go back and steal that chicken. What have you done with it?"

"Of course I didn't steal it. Why would I want to?"

"Maybe to cook it. You must give yourself up, Benny. Tell them you did it because your children are starving."

"I did you people a favour. Now I'm a wanted man hiding from the police."

"Calm down Benny," said Connie. "If it wasn't you who was it?"

"You tell me. You lot have got to help me — you got me into this."

“Nothing we can do. You’ll just have to take your chances and lie low. Maybe the thief will be caught eventually.”

“Look, the least you can do is put me up until this is all sorted out.”

THIRTY-ONE

Caged cat

Jackass the parrot was out of sorts. His brief adventure in the outside world had made a strong impression on him and now he seemed to resent Emma keeping him cooped up in his cage when there was so much to explore outside. But after the ordeal of hunting for the escaped bird, Emma thought it wiser to keep him confined.

Jackass distrusted cats; it was just an instinctive feeling. One of them was a black and white cat called Toodle that belonged to the neighbours and which was often seen prowling in the garden. Jackass showed his displeasure — loudly. Emma noticed it near the door gazing at Jackass and chased it away.

However it often hovered at a distance, hoping for a chance to investigate more closely.

But Jackass was beyond the reach of even the most dedicated stalker. He was whisked off in his cage on the pillion of Emma's moped most mornings and at other times was always under Emma's eye.

Toodle's patience paid off one weekend when Emma had to attend a wedding and was forced to leave Jackass alone in the flat.

"Don't get up to mischief," Emma cautioned. She locked up the flat but overlooked a small window in the kitchenette. For a time he hopped from perch to perch, preening himself.

Tiring of this he turned his attention to the problem of undoing the catch that held the cage door closed. The catch clicked open, and it was a simple matter to slide the wire door open and hop out.

For a time Jackass was at a loss about what to do. He flitted aimlessly about the flat until he found one of Emma's magazines and he pecked holes through it. While engaged in this pastime, Jackass noticed the curtain in the kitchen parting and a pair of golden eyes fixed on him.

He flew to the top of a cupboard. Toodle scrambled up the cupboard, dislodging several plates, that shattered on the floor.

Jackass flew off to a curtain rail and Toodle tried to claw its way up the curtains. The game of cat and parrot continued, with Jackass flitting from one point to another.

The empty parrot cage hung above the floor and Jackass finally took refuge on top of it, strutting up and down with his feathers bristling. Toodle tried leaping up but couldn't grip the wire sides.. It finally managed to hook a claw on the ledge in front of the cage door and scrambled up, only to find itself inside the cage. Jackass fluttered down and somehow dislodged the sliding door, which dropped shut, trapping Toodle inside.

Emma got back several hours later to find Toodle, which had given up the struggle, curled up asleep in the cage and Jackass strutting on top.

"I was amazed," Emma told Mrs Thornton. "I found your cat in Jackass's cage."

"But that's impossible. Do you mean our cat somehow got into your flat, opened the cage, ate poor Jackass and then locked itself in and went to sleep?"

"No; thank goodness Jackass is safe."

"It's quite unbelievable. Where is the cat now?"

“Well, I opened the cage and it ran away.”

“But how did it end up in Jackass’s locked cage?”

“That’s what I find so puzzling.”

The mystery remained unsolved — until that evening Emma noticed that Jackass was unusually quiet.

She saw he was pecking at the cage door. A moment later she heard the whirr of wings and looked up to find Jackass perched on the back of a chair. The cage door was open.

“So that’s your secret! That’s how the cat got in, isn’t it? You’re far too clever. We’ll have to stop that.”

Next day Toodle was seen in the garden wearing a red collar round its neck, with a bell attached to it. And Emma fitted Jackass’s cage with a lock.

THIRTY-TWO

Pesky prefect

The head prefect at Rodney's school, Anton Watson, was not a favourite with the boys. In fact most of them kept well away from him. He was a dour, stocky youth who did well on the rugby field, though it was said he bent the rules under cover of the scrum and was not above applying the boot, not always to the ball. He was not popular even among the other prefects but it was not worth getting on the wrong side of him.

But he had one saving grace. He was a wizard on the trumpet. He was the star of the cadet band and his trumpet soared above the bugles. Rodney was not impressed and thought he was a show-off.

"Look, so he can play these frilly bits to show the rest of us up," he confided to Phillip Gillespie, a former colleague on the ill-fated school orchestra, who had persuaded Rodney to join the cadet band. "But remember he is playing a trumpet with those valves. Naturally it's going to sound better than a bugle. We could do just as well if we had one. Instead we have to battle with five notes."

Phillip looked round anxiously to make sure they weren't being overheard. "Hey be careful what you say about him."

"His old man bought that trumpet for him, otherwise he would be stuck with a bugle just like the rest of us."

There was no chance of Rodney getting a trumpet — his family was not happy with his bugle. They were not likely to encourage more noise by providing him with an even louder instrument. His sister Karen closed her windows

whenever Rodney practised. Sometimes she wished he still had his clarinet, which at least sounded better than the bugle.

“Why do you have to keep blowing that foghorn so much? Surely you have learned to play it by now.”

Phillip had some interesting news. “Did you know that Watson sneaks out and plays in a jazz band at night?”

“How can he do that? He’s a boarder. What about the rules?”

“If you’re head prefect you don’t have to worry about rules. Friend of mine, Roy Proudfoot, says he’s seen him playing at some club in town. It’s a rough joint called the Black Alley. Maybe I can take you there sometime.”

“How can you do that?”

“Roy can fix it for us. Just let me know when you can make it.”

They left their bikes in the parking lot outside the club at the end of a lane. The entrance was lit by a purple flashing neon sign, and they could hear live music from inside. The high notes of a trumpet playing a solo riff soared above the other instruments. “That’s him — that’s Watson. You can tell from that *‘prrip’* he always makes,” said Phillip.

“Yes, sounds like him. Not bad.”

Inside it was dimly lit. Roy, who had a part time job as a waiter, met them at the door and he ushered them to chairs near the back. “Just keep a low profile,” he warned. “I’ll be in trouble for allowing you in if anyone finds out.”

He bent the rules even more by supplying them with mugs of beer, adding a generous price mark-up for himself. Watson seemed to be in his element and was playing improvisations on a jazz standard. There was a pianist, drummer and bass guitarist with an electric guitarist and Watson leading on the trumpet.

Phillip joined the applause. "He's great on that trumpet. Makes the rest of them look like amateurs."

When the band took a break Watson joined a noisy group near the front, downing mugs of beer.

"Okay, he's something on that trumpet. But can you imagine what Wrinkles would say if he could see him," Rodney remarked.

"Or us," said Phillip.

They watched a few more numbers, Watson still electrifying on the trumpet; there was no doubt that he was the star of the show. The audience became more and more unruly though— in proportion to liquor sales at the bar.

"Let's get out of here," said Rodney. "Things are getting rough."

"Yesh," Phillip agreed. "Lesh head out now," he added, gulping down the rest of his beer. Rodney had been more careful, knowing that he might have to face his sister when he got back. They weaved their way to the parking lot and rode unsteadily homewards.

Rodney had more respect for Watson's trumpet, having seen him in action. "So what do you think of him now?" Phillip asked next day during lunch break.

"Sure he knows how to blow a horn. But I still wish someone could take him down."

“I hear the latest is he goes around quizzing everyone whether they know the names of the prefects,” warned Phillip. “You’re supposed to memorise the list. If you make a mistake he hauls you into the prefects’ room for punishment.”

Unlike most eleventh graders, who kept well out of Watson’s way, Rodney and Phillip thought they were immune, being privileged members of the cadet band. It came as a shock when they heard that William Rice, a junior member of the band, also thinking he was exempt from the rule, had fallen foul of Watson.

After a heavy afternoon of practising for the annual inter-schools cadet band competition Rodney, after changing to go home, was making his way to the gates when he heard Watson’s harsh voice.

“Hey you, Thornton, where do you think you’re going?”

He was a person of few words; after Rodney said he was on his way to catch the bus home, he said, “Okay, so give me the names.”

Rodney was unable to remember all fifteen of them.

“You flunked. I’ll see you in the prefects’ room tomorrow.”

Phillip was shocked at the news. “You’re in the band. He can’t do this to you.”

“Well he has.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll come in with you,” Phillip offered.

“Won’t do any good. I think Watson gets a kick out of punishing people.”

They knocked and went into the prefects’ room. Watson was practising putting with a cane.

“Hey you,” he said, noticing Phillip. “What do you want?”

“I just want to say we’re in the band with you.”

“I don’t take excuses.”

“Hold on a minute,” said Rodney. “I’ve got some photos of you.”

“So?”

“So Wrinkles might be interested in seeing them.”

Watson stared. “What do you mean?”

“I mean he might not be pleased to see you drinking in a night club when you should be in the dorm.”

Watson froze for a moment, then he paced up and down thinking. Finally he said, “All right you two — get out of here. But I won’t forget this.”

THIRTY-THREE

Helpful Hints

"Karen tells me you have been in trouble with the Head Prefect," said Winston.

"Yes," Rodney admitted. "He wanted to throw me into detention for not memorising the names of the prefects. A pretty drastic punishment."

"You think detention is drastic?"

"Sitting in the detention room for hours writing lines is not fun."

"You people don't know when you are well off. Not so long ago prefects were allowed to cane."

"What was that like?"

"Try reading this essay that appeared in one of our school magazines. It will give you some idea."

Helpful Hints on the Gentle Art of Caning

By Roland Strongarm

As Head Prefect I was proud to be granted the privilege of "the right to whip" which is a time honoured and noble tradition of our great school. I am glad to say that I have carried the torch to even greater heights, and am happy to claim that I have developed what used to be a hit or miss affair into an exact science.

As an advanced implementer of the noble practice I feel it's my duty to record my hands-on research into this fascinating subject so it will not be lost to others entrusted with carrying on the good work. First of all let me point out the benefits of wielding the rod. There can be no doubt that there are many, particularly in the lower grades, who are resentful of authority, and will do all they can to

kick over the traces. Taunting of teachers is regarded as fair game. In much the same way as bull-fighters goading angry beasts are regarded as national heroes, so are these taunters lauded by classmates as being champions.

Our brave teachers unfortunately are at a disadvantage in dealing with this scourge. They are bound by an unfair regulation forbidding them to wield the malacca themselves. Instead they have to refer them to the Headmaster. The system we prefects use is far more effective and a much better deterrent. In fact I have suggested that all flogging should be carried out by the head prefect and teachers should send troublemakers direct to me for remedial treatment. This would save the Head time and effort.

This practice has been a great tool in turning out worthy citizens who can stand up to hardship in their future lives. Learning to brave the pain of the cane without flinching gives them the courage to stand up to adversity. It turns mice into men.

Turning to the practical side of the art, the first rule, as in golf, is to perfect your swing. I have found many of the ways to improve your game of golf can be applied to the art of whopping. First the correct stance is important to keep your balance and to swivel as you follow through your stroke. To get maximum impact raise your malacca well above shoulder level and then maintain an even acceleration as you approach the target.

You can judge how effective it is by the characteristic sound made as the target is reached. It should be a sharp thwack, something like beating a carpet with a broom handle. During a properly executed swing the tip of the cane should travel at roughly the speed of sound. An expert can even cause the end of the cane to go through the sound barrier making a whoosh and crack like the bullwhip used to drive cattle.

Do not be afraid of causing excessive damage to the target. They are tougher than you think. A worse case scenario would be for the

target to be carried off to the sick bay, and allowed to recover gradually. I am proud to state that I have never had an ambulance case, which would put the school to needless expense. In most cases the target is able to leave the prefects' room on his own feet without assistance. They usually leave as quickly as possible in case I decide to administer another for good luck, though some stagger and seem disoriented. A beneficial effect is that the process releases certain chemicals which enhance brain activity so that applied regularly the treatment may improve academic performance, though this has not been scientifically proved. I hope to do research on this one day.

Some problems may arise if the target yells on impact. One method is to get an assistant to clap a hand over the target's mouth. Arranging the subject in the most favourable posture is another important factor. The traditional pose, bend down and touch your toes, is not necessarily the best, though in cases where a queue of offenders has to be dealt with one after another this may be the most time-saving scenario. For solo cases a wider choice of posture can be used.

In extreme cases where the subject refuses to assume the desired pose voluntarily a more drastic approach is needed. Here it may be necessary for assistants to hold the target face down over a table or in very rare cases to tie him down with ropes and gag him, though I am pleased to report this procedure has been used only twice during my time.

An underhand trick used by some subjects is the use of padding, which defeats the beneficial effects of whopping. It is usually easy to detect because the padding causes a noticeable bulge. After removal of the padding I usually increase the number of strokes to make sure of a favourable outcome.

The art, I have found, can be improved by applying physics and mathematics. In physics much can be learned from Newton's laws of motion. The amount of energy released when a moving object

meets a stationary one can be calculated to determine the force that should be applied to the implement. To determine the correct acceleration curve from the beginning of the swing until impact, calculus can be used.

It should be remembered though that speed is not the only factor to be considered. Accuracy is important. The aim should be to land each swipe in exactly the same spot. While sometimes this may be difficult because of the offender flinching, practise allows the wielder to adjust his aim to allow for movement of the target. Two or three perfectly aimed strokes can be more effective than a dozen haphazard ones that land at random. Scientifically delivered blows can often draw blood with as little as three strokes.

Finally I come to an aspect not often given much prominence — and that is marketing. To instil a culture of discipline the consequences of disobeying the rules must be advertised. The best method is word of mouth. The use of slogans is very effective. On catching sight of even innocent bystanders I use my favourite phrase “I’ll flog you four”. This is usually enough to cure the bystander of any tendency to rule-breaking, though it does deprive us of subjects who could be used to further our research.

I hope this article will be helpful to my successors and also draw attention to the healthy effects on school discipline we have achieved.

THIRTY-FOUR

Blundering Benny

Connie, as was often the case, found herself in difficulties. Putting up Benny was out of the question but eventually she had yielded to pressure from her mother, and this upset her already tight budget. Benny didn't earn much as an unqualified electrician and in fact he had troubles of his own. There were certain customers who were keen to trace him.

"Benny, a Mr Gordon keeps phoning about a job you did for him."

"Never heard of him."

"Then how did he get hold of my phone number? I've told you I don't want any part of your crooked business."

"I would never give out your number. It must have been Marcella."

"Well I told Mr Gordon I have nothing to do with you and don't even know where you are. He didn't want to believe me."

"He must be one of those people who got a job done practically for nothing. They expect me to use brand new top grade materials and still make a profit. You can't have it both ways."

"Like you fixed my stove with a kettle cord, I suppose. This man Gordon says his house nearly burned down and he is in trouble with the inspectors for illegal wiring."

"Look, you get what you pay for."

"Well I hope he doesn't come round here looking for you."

There were many problems with having Benny to stay. In the first place there was a lack of space, so he had to crash on a sofa. There were no blankets to spare, so he had scrounged some from Mr Goodfellow, their neighbour. He also cheerfully took it for granted that he would enjoy free board and lodging.

Benny had to keep a low profile because another neighbour, Mr Gubbins, who knew Benny by sight, suspected he had stolen his prize rooster and the police were on the lookout for him. He was in arrears with maintenance payments to Marcella, his ex-wife. And dissatisfied customers were also eager to get hold of him.

“As though we haven’t enough troubles of our own,” Reggie, Connie’s husband, complained. “And now we have that no-good brother of yours hiding out here. We could be jailed for harbouring a wanted criminal.”

Although burdened with all these predicaments Benny remained cheerful, confident that they would soon sort themselves out. He considered a lot of these woes, in any case, were not of his doing. Customers were making a fuss about nothing — they had all benefited from cut prices. It was Connie’s fault that he was suspected of chicken theft — Connie had pressured him to try to persuade Gubbins to sell his prize rooster and he had had nothing to do with its later disappearance. As for Marcella, it was up to her to get a job — he couldn’t be expected to pay maintenance. Court orders were just pieces of paper anyway.

But what did bother Benny was lack of cash. Connie was tight-fisted and refused to lend him a few bucks and his fair-weather pals turned away when he approached

them. He was no longer welcome at his favourite drinking spot without cash in his pocket.

Connie began to lose patience. "It's no good your hanging about here all day Benny. You've got to get out and earn some money. You can't expect me to be your free meal ticket."

"So whose fault is it that I'm stuck here with the police after me?"

"That's all blown over by now. In any case you can wear a disguise."

Benny ventured out reluctantly, wearing a moustache. He headed for one of his favourite haunts, the Starving Horse, a not too classy joint in a not too classy part of town, where he hoped one of his mates could tip him off if there was anyone looking for cheap electrical work.

He spotted the broad back of Froggy Foxton leaning over the bar talking to the barman and sidled up. They were talking in undertones. Froggy became aware of an unwelcome presence.

"Mister, what are you doing listening in to private conversation?"

"Froggy, you know me — Benny."

"So what's with the moustache. You in disguise or something?"

The barman eyed Benny. "You know him?"

"Yeah. He's Benny, small time electrician. Does cheap jobs under the radar."

The barman, scruffy with long hair and pointed features, looked interested. "Hey, he could be useful."

Benny perked up. "You got something for me?"

The barman, appropriately called Rat Pellham, winked. “Maybe. Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“We’ve got a job in your line. But it needs someone who can keep his mouth shut. Could mean cutting a few corners.”

Froggie looked doubtful. “Maybe it’s in his line, but he’s not one to keep his mouth shut — are you Benny.”

“I don’t know how you could say that Froggie. I’m not a blabber.”

Rat Pellham turned away and began polishing a glass.

“Tell you what,” said Froggie. “Maybe we could use you as an outsider, if you just do what we say, no questions asked.”

“Sure that’s fine by me.”

“Okay we’ll think about it. We’ll let you know,” said Rat Pellham

Connie was sceptical when she heard the story. “I hope it’s above board Benny. You’re in plenty of trouble as it is. Enough is enough.”

“I don’t mind cutting a few corners, if it means cash. Whatever it is they can’t pin anything on me.”

They contacted him a few days later and took him round to a run-down neighbourhood where some drab apartments were going up.

“Why are showing me this lot?” he asked. “They look like they’ll topple if you push them.”

“Like we said, they’re in your line.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“The deal is you do what you always do. You wire them up for power.”

“Hey fellas, this job looks too big for me. I’m a one-man outfit.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll round up some helpers to lend you a hand. What we want is for you to get the job done quick. Cut a few corners if you have to so long as it looks okay. Nobody minds what goes on under the surface — know what we mean?”

“What about inspectors? I don’t deal with inspectors.”

“Leave them to us. We got good friends in the Council to smooth the way for us. Inspectors won’t come near the job.”

THIRTY- FIVE

Risky racketeering

The helpers they rounded up hardly knew a light switch from a fuse box. Apart from fetching and carrying and other groundwork, Benny was on his own.

Benny had novel ideas on how to short circuit (in more ways than one) some of the tedious safety measures used by less enterprising electricians. He decided it was a waste of effort to run cables through tubes. It was much easier to string them along the walls and cover them with a layer of plaster. Soldering of joints was unnecessary when wires could be twisted together and wrapped in insulation tape. Earthing metal parts was silly and earth leakage detectors could be left out – not necessary when you had fuses anyway.

Loads of goods were delivered in Froggie's van — copper cables, wall plugs, wall switches, light fittings as well as plumbing material, and kitchen fittings. They were unloaded under cover of darkness, when Froggie would arrive with helpers and furtively carry them into storage.

Froggie had also found a plumber who shared Benny's advanced theories of how to expedite work in progress.

"What do you think of this job, mate?" Benny asked casually.

The plumber, a square block of a person named Rolly Robins, said he had his problems with the materials. "The pay's good, so I don't rock the boat. Luckily I got my own little tricks. If something doesn't fit I make it fit. What happens down the line's not my worry."

"I'm with you there. You been with Froggie long?"

“I was put on to him by a pal. But I know all about Froggie and his partner.”

“What’s there to know?”

“Better I don’t say. Could get you a load of trouble.”

“Trust me. I’m not a talker.”

“Okay. First place, this deal here is just one of their rackets. Froggie owns this scrap metal yard; he’s got plenty of small timers collecting stuff — maybe even lifting it from empty houses. So you can guess where all our material is coming from? Copper pipes, electric cables, switches, meter boxes, you name it.”

Benny whistled.

“Next thing this Rat Pellham has got contacts in the Council — maybe family. So they’re into the tender racket. The usual. Put in a high quote, jobs for pals, get the job done cheap as possible, pocket the balance.”

“What about inspectors?”

“Same thing. A few bucks here, a few bucks there and everything’s passed, no inspection — everyone’s happy.”

“Except the guys that move in and pay the rent,” grinned Benny.

“Now here’s the part where we score. Keep in with Froggie and when the complaints start to come in who do you think gets to fix things? Dead right. You and me. Froggie stings the Council for a high price for repairs, and he gives the jobs to us. Council pays us and we give Froggie a small cut.”

“How does Froggie score?”

“He charges Council big bucks for material to fix things. The material cost him peanuts, so he makes big on that.

Any faulty stuff we replace goes back to Froggy to be used on another job. Can't go wrong. We all get rich."

Although Benny's bank balance improved, he decided it would be a mistake to let Connie know. It could lead to demands that he should contribute to the family's finances, resulting in less for himself.

"You've got this new job now, Benny, yet you keep telling me you're broke," Connie complained. "Where's all the money going?"

"I don't get much — the job's right out of town. Transport cost is killing me."

"That 's your story, Benny."

"I would never lie," said Benny piously. "I've got my principles."

"I'm on a tight budget being the only bread-winner. You've got to pay up Benny."

"We should get rid of him," said Reggie, as soon as Benny was out of earshot. "That no-good brother of yours is a sponger."

Benny, though, had no intention of being got rid of. He was on a good wicket and, after all, had helped the family out in the past. They owed him.

With his new job he had spending money and was once more popular with his pals in the pub. He was welcomed by one of his old cronies.

"Benny — where've you been?"

"Long story. Hit a bad patch, but I'm okay now."

"Did the booze get you?"

“No, no nothing like that. I don’t have a problem with booze. I can take it or leave it like anyone else. You still with the Daily Flash?”

“Yeah, still stuck with them. As for booze, better take than leave, I always say. So what you doing now?”

Benny was about to order a lager when the crony, a newshound named Wilfred Snipes said, “Hold on. Have one on me. You can treat me next.”

After successive treats Wilfred remarked, “You were saying you got a new job?”

Benny gazed at his lager and blinked. “New job. Yeah, yeah, new job.”

“Still in the same line — electric work?”

“I been meaning to tell you about this job. Don’t really like it. It’s a bit risky, not that I mind a bit of corner cut-cutting... I don’t know if I should be telling you this.”

Wilfred leaned forward eagerly. “No, go ahead. You can trust me.”

“You heard of this guy Froggie? He’s the one who has pulled me into this racket — him and his pal Rat Pellham. Froggie owns a scrap metal place, so they get Council contracts and use this junk to build on the cheap.”

“Hey Benny you want some advice from a pal? Get out of it...Joe,” he called to the barman, “bring us another round on Benny.”

Wilfred was keen to hear more, particularly about the Council insiders and Benny was glad to oblige.

The barman became concerned after several more rounds. “You gents, I think it’s about time to check out. Don’t want to have you carried.”

“Hey, I’m as sober as the Pope,” Benny protested as he was assisted out.

THIRTY-SIX

Network noose

The main benefit of networking, Winston found, was that it was no longer necessary to have your desk cluttered with paper. It was all on the screen. For the Editor it was satisfying to see lines of toilers staring at their monitors and rattling their keyboards to meet the deadline. He assumed, of course, that they were not taking part in online casino gambling, or typing letters to friends on email.

There are hidden dangers in the use of computers. All the words on the screen are really little noughts and ones recorded as magnetic blips. They can be wiped out in the blink of an eye. It can be a horrifying experience to see the work of several hours suddenly gone forever, as though it had never existed. Usually placid individuals often explode when this happens.

Such outbursts were not unknown on the days when Eric Pogson did the news pages. He was not a placid individual at the best of times and when his computer swallowed pages there was serious disruption.

“Are you having trouble with your computer Eric?” a colleague asked.

Eric had stood up so violently that his chair fell over. He was staring at the blank screen of his monitor.

“It’s this rotten tin can again.”

“Yes, I see you have quit the program,” the colleague, a plump person called Laurence Lightfoot, said. “Have you saved your work?”

“Saved? I couldn’t even save my soul before this thing went blank. I have complained until I’m hoarse about

this faulty tin can but nothing has been done. There are loose things in it. Listen for yourself.”

He lifted the computer, electric cables dangling, and shook it violently. Laurence Lightfoot reached out hurriedly and helped him ease it back onto the desk.

“Careful, you might drop it.”

“Dropping it is the best thing that could happen.”

“Have you lost any of your data, Eric?”

“Not any — all of it. Nearly the whole morning’s work.”

“Don’t worry, sometimes it’s still there on the hard drive or memory.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Use a hammer and chisel to get it out?”

“No, no. That might damage it beyond repair, Eric. You’ve got to be gentle with these things. Violence is not good for them.”

“Maybe a good bashing would cure it.”

“No, no, I think we can get your work back without being too rough.”

After much fiddling and pressing of buttons the screen flickered and Pogson’s missing text slowly reappeared.

“There you are Eric. It was not lost after all.”

Pogson sat down, relieved but still not happy with his machine. “I still think it’s faulty. It could happen again. I can’t go on until whatever is wrong with it has been fixed.”

“It’s possible you pressed the wrong button by mistake, Eric. It happens to all of us.”

“Maybe to all of you but not to me. I refuse to type another word until the technician has found what’s wrong with it. It’s the Chief Sub’s responsibility to sort this out,” he added loudly.

Even from his office some distance away Winston could hear Pogson demanding that his computer be given ‘medical aid’.

The consultant who was finally called in dismembered the machine with a screwdriver laying bare its inner workings for Pogson’s inspection. It was probed and prodded while Pogson stood by muttering. “Well, as you can see, Mr Pogson, we can find nothing organically wrong. No viruses or microbes. I would be inclined to give it a clean bill of health.”

“All I can see is a tangle of entrails. Are you one hundred per cent sure nothing is wrong?”

“Well no-one can be absolutely sure. Of course there could be some other cause. You are on a network — someone could be hacking into your machine.”

“How could that be done?”

“Quite easily really. Anyone on the network can view what other users have on their screens. They can delete things by simply pressing a key.”

“So, someone in the office could erase what’s on my screen?”

“I suppose, theoretically, they could. But who in their right mind would do such a thing?”

“Some I could name. How could we find out who is doing it?”

“I believe there are certain tracking programs out there but I wouldn’t advise using them.”

“What was that all about?” asked the Editor, Wally Williams, emerging from his office after the technician had left.

“Nothing much,” said Winston. “Just Eric complaining about his computer.”

A strong conviction that it was Chief Sub Stonehead who was erasing text from his computer did not improve Pogson’s temper. He avoided directly accusing Stonehead but dropped subtle hints.

“I’ve got my eye on you Charlie,” he said, as he passed Stonehead’s desk. “I’m well aware of what’s up.”

Stonehead’s eyebrows twitched. Pogson was obviously harking back to a quarrel they once had about cups. “I wouldn’t drink out of your teacup. I’ve got my own, which is clearly marked.”

“Who cares about teacups.”

“Well please keep away from mine. Just mind your own teacup.”

“You’re not fooling me with this talk of teacups. I know what you’re at, Charlie,” Pogson hinted. He stalked away.

When the tea break arrived Stonehead watched closely to make sure there was no switching of cups.

Pogson, however, found it difficult to see what the Chief Sub was doing on his keyboard. He made several trips past Stonehead’s desk craning his neck.

“Is there a problem Eric? Is something bothering you?”

“If there is one it’s of your making.”

“I’ve told you I’ve had nothing to do with your cup.”

“Don’t think you can side-track me, Charlie.” He moved back to his desk.

Stonehead chose a moment when Eric was busy to pay a discreet visit to the Editor’s office.

“Sorry to trouble you Wally. Could I have a word in private?” he asked, easing the door shut.

“Yes, Charlie. I thought the computers have been sorted out.”

“No that’s not the problem. It’s about Pogson.”

Wally sighed. “I hope it’s not serious.”

“To me it is, though you might not think so. It’s about teacups.”

Wally blinked. “He’s been stirring it, has he? Or is this about a storm?”

“For some reason Eric seems to think I have been drinking out of his teacup. Crazy as it seems.”

“Can’t you sort it out with him?”

“I have tried Wally. I would appreciate it if you could have a word with him.”

“Alright Charlie I’ll talk to him,” he said reluctantly.

At a suitable moment Pogson was called in.

“Shut the door will you Eric. I believe that you are not happy about the teacup situation.”

“Teacups? I’ve got no problems about teacups. Why should you ask?”

“Well it’s not about the cups *per se*. It’s more about drinking out of them.”

Eric frowned. “Has someone complained? Might I ask who?”

“Well it wouldn’t be fair to name names, Eric.”

“Ah, I see. It’s about Charlie. He spoke about teacups when I was drawing him out about something entirely different. He was obviously trying to duck the real issue.”

“Oh, so it wasn’t about teacups. What was it about then?”

“I can’t say at the moment, Wally. But it’s something more serious than cups and saucers.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

Teacup tantrums

Charlie looked up smugly as Pogson passed on his way back, assuming that his talk to the Editor had solved the issue. He decided nevertheless to keep his teacup well away from Pogson in future.

The network was a complicated one with twelve machines connected in a loop, so data could be exchanged freely between them. If you wanted to send a file from one computer to another all you need do was select the name of the target from a list of users and press the magic word “send”.

As in most office systems, though, there were often trolls. One such geek was Albert Doubleday, a thin, youth with spiky hair who considered himself a computer whiz. He had once accidentally trodden on Pogson’s toe in the canteen and had received a cuff on his left ear, even though he had apologised. After that he kept well away from Pogson.

He was thus not a bosom friend of Eric. In fact he had often dreamed of striking Pogson with a baseball bat. Albert was an assistant graphic artist, who had once worked in the printing department. As a graphics person he was also on the network, though not directly involved with the tedious business of editing. It amused him sometimes to change a word here and there in the text Pogson had edited.

Tactics like this were hard to detect. When the magazine was printed with these blemishes complaints came in from readers. This caused Wally some concern. He called Stonehead into his office.

“Charlie we have something of a crisis on our hands here.”

“No need to worry, Wally. Thanks to the talk you had with Pogson the teacup problem has been solved. The whole thing was more or less a hiccup.”

Wally brushed teacups aside impatiently. “This is something more important than teacups, Charlie. Letters have been arriving from readers about typographical errors in our articles. Here is a typical example.” He frowned, sliding it across.

To The Editor

“The Gardening Clarion”

Dear Sir,

The article “Growing Tips for our Young Readers” in your latest edition refers.

I was disturbed by certain words peppered throughout the above article. As the mother of a growing child I find it unacceptable that these should appear, particularly in an article aimed at young readers.

These are phrases one would expect in the most lurid pornographic publication, and it is beyond belief that you have allowed them to appear in a family magazine. The occasional typo can be forgiven, but in this case it is shocking that such glaring blunders were overlooked.

Please ensure that this does not happen again or you will lose many loyal readers.

Yours truly,

Matilda Greenpepper (Mrs)

Charlie handed the letter back, his eyebrows twitching.

“Impossible, Wally. Typos like that couldn’t get through the system.”

“Well it seems the system is more porous that we thought.” Remembering Pogson’s hints at dubious activity in the office, he added, “We will have to get to the bottom of this, Charlie. But it must be kept quiet. I can’t risk an uproar or other disruptions.”

Charlie went back to his desk. He knew Pogson had edited the article. The question was how to approach Pogson without causing another eruption. To accuse him outright might not be the best one. What was needed was a more subtle method to nail him.

He suspected Eric must intercept files on the network and doctor them before they were sent on to the printers. But a flaw in this theory was it seemed unlikely that Eric had the technical know-how to do it. So he must have an accomplice, probably one of the weird graphic people.

Eric, on the other hand, was sure his machine was being sabotaged by Stonehead. He decided it must be during the tea break, when he left his computer unattended. Perhaps he could get someone to help keep an eye on his computer — someone like Laurence Lightfoot, whose desk was nearby.

“Laurence you’re clued up with these tin boxes. Do you think you could spare me a moment to sort something out.”

“Depends what it is, Eric. I wouldn’t like to fiddle inside and get blamed if it blows up.”

“I don’t mean fiddling inside. It’s about words here and there disappearing from the screen.”

“That is unusual, Eric. It should happen only if you erase them yourself.”

“Do you think it’s a gremlin?”

“You mean a virus?”

“Virus, rodent, germ, microbe, bug – whatever you call these things”

“Well it’s possible of course, though it’s not their usual behaviour. They are generally much more vicious than that. They aim at bombing your computer out altogether. Does it happen often, Eric?”

“Fairly often. It must be when I’m away from my desk. I only find out later when it’s too late — when the stuff has already gone through.”

Laurence agreed to watch Pogson’s screen whenever it was unattended. There was no suspicious activity for several days and Laurence began to think Pogson was delusional. But one morning while Eric was at the tea trolley Laurence noticed a flicker and the blinking pointer skated across the screen as though moved by a ghostly finger. He called Eric and together they watched as the pointer settled on a word and gobbled it up. It moved at random, like a piranha fish, to several other words and devoured them before returning to its original position.

“You were right, Eric. Something’s weird here. We should report this.”

“Hold on Laurence. I want to nail whoever is behind it. Could you nip round to Charlie’s desk? Take a look at his screen.”

Stonehead looked up as Laurence approached his desk.

“Something wrong, Laurence?”

Laurence invented an excuse, while craning his neck to see Charlie's monitor, but it was blank.

When he got back Eric asked, "Well, did you see anything?"

"Sorry Eric. He turned off his screen before I could look."

"Turned it off — like someone with something to hide?"

"Maybe he finished what he was working on."

"And elephants might fly. Next time it happens I'm going to investigate myself."

However the next victim was Stonehead himself, and once again it happened during teatime. The blinking pointer on his screen skated over the page, gulping words. His first thought was to blame Pogson, but everyone was at the tea trolley, except Laurence Lightfoot, who was peering at Pogson's computer.

Charlie sidled across. Laurence looked up to find Stonehead standing over him.

"What, may I ask, are you doing at Pogson's computer?"

"I'm doing Eric a favour. He's been having trouble and he asked me to have a look."

Pogson, noticed Stonehead there and lumbered back to his desk.

"Something on your mind Charlie? Have you decided to come clean?"

"I've don't know what you mean."

"You can't get away with it Charlie. I've got Laurence here to back me up."

Stonehead frowned. “You must be out of your mind, Eric. I’ll get Wally to sort you out.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

Hacking horrors

Wally Williams sighed as the Chief Sub came into his office. “Yes Charlie? Is it about Eric Pogson again?”

“I’m afraid Eric seems to be suffering from some sort of delusion, Wally. As you know I first thought it was to do with teacups. But now I think it’s computers.”

“That’s a touchy subject isn’t it.”

“Eric seems to think that I’m interfering with his machine. But I have also been hacked. Or it seemed like it — I can’t be sure.”

“That is the difficulty — we can’t be sure. Let me show you an example.”

Wally turned to his PC. His fingers were poised above the keyboard when his elbow tipped a glass of water into the keyboard.

“Careful Wally. Water’s not good for these things.”

“Not a problem,” Wally said impatiently. “They don’t mind . . .”

His PC gave a series of beeps. Wally reached for the escape key to silence it. The beeps stopped and instead the machine gave a continuous whistle, like a heart monitor above a hospital patient’s bed warning of a cardiac arrest. The monitor screen faded and a puff of smoke came out the side of the box.

“It’s on fire,” Stonehead warned. Wally jerked the power cord out its socket and the stricken machine gave a last beep before dying.

Wally sat down looking dazed. There was still smoke coming out the box and a burning smell.

“Don’t touch it Wally. Let it cool down and we can call the tech to have a look at it. It seems the inside is roasted.”

“Yes Charlie, get Mabel to call the technician. She should ask for Basil and tell him it’s an emergency.”

The computer doctor, large, with a black beard arrived shortly afterwards. “So what have we here? Is this the patient?” he grumbled, putting down a toolbox.

“Morning Basil, sorry to drag you out at short notice. We have had a bit of drama. My PC seems to be in poor health.”

“Well let’s have a look-see.”

He opened the lid and peered in, then shook his head and whistled, reminding Wally of the mechanic’s look the last time he had his car inspected. “This won’t do Captain, won’t do at all.” He whistled and shook his head again. “How did this happen?”

“Well it was completely out of the blue,” Wally said, squirming slightly in his chair. “Anyway, what is the diagnosis?”

“Afraid it’s pretty much cooked, Skipper. Maybe the CPU is still okay, or perhaps we can salvage the HD, but the PS looks charred, and then your MB could well be zonked, not to mention your SCSI.”

“Afraid you’ve lost me there. But I get the drift. You mean my PC is a hospital case?”

“Could even be the morgue.” Basil shook his head sadly. “I don’t like to see my PCs go this way.”

“My main concern is the data. I’ve got some important stuff locked up in there.”

“Do you mean you haven’t backed up! Well that is serious. You should back up, you know.” He wagged an accusing finger.

“The only thing I back up is my car to get into the parking lot.”

“There you go, Major. But maybe we can salvage your data if your HD isn’t zonked. But I can’t promise anything until we get the corpse into the dissecting room.”

“Well, I’ll be holding thumbs. Please make every effort. By the way, there is another matter you could attend to.”

“What would that be, Cap’n?”

“There have been complaints that someone is abusing our network — they say text is being changed. The changes have even appeared in the magazine.”

“You mean naughty words get into print?”

“Exactly.”

“That sounds like a troll. You’d be surprised how many of them we have around. Smart Alec types; get a giggle out of it.”

“That could well be the case. But how do we find out who’s doing it?”

“Not so easy. They’re a sly lot.”

“You can see my position, Basil. We’ve got to stop this but I don’t want to start a witch hunt.”

“There may be a way, Skipper. I’ll have to think about it.”

The PC was carted away to the dissecting lab. An inquisitive Chief Sub put his head around the door. “What was the verdict, Wally?”

“The tech thinks it’s well and truly ‘zonked’, whatever that means. He’ll come back to me after the post-mortem. He may also be able to help with our other problem — but please keep that under the hat. We don’t want to spread alarm.”

The tech phoned a few days later to confirm his diagnosis. There was no hope for the patient, he said, but it would be possible for him to transfer its heart into a new machine.

“Well, I was expecting the worst. Please go ahead with the heart transplant as soon as possible. What about the other matter we spoke about?”

“You mean the net fiddler? Yes there is a way. But maybe not quite kosher. It’s called a logger.”

“So what is this logger thing? Is it made of wood?”

“An app called key logger. We could snoop into everything on the network. But it will take time to weed out the baddy.”

They installed an extra PC on the network so Basil could set up the trap, which would keep a log of unusual activities. “I’ll look in from time to time and check up how we’re doing,” he said to Wally. “If staff want to know what’s up, tell them I’m trying out a new model to replace the one you zonked.”

THIRTY NINE

Graphics glitches

The layout people in the graphics department were housed in their own office nearby. Albert Doubleday considered it the creative hub of the magazine; they were more talented than the editorial hacks labouring at their boring tasks. He rarely visited the editorial office for fear of running into Eric Pogson, who had once boxed his ear and was quite capable of doing it again. But he had secretly paid Eric back by tweaking his computer through the network.

Albert prided himself on being a whiz on the computer and had devised ways to cover his tracks so he was confident the computer illiterates in the other office had no chance of nailing him. It was a pity he could never personally witness the results of his handiwork but he consoled himself by picturing Pogson's anger when his computer misbehaved. He was pleased to hear rumours that gremlins were playing tricks in the editorial department.

The Editor paid a visit to ask Hal, the Art Director, whether all was well with their machines.

"No complaints, Wally. We're all too busy to complain."

"Glad to hear it. Nothing to worry about. Just checking."

"Has anyone got a problem?" Hal called out to the graphics people, all engrossed behind their monitors.

Nobody had, except Albert, who couldn't resist the chance to probe. "Is there a problem with the computers, Mr Williams?" he asked.

“What makes you think that Albert?”

“It’s just that you asked if our machines were okay.”

“Why shouldn’t they be okay, Albert?”

“I thought maybe there’s a problem.”

“Nobody said anything about problems. Do you have something on your mind Albert?”

“No nothing at all. I was just curious.”

Later Wally called Hal into his office. “About Albert; how is he getting on?”

“He seems keen. I hear he often stays late; maybe he likes working on the computer.”

“Is there anyone he doesn’t get on with?”

“Don’t think so. Oh yes, he had trouble with Eric Pogson; who hasn’t?”

For a while the gremlin seemed to be taking a rest and there were no more incidents. The tech checked the log every few days. There was nothing to report. But Albert was nervous. Perhaps there was something afoot he didn’t know about. Who was that bearded dude who came in and fiddled with the network? Perhaps some kind of IT expert.

He spoke to one of his geek friends, who had been giving him tips about hacking—a skinny youth with cropped hair known as Byrom, who was attending a computer technology course at a local college.

“Hey By, I think maybe they are on to me.”

“What makes you think so?”

“It’s just a feeling I get. There’s this fat guy with a beard, pokes around. They’ve put an extra PC on the network, but I can’t get into it.”

“Something screwy. Maybe I should come round and take a look sometime.”

A few evenings later Albert let him in through the security gate after the last of the stragglers had left.

“Let’s check the new one first,” Byrom advised. “Could be they’ve sneaked in some kind of spyware. I know these IT guys.”

It was hidden behind a locked door. “No probs. These locks are a piece of cake. You can spring them with a hair pin.”

The new machine sat on a table blinking.

“We don’t want to leave a paper trail,” Albert said as Byrom busied himself at the keyboard.

“Bingo,” Byrom called after jiggling keyboard and mouse for some time. “This looks like our snooper. It keeps a log of what’s going on. What do you think we should do?”

“Don’t do anything that will leave footprints. They are already watching me.”

“Tell you what. I see the app asks how long you want to keep the log before it erases. It’s set for one month. How about we reset it so it erases the log after, say, two minutes?”

“Won’t that make them suspicious?”

“Naw. They’ll just think there’s nothing to report.”

Byrom couldn’t resist secretly adding his own booby trap before Albert ushered him out the building.

Eric wasn't in the best of tempers when he arrived next morning, having spent a restless night with his gouty toe. "Are you okay, Eric?" asked Laurence at the next desk.

"Right as I'll ever be cooped up here with you lot."

He booted up his computer only to find a sinister message on his screen when he logged onto the network. "*Watch your back Pogson. This is a friendly warning.*"

He called Laurence. "What do you make of this?"

"Looks like someone having you on, Eric. Some kind of joke?"

"This is no joke. Someone is trying to get at me." He lost no time in sharing his displeasure with the Editor.

"I am getting personal threats, Wally."

Wally sighed. He was becoming weary of the hacking saga. "What personal threats Eric?"

Eric explained at length.

"Sounds to me like a practical joke, Eric. Let us not jump to conclusions. It may be perfectly harmless."

"*'Watch my back.'* That doesn't sounds like a joke."

"I'm sure the phrase was used figuratively."

"Well something has got to be done about it."

Wally viewed his gleaming new keyboard, which had recently replaced his old one. The carefully crafted sentence, which he had been about to type before Pogson interrupted his train of thought, vanished like smoke never to be recaptured. He frowned irritably. "I'll see what can be done Eric. I'll have to get hold of the technician again, I suppose."

Basil trundled in some time later and seated himself heavily on the office chair opposite Wally's desk. It creaked.

"Well Skipper, what's the trouble now?"

"Seems there is no end to this hacking problem, Basil. Now I've had a staffer claim that someone is leaving threatening messages on his screen."

"Must be the same joker who has been bugging you all along. I'll have another poke around our private-eye machine. He may be getting too clever for his own good."

"You still think it's someone who works here?"

"It's got to be, Skipper — someone on the network, and that could mean anyone." He heaved himself up. "Well let's go and have a gander." He paused at the door. "By the way Skip, that machine of yours that we took away is history. Well and truly fried. Wonder you didn't burn the office down."

"Well I didn't hold out much hope for it. You'll dispose of the remains, I take it?"

"Sure, we'll make the funeral arrangements. Of course it won't need a cremation because you have more or less done that in advance."

Wally waved him away, not amused.

At the door to the inner sanctum where the dedicated PC was concealed Basil fiddled with the lock, finding that his key was reluctant to go in. The suspicion crossed his mind that it had been tampered with. This was reinforced when he noticed a screwdriver he had left on the desk on a previous visit now lay on the floor, and the chair that was usually in front of the desk had been

carelessly shoved against a wall; all of which added up to an obvious conclusion. There had been a visitor, either official or not; he didn't know which. Or else it was some other intruder with felonious intent.

Checking the spy-catching programme, he saw the log was empty. That seemed to show there had been no hacking; though on second thoughts it seemed strange that the log was in such a pristine state, almost as though it had been wiped clean with an antiseptic cloth.

"What we have here is a smartass," he muttered, on further investigation. "He, she, it has turned off the tap. Well, so we turn it on again. Catch him, her, it at their own game this time."

"Find anything?" Wally asked, when the technician lumbered back into his office.

"Maybe we've found a wiseguy, Major. Someone's been in there and got their fingers where they shouldn't be."

"You mean some kind of sabotage? Impossible. You and I are the only ones with a key to the place."

"Ah, Captain, ever heard of lock picking? Anyway I've put in my own little booby trap. Let's see what happens."

FORTY

Long-jump lament

Karen Thornton was upset when she got home from school one afternoon, holding the squashed remains of her new school hat.

“Why so glum?” Rodney asked.

“Can’t you see? Look at my hat.”

“Well, you shouldn’t sit on it. Hats are meant to go on your head, you know.”

“Someone else did it. And I think I know who.”

“One of the teachers? Or was it run over by a car?”

“No, I think it was Cynthia Blinkinsop. I beat her in the long jump practise this afternoon. When I got back to the change room my hat was lying on the floor crumpled up. I saw her later and she had a funny smile.”

Cynthia was the holder of the school under-thirteen long jump record. The fact that she had broken a record that had stood for ten years, made her something of a celebrity.

“Anyway, perhaps I can unsquash your hat for you,” Rodney consoled her.

He fixed it using hot water, steam and a hair dryer, which seemed to restore it, except for a few minor blemishes.

A new member of the staff, Enid Elton, not long out of the Teachers’ Training College, had noticed that Karen had an aptitude for the long jump and had offered to coach her. She had been a keen athlete at school and at college she became interested in the latest techniques that were being used in field events. Karen, seemed an ideal

candidate for trying new styles, because she had not become set in standard methods.

Cynthia's coach, Eileen Truworth, an older staff member, did not approve. She was a believer in tried and trusted coaching methods and thought Enid tended to be scornful of conservative ideas.

"Enid, don't you think Karen Thornton is too young to be taught these advanced methods?" she asked disapprovingly. There had been surprise in the teachers' common room, when someone mentioned that Karen had managed a distance of fifteen point four feet in one of her practise jumps, not far off the record set by Cynthia Blinkinsop.

"Not at all," Enid said. "Surely it's worth trying new ideas if it leads to progress?"

"I was thinking more of her age. Some of those techniques you're trying could over-stress pre-teen girls," Miss Truworth said severely. "As teachers we have a responsibility not to put our pupils at risk."

"I'm sure there is not much risk. There is more risk in some of the other field events, such as the high jump."

Someone suggested (jokingly) that there might be a risk of Miss Truworth's protégé being deprived of her record.

Miss Truworth was not amused.

"My protégé, as you call her, will probably break her own record this year. But I have serious doubts about these new techniques."

"Well Karen has benefited from them," Enid pointed out: "She has improved a lot since she started using them."

“Another concern of mine is whether it might give an unfair advantage to some contestants. I feel strongly that there should be level playing fields. All the contestants should use the same methods.”

“There is nothing in the rules about that,” Enid insisted.

“That may be so. However I think each school should be allowed to make its own rules.”

“I’m sorry Eileen but I don’t agree. I’m sure Headmistress wouldn’t allow it.”

“We shall see,” Miss Truworth said frostily. “I intend to discuss it with her.”

The Principal, Mrs Gwendolyn Fortesque, was not altogether pleased. Miss Truworth was a frequent critic of school issues.

“As you know, Gwen,” Miss Truworth said, “I am not one to carp on inconsequential issues,”

“Is this to do with our shortage of blackboard chalk?” the Principal asked.

Miss Truworth waved aside talk of blackboard chalk. “It’s about the school long jump event.”

“I wasn’t aware of any problems there.”

“I don’t like to criticise, Gwen, but our new coach, Enid Elton, has introduced some dubious practices. Unorthodox arm and leg movements, even landing sideways.”

“Well, Eileen, I’m no expert in the long jump. But there are rules governing school sports.”

“The rules don’t prohibit them I admit. But they should.”

“In what way are these techniques different?”

“In my opinion they are dangerous for beginners,” Miss Trueworth lectured. “Flailing legs in mid-air when wearing spiked shoes. And a dreadful way of throwing the body down sideways on landing. Most unnatural.”

“What do you suggest then, Eileen?”

“Personally I think a ban would be in order.”

The Principal sighed. “I will have to hear what the new coach has to say.”

“Is there any reason why you are introducing new coaching methods?” the Principal asked, after calling Enid into her office. “There are concerns that they might be unsafe.”

“Yes, Miss Trueworth has spoken to me about it. As I said to her, there is no more risk than there is in the usual techniques.”

“Are there any benefits?”

“Oh, yes. It’s now generally accepted that they are an improvement. Most professionals have switched. It’s something like the back flip in the high jump. Nobody uses the old scissors method anymore.”

“The flip-back scissors?” Headmistress raised an eyebrow. “I see. As I told Miss Trueworth I’m no expert in jumping. I will have to get hold of a copy of the schools’ sport guidelines.”

There was nothing in the guidelines against new coaching methods and Enid was allowed to continue, though not without strong disapproval from Miss Trueworth.

“Mark my words, Enid, “ she warned, “you will regret putting that girl at risk. Those stressful contortions

should be reserved for the professionals. I hope Karen's parents have been consulted."

Karen continued to make good progress during practice. The double arm lift was supposed to help in taking off. Running on air seemed to allow her to travel through the air, almost as though her flailing legs were acting like the propeller of an aeroplane. Miss Truworth considered running on air just as futile as trying to walk on water.

Throwing the body sideways on landing was intended to prevent toppling backwards, which often happened in the conventional stance of keeping the body vertical and landing on both feet. "Throwing yourself down sideways on the sandpit like that could injure the spine," Miss Truworth remarked acidly.

(One technique that the rules did *not* allow was the somersault before landing, which gravely increased the risk of a broken neck.)

Cynthia's practice jumps were not progressing as well as her coach hoped. So far she had not even reached her record distance. Miss Truworth increased the number of Cynthia's practice sessions; and made her go on an energy building diet.

"How's the practising going?" Karen's brother, Rodney asked. "Are you still doing that ballet in the air?"

"You mean running on air? It's just a way of doing the long jump."

"What about this weight lifting double arm?"

"Don't be silly. It's nothing to do with weight lifting."

"Will we be allowed to come and watch you do this aerial running?"

“Well Mom might, but not you. You’ll be blowing your foghorn at school, I suppose.”

The long jump pitch was close to the front of the playing field, behind the hundred yard track. To save broken bones a landing pit had been dug and filled with fine sand. Next to that was the approach track, about fifteen strides long, and across the end was a white line on a take-off board. If the unfortunate jumper’s foot went even a hair’s breadth over the far edge of the line it was a foul, and the jump wouldn’t count. A judge would sit ready to pounce if this happened.

Karen found this trying. You had to take off as close to the edge of the line as possible. Too far back and you lost out, because your leap was measured from the edge of the line to the spot where you landed. This was discouraging but you couldn’t argue with the eagle eye of the judge.

Cynthia’s distances in practise leaps were disappointing but her coach persevered with her training programme. She consoled Cynthia by pointing out a lot of Karen’s best jumps were probably fouls.”

As sports day loomed Cynthia showed no improvement. On the other hand Enid had hopes that Karen could even break the record, though her immediate aim was just to win. They could practise only twice a week, after school, so Karen also did exercises at home.

Rodney was not impressed. “You are overdoing all those exercises, Karen. They won’t make you jump any farther; they just wear you out. You should save all your energy for the actual jumping.”

“I’m just doing what my coach tells me to do. She knows better than you.”

“Well don’t say I didn’t warn you, when you fall over with cramps just as you are about to leap into the air. People are not built for jumping. You should leave it to grasshoppers and frogs.”

But at least Karen got encouragement from her mother, Alice. “I’m sure you will win, after all your hard work,” she said. “I’ve found a special spot for that silver trophy.”

FORTY-ONE

Snooping Snipes

Benny was in trouble. Although this was not unusual, considering his chequered past, this time it involved some not-too-desirable characters, who could pose a threat to his future good health. An article in the local press came to the attention of Mr Rat Pellham, with whom Benny was closely involved. The article, by Wilfred Snipes, drew attention to some revealing information concerning the management of the City Council.

The article claimed that certain malpractices were rife in the Housing Department, hinting at the improper granting of tenders and certain suspicious payments to building inspectors. An urgent investigation of the department was called for. The by-line of the author appeared in large print above the article.

“Hey Froggy, you seen this piece in the paper about the Housing Department?” asked Rat Pellham, when Froggy Foxton, called round at the Starving Horse Tavern for lunch.

“Naw, I got no use for that rag.”

“Here, take a look at it.”

Froggy, who was not much into reading, having left school at an early age to study at the university of life, screwed up his eyes and read the offending article with difficulty. “Yeah, it’s quite close to the bone. I mean our bones.”

“So where did this Snipes pick up all these lies?”

“Shoot me, I dunno.” Froggy downed a tot of brandy Rat had placed near his elbow. “Maybe someone we know blabbing to the Press?”

“Can’t think of anyone. They all know what happened to Flashy Gorkham.”

“Amen,” Froggy murmured piously.

“What about your pal Benny? He wouldn’t open his big mouth, would he?”

“Benny? Naw, he has got too much to lose. He knows it would be more than his skin is worth. Anyway, he’s got no connection with the Press.”

“Well, perhaps we can work on his guy Snipes. We could find out more about him. We could lean on him.”

“Have you seen this story in the Daily Flash, about the Housing Department, Benny?” asked Connie at breakfast that morning. “Your firm works with housing, doesn’t it?” She passed the paper to him just as Benny was starting his bacon and eggs. He lost his appetite as he read the article written by his pal, Wilfred Snipes.

“What’s the matter, Benny? You look pale.”

“Maybe it’s because I’ve been working too hard, to earn money to help you people out.”

Benny had a misty memory of having seen Wilfred somewhere not long ago. He must have been talking to him but he couldn’t recall where it was.

Connie warned: “Look Benny, you’re not fooling me. I hope this firm of yours hasn’t got something to do with dirty work going on in the Council. My family don’t want our good name smeared by crimes you and your firm have been committing.”

“Crimes? Who said anything about crimes?”

“Well it looks suspicious, Benny. Best you get out of there. Find something else.”

Benny lost no time in getting hold of Mr Snipes. “Hi, Wilfred, this is Benny. I’ve got something I want to talk to you about.”

“Benny? Oh yeah, what’s up Benny?”

“Can’t talk on the phone. Can we meet somewhere, if you don’t mind.”

Wilfred did, in fact, mind. He had been half-expecting a call from Benny about the Council article he had written, which was causing a stir in a number of places. They all wanted to know where he had got his information. Of course he had given the standard excuse that it was against journalistic principles to reveal his source.

He reluctantly met Benny at a local watering hole.

“How have you been doing, Benny? Haven’t seen you around lately,” he said.

“Not so long ago, if I remember right. Less than a month ago, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe... I can’t remember. I’m one of the regulars here, you know. Meet all sorts of people.”

“We knocked back quite a few, didn’t we?”

“Well, now that you mention it, yes — but I can’t recall what we talked about. We were pretty far gone — had to be helped out.”

“Didn’t we talk about this new job I’ve got, doing electrical work on low cost apartments, for the Housing Department?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Another thing. Everyone is talking about the story you’ve put in the Flash, about dirt in the Housing Department. You didn’t hear it from me, did you, Wilfred?”

“From you? In your dreams, Benny. Remember I’ve got plenty of anonymous sources.”

“Wilfred, let me say it straight. That story has put me in a spot. If it came out that I’ve been talking to you there are certain persons out there who might want to put the lid on me. Not only that Wilfred, they could also nail the lid down on you too.”

Wilfred Snipes went back to his office, unnerved by this threat. The thought that he might face physical danger from those annoyed by his article had not occurred to him. He had expected outrage from the officials in the municipality, especially from those who were probably involved. There would be denials, perhaps threats to sue the Daily Flash. All of this, though, would be mere verbiage. It wouldn’t involve a risk of physical harm. However, the prospect of unnamed individuals nailing a lid on his coffin was not an appealing one. Even the lesser possibility of an unplanned stay in hospital was not pleasant to contemplate.

The newsroom, when he got back to his desk was in its usual chaotic state. Untidy looking hacks were at their keyboards spewing out their daily garbage about the trivial events of everyday city life. Their day’s work would be glanced over by readers and then, along with the rest of the Daily Flash, thrown into the nearest rubbish bin. A few articles though, such as Wilfred

Snipe's latest offering, might attract interest, depending on how shocking a scandal might be revealed,

The News Editor, Vic Hornsby, sat behind a glassed-in partition, arguing on the telephone with a member of the local Thespian Society, about an unfavourable review written by the Theatre Critic. He slammed down the phone. Then he spotted Wilfred, who was about to sit at his desk, and gestured urgently. He was always gesturing urgently and spent most of his life rushing from crisis to crisis.

Wilfred glanced heavenwards and made his way to the News Editor. "Where have you been, Wilfred? All hell has been breaking loose about that Housing Department article. I've had everyone from the Mayor downward on to me. The Editor, as usual, distances himself from the whole thing and tells me I must sort it out."

"Nothing to get excited about, Vic. I spoke personally to the Editor, before we ran the article. He said it sounded like a good story and it was about time we had an exposé on corruption in the municipality. He mentioned it to you, didn't he?"

"Mentioned it to me? If he did it must have been while I was in the middle of trouble in the printing department. I hope you can back up your facts."

"I can assure you Vic, that I got my information from an impeccable source."

"I've heard that one a hundred times. I hope you didn't get your facts from a pal in a pub?"

"You know I am above that sort of thing, Vic."

"So where did you get the tip-off?"

“We don’t have to go over that one. You know I can’t compromise my contacts, or they would never trust me again.”

“Well it’s on your head, Wilfred. You must take the flak. And let me tell you there have been some weird customers trying to find out about you.”

Wilfred paled. “In what way weird?”

“Aggressive, wanting to know how to contact you personally. Annoyed when I told them we don’t give out personal details of staff members.”

Leaving the News Editor on the phone dealing with yet another crisis, Wilfred returned to his desk. There was a note propped up on his keyboard, informing him that a certain Mr Pellham had phoned and urgently needed him to return the call.

He turned to the reporter at the next desk, holding the note. “Sorry to interrupt, Molly, but was it you who left this note for me?”

She peered at it then nodded. “Oh yes, this person phoned about half an hour ago. He sounded rough, quite rude actually. I told him you were not available and he said he thought you were trying to avoid him — very cheeky.”

Wilfred sat a moment, considering this development. He was in two minds whether or not to ignore the message. The contact phone number was not a familiar one, so it might well be this was the mysterious Mr Pellham, who had already been brushed off by the News Editor; in which case ignoring it would be the best option. On the other hand it could be one of his

anonymous informers with information on another scoop he was working on.

FORTY-TWO

Snitcher Snipes

Wilfred dialled the number and listened to the ring tone at the other end, which went on for a long time. He was about to give up, when a female voice said hello and asked who he wanted to speak to. In the background he could hear familiar sounds — the clinking of glass and raucous voices mixed with outbursts of laughter.

“Well, I’m not too sure of the name. I think it’s Pilgrim or something like that.”

“It’s Pellham — and he for sure isn’t no pilgrim; he’s never been to church in his life. He’s better known as Mr Rat. Hang on, I’ll call him, if he’s not too busy.”

It appeared the Rat was always too busy, but was prepared to make time to answer the call, provided it wasn’t the Jehovah’s Witness or someone requesting a contribution to a worthy cause.

“Yes, who is this?” a high-pitched and squeaky — in fact, rat-like — voice demanded. “What’s your pitch?”

In a way Wilfred was relieved. The voice, didn’t sound as though its owner could be a particularly menacing individual. The impression Wilfred formed was of a small weasily person, probably with little beady eyes and close-cropped hair.

“*You* phoned *me*, Mister. I’m calling back.”

“Okay, so I get lots of calls. What’s your moniker?”

“You can just call me Will I don’t throw my name around.”

A moment’s silence, then the Rat cottoned on to who it was. “So you’re the guy who wrote those lies about our Housing Department. Wilfred something?”

“Yes, that’s me. That’s what we newsmen do. We write stories about what’s going on in the world, so that people like you aren’t kept in the dark.”

“Yeah, but not if it’s a bunch of lies. You should be called the Daily Trash. Look, Mr Snitcher, you are treading on toes here. Me and my pals don’t like being trodden on. It can be bad for you.”

“Is this some kind of threat, Mr Hellman?”

Mr Rat gave a squeak of amusement. “You catch on quick, Mr Bitcher. What we are most interested in, though, is who is feeding these lies to you. We would be happy if you could tell us that. I would hate you to make us unhappy.”

“You know I would never tell who my contacts are.”

The Rat gave a series of squeaks of merriment. “We don’t like stubborn people, Mr Snitcher. Stubborn people make us unhappy. They cause us pain.”

“Look Mr Pilgrim, I don’t like the way this conversation is going. Maybe I should report this to the police. You can’t get away with threatening members of the Press.”

“Have it your own way, Mr Bitcher. We will be finding out more about you, and we will stay unhappy until we find out who your untruthful little pal is.”

When Benny turned up at the site next morning he found Froggy loading building materials of various description onto his truck, from the basement where it had been stored.”

“Hey, Froggy, what’s up? I’ll be needing some of that stuff you’re taking away; the stove isolator and geyser thermostat for number ninety-six.”

“There’s bin a hitch. Some nosy news hound has been sniffing around looking for trouble. It’s splashed all over in the local rag. So we’ve got to clean up here, just in case. We don’t want some little jerk from the Housing Department snooping in the basement trying to make life difficult for hardworking people.”

“But we got nothing to hide, Froggie. Let them come, I say.”

“They always try to hang something on us. We honest guys are always taking flack from high and mighty officials. So we got to take precautions.”

“So what’s the story, Froggy? What’s the beef about in the local rag? What’s it got to do with us?”

“You can read about it for yourself. When they got nothing to write about they rake something up, to make a scandal. We know who it is. The sucker is dumb enough to splash his name above the story. Some nobody called Sniper, or something like that.”

“Yeah, I know the type.”

“You know him?” asked Froggy, his slightly bulging eyes swiveling towards Benny.

“No I don’t know him. Never heard of him. I said I know the *type*.”

“Anyway, we’ve got our feelers out about him. Rat has already had a session with the guy, on the phone. We want to know more about how he got hold of all that garbage he has sprouted. We don’t let go easily, when it comes to snitchers. We got ways of dealing with them.”

Benny was unnerved. He could see that the time was approaching when he should make a change of

employment. Thanks to Wilfred he was both walking on thin ice, and in imminent danger of plunging into hot water — the hot water melting the thin ice, so to speak. He had heard rumours that employees, in the past, had fallen foul of Froggie and Rat, and there were ongoing investigations into accidents they had met with.

“I think you are right,” he confided to Connie. “Maybe it’s a bit risky to carry on with this new job. The pay is good, but I’m getting vibes that there is trouble coming.”

“Yes, I know all about you and your vibes, Benny. You spend the better part of your life, getting vibes. I’ve always said, one day your vibes are going to get the better of you.”

His recollection of just how much he had told Wilfred Snipes about the inventive ways his new boss conducted the business, was still hazy, but he was coming to the realisation that he had said more than was wise. Of course it had not been without prompting from Mr Snipes, in the form of frequent replenishing of his beer mug. His future wellbeing, it seemed, was dependent on how strongly Mr Snipes was prepared to uphold the journalistic code, regarding the protection of sources. Given sufficient persuasion, he may well be tempted to regard his health to be of more importance, Benny reasoned.

“So what are you going to do?” asked Connie. “You can’t just walk out, can you? You would have to give notice.”

“Notice wouldn’t stop me. It’s other things. They might think I’m running away from something. I wouldn’t like them to come after me.”

"Maybe you could disappear," Connie said hopefully. "Just move away to another city, even another country. Make a fresh start."

"Are you wanting to get rid of me? No, I think I'll wait it out. Maybe it will all blow over."

Wilfred Snipes was unhappy when Benny phoned him at the newspaper office, to find out details of his call to Rat. "Benny, don't phone me here? You know the set-up."

"Hey, why the panic?"

"Just get off the phone, Benny. I'll see you at the Cat's Whiskers."

The line went dead.

When he called at the oasis in question, Benny was ushered by a barmaid into a dim cubicle, where a customer wearing dark glasses was seated at a table, sipping a beer. The customer waved him to a stool opposite.

"Wilfred! What's with all this cloak and dagger stuff?"

"Sit down and listen. Your pals are on to me. I spoke on the phone to someone called Rat and I was threatened with Gestapo tactics, if I don't give them what they want."

"What do they want?"

"You can guess, can't you?"

"They want you to print a story, saying the whole thing was a mistake?"

"Wrong. What they want, Benny, is *you*."

"Why should they want me? Nobody has got anything on me."

“Maybe not. But they want to know who tipped me off about the Housing Department story.”

“Well, like you told me, it was some snitch in the Department.”

Wilfred sighed and took a sip from his beer mug. “Benny, I know you are not going to like this, but I’ve got to come clean with you. It was *you* who gave me the tip-off. You told me the whole story that night. I didn’t ask you to. I tried to shut my ears. But you wanted to get it off your chest. Maybe your conscience was bothering you. So you wanted to absolve yourself — something like confessing to the priest at confessional.”

Benny tried to protest.

“No, don’t say anything, Benny. I’m not blaming you for what you did. I’m not one to stand in judgement of others. You did what you had to do. But there’s no need for you to worry. No matter how much these people lean on me, I would never give you away. You can rely on me through thick and thin. That I promise you.”

Wilfred downed the rest of his beer and stood up briskly. “Look, I’ve got to run, or I’ll be missed at the office. We can talk again sometime, but don’t try to contact me. These people are watching me, and if they spot any connection between us they will put two and two together.”

Leaving Benny to foot the bill, in more ways than one, Wilfred left before Benny could collect his thoughts.

FORTY-THREE

Toasted toes

Wilfred crossed the street to where his car was parked, got in, and wove his way into the traffic, heading back to the office. The hair on the back of his neck performed an involuntary levitation when a voice addressed him from the back seat.

“Ah, Mr Snipes, excuse me for taking the liberty of taking a lift with you, without your permission.” Wilfred froze in his seat, nearly colliding with the car in front of him. “No, don’t look round, Mr Snipes,” the voice continued. “Concentrate on your driving, in case we are involved in an accident – it would be a pity to damage your nice car.”

The gent who owned the voice was neither Rat nor Froggy, but a more urbane individual, who stressed the importance of Wilfred keeping his eyes on the road. “I’m a shy person, Mr Snipes. One of my foibles is that I hate people looking directly at me. It makes me feel uncomfortable. We will get along very well if you continue driving and follow the directions I give you.”

They reached a run-down suburb where they stopped in front of a house and the gent leaned forward and placed a black blindfold over Wilfred’s eyes to protect them from the glare, he said, and also for fear of Wilfred making him feel uncomfortable by looking at him. He was led into the house and urged to make himself comfortable on an armchair that was anything but comfortable.

They were joined by two other persons, who were neither urbane nor gentle. One of them uttered several squeaks of merriment by way of greeting.

“Mr Snipes... like I said last time. We were going to keep an eye on you.”

The other one croaked, “So this is the geezer who has said all those bad things about us honest souls. I should say ‘pleased to meet you’ but I’m not so pleased.”

“And I don’t think he’s pleased to meet us either.” Wilfred recognised the voice as that belonging to Rat.

“Now that we are all settled comfortably, I suppose you are wondering why we have arranged this get-together?” the gent asked.

Wilfred nodded his head.

“Ah, but you must have an idea what this is all about. I believe during a talk to our acquaintance here, that you were reticent in giving us some answers to a matter that concerns us.”

Wilfred nodded again.

“Well, now that you have had time to reconsider, I’m sure that you will oblige us with them.”

The Rat squeaked merrily, the scene seeming to appeal to his sense of humour. Even Froggie was moved to utter a guffaw.

“You know I can’t,” Wilfred said in a strangled voice.

The gentleman shook his head sadly, very disappointed at such an unreasonable answer.

“I knew he would be stubborn,” Rat said. “I told him stubborn people makes us unhappy. But he won’t listen.”

“I’m sure you are wrong, Mr Pellham,” the gent contradicted. “Mr Snipes is a reasonable person. I’m sure he cares deeply about the happiness of his fellow men.”

“What do you want to know? There’s not much I can tell you.”

“What we are wondering, is what misguided impulse prompted you to write your article, which has deeply wounded many honourable citizens, including my two acquaintances here. Perhaps it was a friend of yours, someone foolish who misled you? But I assure you, you would do no harm to your friend by revealing his identity. We are forgiving people, with great compassion for others.”

“I can’t give away my sources.”

The gent sighed. “So be it, Mr Snipes. Though I am disappointed, we do understand your position. Well, let us have a cup of tea and forget our differences. I wonder, Mr Pellham, whether you could do the honours. You will find a kettle, cups and saucers and so forth in the kitchen.”

Grumbling, the Rat took himself off and soon the clatter of cups and the cheerful sound of water boiling came from the kitchen.

‘I notice, Mr Snipes, you have good taste in shoes. I would like to examine them more closely, if you have no objection. Mr Frog, would you mind removing our friend’s shoes.’

“Ah, yes, an excellent brand,” he mused, turning Wilfred’s shoes over in his hands. “And the socks too, Mr Frog... Yes they are a good match.” He looked up. “Are you comfortable, Mr Snipes? I notice you are wriggling in your chair. I think Mr Frog should help you into a more relaxing position.”

He motioned to Froggie to stand behind Wilfred, who felt powerful hands immobilising him.

“I have some neighbours here who constantly complain about noise. Mr Frog, I wonder if you would kindly place these socks in Mr Snipes’s mouth. He strikes me as being a loud individual.”

Mr Rat came in with the promised tray of teapot, cups and saucers, teaspoons, milk and sugar. “Excellent, I hope you have brewed our tea with freshly boiled water; I’m rather fussy in that regard. Mr Rat would you mind pouring me a cup. But please be careful not to pour that tea on Mr Snipes’s feet. That would not be the proper way to treat a guest.”

Wilfred uttered a strangled yell through his socks as boiling tea made contact with his bare toes, and strained against the strong hands pinioning him to his chair.

“That was very careless of you, Mr Rat. Mr Snipes could develop nasty blisters on his toes. Do be more careful next time.”

Another application of boiling tea made Wilfred seriously consider whether it was worthwhile sacrificing the skin on his toes for the sake of Benny’s skin.

“I’ll talk,” he shouted, his voice muffled though his woolly socks.

Wilfred had few qualms about failing to uphold his journalistic ethics, when it came to a choice between them and blisters on his toes. When he divulged that the traitor in their midst was none other than their trusted employee Benny, it seemed Froggy and Rat were outraged that Benny could stoop so low as to snitch on them after all they had done for him.

The gent sipped his tea philosophically. "Well," he observed replacing his teacup on the tray. "It seems our little get-together has turned out happily for all concerned. Froggie, allow our guest to replace his shoes and socks, and we can arrange for him to be returned to his colleagues, who might become anxious at his prolonged absence. Mr Snipes, I'm sure you will be circumspect in discussing our meeting with any third party. Unless, of course, you are keen to pay us another visit for some more chit chat."

After painfully putting on his shoes and socks, Wilfred was escorted back to his car, installed in the passenger seat, and still blindfolded, driven by Rat back to the city, closely followed by Froggie in his truck.

Rat parked the car. "Well, Mr Snooper, things have turned out nice after all. I'm sure you won't say anything to our pal Benny. I'll leave you now. You probably wouldn't ever like to renew the acquaintance."

He heard the driver's door slam, then cautiously removed the blindfold to find himself parked outside the Daily Flash. He hobbled painfully back to his office.

FORTY-FOUR

Baking bonus

The Women's Church Guild Karen's mother, Alice Thornton, belonged to, was holding a cake baking competition in aid of charity. The winner was to receive a token prize of a book voucher, which would be presented after the judging. The prize itself was not the main attraction; it was more a spirit of rivalry that motivated them. After the Baking Queen had been crowned, hers as well as all the less successful entries would be sold at a Grand Cake Sale and the proceeds would be donated to the church charity fund.

Alice Thornton did not think of herself as an expert but joined the competition more to support the Guild's charity efforts, without any ambition to be the winner. She left that to Hortense Ogilvy, Prudence McClutter, Veronica Swindon and others in the expert circle. Hortense and Prudence both considered themselves top authorities and would bristle if anyone questioned their opinions. They often clashed about methods and ingredients.

Alice was in the throes of cake-making when Karen, came into the kitchen.

"What's that smell of baking, Mom? Are you baking a cake for us? Please put plenty of icing on it. I can help you if you like."

"Sorry, you won't be having any. You've got to watch your weight, if you want to win the long jump cup at school."

"Oh, an itsy bitsy bit of cake wouldn't make any difference."

Rodney joined them, also drawn by the smell of baking. “If it’s a cake you are baking, I bags the biggest slice.”

Winston, her husband, was the next to appear. “Just in time for tea. We can have a little family party to celebrate our first home-baked cake in six months.”

Alice, shook her head. “Sorry to disappoint you all. It’s not for you. This is for the church.”

There were loud cries of dismay. “Shame on you, Mom. Surely your own family comes before the church,” Rodney scolded.

“It’s for a competition. The winner will be declared Baking Queen, and get a book voucher as a prize.”

“Well, at least you can use the voucher to buy a book on cake making, so we can have plenty of cakes in future,” Winston put in.

“That’s if I win the competition. There are plenty of experts who have also entered. So I suppose I don’t have much chance of winning.”

They drifted off disconsolately, except Karen.

“How will the winner be chosen? I wouldn’t mind being one of the tasters.”

“Of course the Judge will have to be a confection expert. First it was going to be the Pastor’s wife, but some of the contestants said she was not enough of an expert. So now it will be someone not connected with the church, in case there might be favouritism. We are hoping to get one of the adjudicators from the Baker’s Association. But he or she will have to be paid, I suppose.”

“Gee, I wouldn’t mind being paid to eat cakes.”

There was disagreement among the contenders. For a start, Hortense Ogilvy wanted rules to be set up. She spoke to the Pastor's wife, Patsy Wellbetrothed, the organiser of the event. "Patsy, my dear," Hortense told her, "We can't have an important event like this without a list of rules for the judge to use. And we contestants must also know what features will be judged on. Without rules we might have people cheating. They might, for example enter cakes baked by someone else. I wouldn't name names, of course," she added darkly, "but I'm sure you can guess who I mean."

Patsy was shocked. "I'm sure no member of the Guild would cheat."

It was decided to hold a special meeting to decide on the rules — rules that could also be used in future Baking Queen competitions. The meeting was held in the main church hall and was attended by most members of the Guild, whether contestants or not. The Pastor's wife presided as chairperson. She herself was not allowed to enter the competition, in case there were complaints of favouritism if she won.

In the front row was Hortense Ogilvy, and a few seats away, arch rival Prue McClutter. Hortense was large and regal, while Prue was short and dumpy with grey hair and tinted glasses, who made up for shortness by a loud and penetrating voice. Patsy opened the proceedings by explaining the purpose of the meeting.

At first, apart from some early differences between Hortense and a heckler in a back seat, about the use of oven thermometers, the meeting was calm. The first serious disagreement was when the relative merits of

butter and margarine came up. Hortense was all for butter whereas Prue favoured margarine.

“Margarine should be banned altogether,” Hortense insisted. “It is a pernicious perversion of nature, Mrs Chairman. Good healthy butter has been with us for centuries. And now we have this unnatural substitute crowding out butter on the supermarket shelves.”

“Boo... boo...” the heckler heckled. “She doesn’t know what she is talking about.”

“Please ladies,” Patsy Wellbetrothed ordered. “You must wait your turn to speak.”

“Mrs Chairman, I must agree with Mrs Dunkirk at the back,” Prue McClutter interrupted, springing to her feet. “Mrs Ogre is talking nonsense. There is nothing wrong with margarine; in fact any scientist will tell you it is far healthier than butter. Butter is loaded with cholesterol.”

Mrs Ogilvy drew herself up to her full height, and glared at Prue McClutter. “Mrs Chairman, I will not stand here to be insulted by Mrs Clutterbug. In the first place, as she very well knows, my good Scottish name is Ogilvy, not what she called me. (Loud laughter.) And in the second place anyone with a modicum of common sense knows that butter tastes better, bakes better, is a natural product, and aids digestion.”

A chorus of hear, hear, from butter supporters, and loud booing from margarine lovers. The heckler at the back, Mrs Dunkirk, was really neither a butter nor margarine enthusiast — her aim was to annoy Mrs Ogilvy, whom she disliked for personal reasons. “Down with butter,” she screamed above the general hubbub. “Butter is bad for you.”

Mrs Wellbetrothed banged on her table and shouted for order, which was restored only after lengthy argument. "Ladies I must beg you to let us get on with the purpose of this meeting, which is to draw up rules for our Baking Queen competition."

The meeting went on with a few more outbursts but was eventually successful in producing a list, which it was agreed, would be typed out and distributed to all interested parties.

Alice finished baking her cake and, hungrily watched by Karen, applied a generous layer of blue icing over it.

"You must put some artistic frills on it, to make sure you win the competition. Would you like me to do it?"

Her mother firmly declined.

"What about some writing on it, like a little poem, and some angels, with a picture of the Bible?"

"I don't think I'm expert enough at decorating cakes to be able to do that. No, it will have to be a plain cake. It's what it tastes like that counts, isn't it?"

"Well I could taste it for you." She was not really surprised when the suggestion was turned down.

Next day Alice took her cake to the church hall, where trestle tables draped with white cloths had been set up at the back of the hall. A few early entries were already displayed under nets, each with a number penned in crimson copperplate by Mrs Catherine Rothman, an artistic member of the Guild. There were no names, only numbers on the small cards propped against each entry.

A volunteer, Miss Sterling, sat at a nearby desk to receive the contributions, enter names of the aspiring queens in

her list, and give numbers to them, before the cakes were carried away by helpers to their place on the display tables.

“You’re one of the early birds, Alice, so you’ll get a nice low number,” Miss Sterling told her.

“Won’t our names be displayed?”

“Oh no. That would never do. The Judge may be influenced. Everything must be above board so there can be no favouritism.”

“Who will the Judge be?”

“We were very lucky to get Mrs Jenny Cartwright, who is head of the Baking Research Department at Blue Band bakery. A very experienced and fair person who often adjudicates in cooking competitions.”

Hortense Ogilvy, who was hovering nearby, sniffed. “That’s not what I have heard. There are far better choices.”

She had set herself up as an unofficial observer, though it was against the rules — but no-one dared confront her. She looked at Alice’s plain blue cake critically. It was obvious from her expression that she thought it was not worthy of appearing at such a prestigious event.

She made a mental note to complain later to the Pastor’s wife that there should be heats, as there were at athletic meetings, so that only the best and most imaginative examples reached the final judging. “We must uphold standards,” she would advise Patsy Wellbetrothed. “Otherwise we will be the laughing stock of the Womens’ Institute, who consider themselves such superior confectioners.”

Alice's plain blue cake was duly allocated a number and borne off to the display tables, where it was placed in a fairly prominent position, though looking rather like a poor relative among its ornate sisters. Hortense shook her head, itching to relegate it to a less conspicuous place.

Her own cake was locked away in a cupboard. It was a scale model of the church itself, complete with a steeple with edible silver bells in the belfry. It was so realistic that no-one would believe that it could be eaten. Her greatest fear, though, was that Prudence McClutter might have a surprise exhibit that would be even more spectacular than her own. She had heard rumours that a wealthy friend of Prudence had allowed her the use of a high-tech kitchen, equipped with state-of-the-art appliances, and that she had produced a cake that was certain to win.

Both Prudence and Hortense waited until almost closing time before they brought their entries to be registered. A sizeable crowd had gathered in anticipation of viewing the star exhibits. Prue's came first, on a board carried by two assistants, but she had cunningly concealed it under a large cover, and it was only when it was placed on the table that she lifted the canopy. There was a buzz of admiration when it was exposed and some of Prue's supporters clapped loudly.

It was shaped like a flying saucer, elaborately iced and embellished with silver portholes around the perimeter and appearing to float on a glowing mist of tiny flashing lights.

However, Hortense's realistic model church seemed to attract even greater admiration and applause, to her relief, and she was convinced that the Baking Queen crown was

practically on her head. She even went home that night and changed her hair style so the crown would fit comfortably.

FORTY-FIVE

Crumbling cake

The event began on schedule the next Sunday after the morning service. There were rows of chairs at the front of the hall facing the stage where the Baking Queen was to be crowned. Behind that was an area where the cakes were on display on trestle tables, surrounded by ropes on supports to keep spectators from approaching too closely.

There was a good turnout; elderly couples, teens, parents with children in tow, milling around the exhibits, craning for a better view. Most of the contestants were inside the roped off area, putting the final touches to their entries. Alice Thornton stood next to her plain blue cake looking anxious that her exhibit might seem out of place among its ornate cousins. She noticed that mysteriously it had been moved from its original position near the front to a less prominent place.

Her husband, Karen and Rodney were there, somewhere in the crowd. Rodney had not been very keen to come, but had been lured by the prospect of free eats. Karen was agog at the mouth-watering sight of so many heavily iced cakes and Winston was discussing with an acquaintance the possibility of automating cake decorating with the aid of computers.

Hortense had secured a prominent position for her model church, in fact it was the same place that had been occupied by Alice's offering, which had somehow been moved. The model church was receiving more than a fair share of attention from bystanders, and even a reporter from the local Hillside Sentinel (tipped off by a phone call from Hortense) was there taking photos of it.

Hortense was on edge, fearful for the safety of her masterpiece, with so many viewers straining at the rope to catch a glimpse of it. Children rushing about playing tag among the crowd she found particularly annoying; she had previously urged Patsy Wellbetrothed to ban them from the area, but without success. She had her eye on one obnoxious boy of about six, and his doting mother, who had pushed their way to the front.

“I want some candy floss,” the boy was demanding. “Rocky Johnson’s father got some for him. Why can’t I have some too?”

“Not now, Cuthbert. Let’s see at this lovely cake that looks like a church.”

Cuthbert turned his attention to Hortense’s exhibit. “That’s not a cake. You can’t eat a church.”

“It just looks like a church, Cuthbert, but it’s a cake inside.”

“But those bells up there are made of iron. You can’t eat iron, or it will smash your teeth.”

“They’re really candy, Cuthbert. They are painted silver to look like iron.”

“You are always saying you are right and I am wrong. Those bells are iron, Mumsy. I’m sure they are.”

He ducked under the rope before anyone realised what was happening, and dashed up to Hortense’s exhibit. To the horror of everyone standing there, particularly Hortense, who was rooted to the spot, Cuthbert reached up and grabbed the silver bells. He darted back under the rope and disappeared with his prize into the crowd. The worst was that in seizing the bells, Cuthbert knocked the

grand tower over, causing catastrophic damage to the rest of the church.

It took several moments for the shock to register, then Hortense uttered a loud cry and fainted. There was general confusion in the hall. The culprit was hunted down and found hiding under a desk finishing off the last of the bells, which were indeed made of painted candy, and he was hauled back to his shocked mother.

“How could you, Cuthbert, you naughty boy!”

“I just wanted to see if they were made of iron, but they weren’t. It’s Mumsy’s fault for arguing with me.”

Mother and son were hustled out of the hall protesting loudly.

The shock of seeing her masterpiece damaged was so bad that Hortense had to be given sedatives, before being driven home by the Pastor’s wife. At first, distraught as she was, Hortense wanted to try repairing the cake but sympathetic helpers convinced her that even if it were possible it was too late because judging was due to start in less than half an hour. The fragmented masterpiece was taken to the kitchen, where it was eaten to the last crumb by helpers.

The Judge, Jenny Cartwright, arrived without much fanfare and having donned a white coat in the changing room was greeted by the Pastor and presented with a list of the rules. The exhibition area in the meantime had been cleared so the Judge could do her work without distraction.

They had decided to use the point system, with just one general class, with most points awarded for originality,

skill and flavour. The cakes had to be fully edible. The contestants, seated some distance away, watched in suspense as Mrs Cartwright made her way along the line of cakes, careful not to show any hint of approval or disapproval and making notes on a clipboard. At last she finished and everyone took their seats as the Judge made her way to the stage to announce the winner. She made a brief speech commending the contestants on the high standard of the exhibits (loud applause) and hoping that the competition would become a yearly event. A hush fell as she handed the Pastor a note and he stepped forward to announce the winner.

As expected, it was Prudence McClutter, for her alien spacecraft. Amidst applause she stepped up to be crowned and congratulated by the Pastor, who made a short speech, also noting that he was saddened by an unfortunate incident that had deprived one of the contestants of the chance to compete for the crown. Just before the end of the proceedings, the Judge unexpectedly stepped forward.

“Ladies, your cakes were all excellent — some very skilful decorations. But we must remember that not everyone is an experienced confectioner. Beginners with their plain exhibits also deserve some mention. Pastor, I’m sure you won’t object if we make another award for the most promising plain cake. I recommend Mrs Alice Thornton, with her striking electric blue icing.” There was a moment’s surprised silence then loud hear, hears of agreement and clapping.

A surprised Alice was awarded a large parcel of self-raising flour to encourage her in her future confectionery endeavours. (Laughter and more applause.) The tables

were cleared as if by magic at the cake sale that followed. Winston, urged by Karen and Rodney, managed to push his way to the blue cake, just in time to snatch it away from someone who was on the point of buying it, and it was borne home, where the Thornton family made short work of it.

FORTY-SIX

Shop-lifting saga

Connie's job at the pharmacy was trying, dealing with impatient customers, being on her feet all day, and the pay was not all that could be desired. Connie was not a happily contented employee but, being the only breadwinner, she had to bring home the groceries and pay the rent. It was also irksome that Reggie and Benny, her sponging brother, could relax at home while she slaved at the pharmacy.

She was not a qualified pharmacist, so she was not involved in dispensing prescription drugs. This was done by the owner, Rene Forrester, helped by a part-time pharmacist. The shop was in the forecourt of a shopping centre and apart from dispensing, carried a stock of other pharmaceuticals, such as off the shelf medicines, cosmetics, toiletries, deodorants, displayed on shelves, which shoppers selected, or were helped select by Connie and one other assistant. There were also two cashiers at check-out tills. Connie's job was mostly advising customers and helping with shelf displays.

Gloria Wickham, the other assistant, was a divorcee in her forties who, Connie considered, did not pull her weight. She had a foot problem so she had to rest on a chair for much of the day. Gloria also had the sympathetic ear of Rene, the owner.

Connie, was less sympathetic. "If Gloria's feet are so bad she shouldn't be in this job," she confided to one of the cashiers. "She should be in a sitting job,"

Though handicapped by her feet, Gloria had acute hearing, especially for any remarks about herself.

"I hear you would like me to get a new job," she accused Connie.

"What makes you say that?"

"You've been complaining about my feet, haven't you?"

"No, not about your feet as such. I do complain about my own feet. I'm on them all day but I don't rest on a chair."

"You've got no sympathy, Connie. If you had the pain I've got then you would also take a minute or two to sit and take the weight off your feet."

"You should see your doctor if they are so bad, Gloria."

After that Gloria spent a little less time taking the weight off her feet. She lived in a flat nearby with her eleven-year-old son, who often visited her at work after school to do her shopping for her at the shopping centre, thus saving his mother an extra burden on her feet. He would leave bags of groceries at the pharmacy and help her to take them home later.

Rene, the owner, was a considerate boss. She allowed Gloria free medication from stock to treat her problem feet and, not to show favouritism, also gave Connie permission to take medicine off the shelves for her allergies

The free medication went through the tills in the normal way, except that the slips showed a hundred percent discount. Rene kept a close watch on her stock, some of which, she suspected, was being spirited away without being accounted for. She refused to believe anyone on the staff was responsible, so she put it down either to shop-lifting, to errors in stock taking, or the computer. She called a staff meeting after closing time.

“We have a problem, ladies. Stock is going missing. It is possible we may have made mistakes in stock taking, but you all know how careful we are so I’m sure we can rule that out. Customers would soon notice if there were till errors. So that leaves pilfering. I think we have a shop-lifter.”

“Shouldn’t we have cameras put in?” Connie suggested.

Rene shook her head. “In a small pharmacy like this it shouldn’t be necessary. Cameras have to be monitored and we can’t have someone watching a screen all day. Our eyes must be our cameras. We will all have to be extra vigilant.

In spite of the extra vigilance there was still a deficit at the next stocktaking. The difficulty was that on the shelves were a number of small but valuable items, particularly in the cosmetic section where luxury up-market brand names such as Chanel perfume or Urban Decay lipstick were on display.

“I don’t know why Rene doesn’t have that stuff locked in glass cabinets,” Connie complained to Reggie. “It’s not surprising it disappears. It’s so easy to slip an expensive lipstick into your pocket without being seen.” She added that she had a feeling Gloria Wickham was involved.

“So what makes you think it’s her?” Reggie asked.

“Her son leaves bags of groceries behind her counter after he does shopping for her. What’s to stop her slipping things in when nobody is looking. She’s in with the boss so she thinks she’s safe.”

Connie decided to watch Gloria closely, though it was difficult when she was dealing with customers. She hoped to catch Gloria in the act of hiding toiletries among the potatoes and onions — and indeed did spot her one morning popping a suspicious packet into one of the bags.

She sidled up to Gloria, hoping to see what was in the bag, which was open enough to show some of its contents. “Your feet seem to be much better Gloria,” she said, craning to get a better view of the bag. “You are more mobile these days.”

Gloria, who was having a short break, looked up, not certain whether Connie was genuinely concerned about the state of her feet or whether she had a hidden motive. She noticed Connie seemed interested in the grocery bag.

“I’m fine; how are your allergies?”

“Getting along, thanks.”

“I see you eyeing my groceries, Connie. What’s my shopping got to do with you? Rene has said it’s okay for me to leave my stuff here till closing time.”

“It looks kind of heavy. It must be hard on your sore feet to carry that bag.”

“Look, Connie, let me look after my feet, and you take care of your nose. Everyone knows Jackson helps me carry my stuff.”

“So he just walks out of here with your bags? Don’t you check?”

“Check? What’s there to check? I hope you are not saying that my bags should be checked.” She stood up, colouring. “I don’t like your attitude, Connie. You seem

to be hinting that I'm stealing. I'm going to complain to Rene about this."

Before Connie could say anything, Gloria was on her way to the dispensary. Through the glass partition Connie saw her gesturing as she told her story to Rene, who seemed to be listening sympathetically.

Connie was called into the dispensary, where she was faced with a hostile Gloria and a displeased Rene.

"Gloria claims that you have accused her of stealing. Why would you have done that, Connie? Do you have any proof?"

"Let's prove it then," Gloria challenged. She shuffled out on her sore feet and came back with her bag of groceries, which she emptied on the floor. Tinned food, bread, butter, milk cartons, vegetables, tumbled out. Among the pile Connie spotted the suspicious item she had noticed Gloria slipping into the bag. It had been placed in a plastic packet.

"What's that?" Connie asked, pointing.

"You want to know? Open it for yourself."

Connie removed the covering. It was a cardboard box, and inside that was a blue jar bearing the label: "Dr Blain's Bunion Balm".

FORTY-SEVEN

Pilfering partner

The split hairdressing salons, far from solving Shawn and Andy's problems, had only led to more disputes, and finally Shawn decided to sell his salon. But selling was not as straightforward as he expected. He consulted the attorney who had originally drawn up their partnership agreement Mr Michael McGruff, of Stubbins, Hawkly and Redcrest.

"There could be legal problems," Mr McGruff warned. "I gather the two of you are no longer on friendly terms?"

Mr McGruff polished his spectacles. "Your partner Andy was here not long ago. He mentioned then that you wanted to sell your share. He was against the idea."

Shawn pushed back his chair. "Andy can't stop me selling."

Mr McGruff held up a calming hand. "Before selling the partnership would have to be dissolved. Then the entire business could be sold and each of you would get half of the proceeds. But there could be problems in dissolving the partnership."

"What problems?"

"Your partner may not wish it to be dissolved. There could be disputes about how the assets are divided."

"I have already given a mandate to an agent to find a buyer. I want to get away from Andy as soon as possible."

"Yes, I see that. However, I don't think you are in a position to sell, since your salon belongs to the partnership. But she could be given a mandate to sell the entire business. Possibly we could get your agent to talk

to your partner about dissolving the partnership, so you don't have to meet in person."

Mr McGruff asked his secretary to bring a glass of water and he took another antacid tablet to relieve the indigestion brought on by difficult clients. She also typed a notice of dissolution, which was duly signed by Shawn and sent to Andy.

The letter reached Andy the next day.

Andy lost no time in visiting Mr McGruff, who was expecting but not looking forward to another visit from him. At their last meeting Andy had torn up a copy of their partnership agreement and scattered the pieces on the office floor. That sort of temperamental behaviour affected his indigestion.

Andy flounced in and demanded to know why he had received a letter giving notice that Shawn intended to dissolve their partnership when as far as he, Andy, was concerned he had already terminated it when he tore up the agreement.

"You must realise, Mr Fulton, one party simply tearing up an agreement really has no effect. There are legal processes that have to be followed. And that is what we are doing now."

"Well I don't like legal processes. We can just ignore legal processes. We can both tear the agreement up and go our own ways."

"Nevertheless the partnership would still exist and would have to be dissolved."

"Over my dead body."

“Well, I hope there will be no dead bodies. I trust there are no outstanding debts?”

“I’ve never had debts. But I have heard Andy is head over heels in the red.”

Mr McGruff was surprised. “If that is so it would complicate matters. It might put you in an awkward position as a partner.”

He shuffled through documents on his desk. “Ah, here is the contract. Let me see.” He frowned. “If your partner can’t meet his debts you may have to sell the business, I’m afraid.”

There was uncertainty and anxiety in Shawn’s salon. Megan, his assistant, had her own clients but often found herself having to attend to Shawn’s customers as well. Shawn seemed to have lost interest in the business.

“We are having problems with our suppliers,” Megan complained to Mrs Henshaw. “Shawn orders far more than we use, but it all disappears from the shelves. We nearly ran out yesterday when our order from Romsey and Green wasn’t delivered.”

“You must talk to Shawn,” Mrs Henshaw said. “I have tried, but he doesn’t seem to be worried. In any case it’s not my place deal with orders.”

“The trouble is Shawn keeps switching from firm to firm. He won’t let me phone to complain when stuff isn’t delivered. He just says if they give poor service he’ll buy elsewhere. Then he opens other accounts to get the stuff.”

Mark, Shawn’s confidant and flat mate, was also anxious. As a chef in a nearby restaurant he would have to give up

his job, if indeed Shawn was serious about leaving town and joining the crew of a cruise liner as a hair stylist. Shawn had assured him there were always vacancies for experienced chefs; it was just a question of signing on at one of the many recruitment agencies and they would even be flown to join the ship at its next port of call.

“How is the business sale going?” he asked.

“We are having some cash flow problem at the moment, so creditors will have to be patient. I have also been losing a bit at The Four Aces, so I need the cash to win back my losses.”

“Hey, Shawn, I thought you were ahead. How much are you in the red?”

“Well, I haven’t added up. Maybe a couple of grand.”

FORTY-EIGHT

Balancing bother

Rita the agent phoned Shawn about a call she had had from Mr McGruff.

"I've just had some rather unsettling news from your lawyer, Shawn. He claims you can't sell your business, because you are in partnership."

"Don't worry about it Rita. It's just a small legal technicality. We can just ignore it."

"He says the whole business may have to be sold."

"Well it might come down to that and it wouldn't be a bad thing. You could handle that too, Rita."

"What about Andy? I don't think he would be keen on selling."

"Andy won't have a choice. We can brush him aside like a fly."

"But you would have to negotiate with him, Shawn. And you aren't on good terms, I believe."

"I would as soon deal with a polecat. But you could deal with him, of course."

Rita hesitated. To be caught in the crossfire between two such hostile clients was not a pleasant prospect. "Well, you know Shawn, this is outside the terms of my mandate."

"No problem at all. We draw up a new mandate. It will work out better for you too, won't it? As for Andy he will have to fall in line, like it or not."

"Before I can do anything I would have to have balance sheets and inventories."

Shawn frowned. "Inventories shouldn't be too difficult. But balance sheets? That sounds like a job for an accountant."

"But surely you already have one?"

"Well, no. I do my own bookkeeping."

"In any case I will need figures to negotiate with him."

"Don't worry, Rita, I'll sort something out."

The question of balance sheets put Shawn in a difficult spot. A balance sheet would reveal some awkward details that he would prefer not to be exposed. He knew of an accountant pal, Isaac Vinsky, also from the Four Aces club, who, it was rumoured, could be creative with bookkeeping.

Isaac said he would be happy to draw up a favourable balance sheet, for a small fee. He gave Shawn a list of records he needed. "I know you haven't been keeping detailed accounts, Shawn. So you will have to estimate, when you haven't got exact figures. We can inflate items so we arrive at a nice positive equity figure."

Dodging creditors was becoming a headache for Shawn. Several of the firms he had dealt with had sent their Reps to find out why his accounts were so much in arrears. But Shawn managed to evade them. Urgent accounts arrived with every mail, but they were torn up and thrown into the trash can. Shawn instructed staff that phone callers must be told he was not available and he would ring back — which he never would.

Then a warning came from the electricity department that their current would be cut off unless arrears were settled.

When Andy found out he phoned Shawn's agent, Rita.

"Hi Rita; it's Andy, Shawn's partner."

"How can I help?"

"It's about Shawn's salon. The Electricity Department are threatening to cut off his power. He also owes me for his share of the rent. As you know we are not on speaking terms. Perhaps you can help."

Rita tried to contact Shawn, only to be told that he was not available.

Shawn's was not a lover of paper work. When he got round to looking into his books he found his income barely covered expenses. Sometimes there were fewer than five appointments a day.

"What's up, Shawn? You're looking like there's been a death in the family," Mark remarked.

"It would solve a lot of problems if it was Andy's funeral. Things are not looking good."

"How so?"

"I've been going through the books. It looks bad."

"What do you mean, Shawn?"

"Look, Mark, I'll come clean with you. These debts have been building up more than I thought. Even if I did manage to sell whatever cash I get will be grabbed by the creditors."

"So where has the money been going, Shawn?"

"To tell the truth I've had to do some dodgy deals."

"What sort of deals?"

"As you know we spend quite a bit of time at the Four Aces. The tables haven't been kind to me lately. Anyway, you know Butch Hawzer? He's always around there. He

came up to me when he saw I was on a losing streak and said he could help me out if I was short of cash. He's got contacts on the black market, and he told me if I could slip some stock out of the business he could sell it for me to solve my cash problem."

"Wow, Shawn. That's taking a chance."

"It's not like I'm stealing, Mark. It's my own stock I'm taking. But things are starting to catch up with me. I'm running out of credit. The bright side, though, is Andy will also be dragged down when the business goes bust."

"I wouldn't like to be there when he finds out."

"Well, Mark, perhaps it's better we aren't there — better if we are far away."

"So what now, Shawn?"

"We'll have to make contingency plans. I'm going in to see a cruise ship recruitment agent tomorrow."

"You mean we do a flit?"

"Why not? I've got nothing to lose. And it would be a way to get back at Andy."

"But we will need cash to go on with."

"That won't be a problem, Mark. I've stashed away the cash from selling my stock so I've got plenty in cash in my safe."

FORTY-NINE

Trapped troll

Basil, the computer technician Wally Williams had called in to fix his fried machine, had also been commissioned to track down an unknown troll. To catch the culprit Basil installed a logging program on a computer kept in a locked room. He had good news.

“I’m on to your troll, Skipper,” he told Wally. “I have narrowed the perp down to someone in your art department.”

“How have you done that?”

“Long story, Captain. But I’ll keep you in the loop. Shouldn’t be long now.”

Albert Doubleday, in the art department, was uneasy. What had started off as a prank had escalated more than he intended and now there was this bearded tech in and out of the office prying into the network. One satisfactory result was that Eric Pogson was stressed out from having his computer hacked; but the downside was that he had vowed to inflict injury on whoever was responsible. Having already experienced Pogson’s anger, when he had been boxed on the ear in the canteen, Albert was fearful of even worse violence if he was exposed as the hacker. He kept well out of Pogson’s way.

Albert rang his pal Byrom, also a computer geek, on the office phone.

“Hi, By. It’s me, Albert.

“Yeah, what’s cooking?”

“Plenty, thanks to that message you dropped on Pogson’s PC.”

“How so?”

“Big flap. I think they’re going to trace it back to me.”

“I don’t see how they can do that. Take a drag and relax, Albert. You’re in the clear.”

“How can you be so sure? This tech guy knows something. I see they have changed the locks on that room; now it’s like Fort Knox.”

“That so? Maybe you should lie low for a bit Albert. Take some leave.”

“Byrom?... Are you there?”

“Yeah, Albert. What’s up?”

“I don’t know. There’s like a ping on the line.”

Byrom didn’t answer for a time. Then he said, “Albert, I think we are being tapped.”

Basil had some news for Wally.

“Like to hear the latest, Commander?” he asked, easing his bulk onto an office chair. He pulled a mini recorder out his pocket and switched it on. A telephone conversation began to play back.

“You recognise the voice, Major?”

“Yes I think so. Sounds like one of our graphic artists called Albert Doubleday.”

“Thought it could be. Anyhow, listen to the rest. I think we have our troll.”

When the recorder stopped Wally thought a moment. “Well there’s no doubt that’s him, Basil.”

“So what’s the next move, Cap’n?”

“How did you get this recording, Basil?”

“I’ve got this neat little gizmo — picks up the magnetic field in a phone line.”

“So you tapped his phone?”

Basil nodded.

“Well that means we won’t be able to use this. Illegal wire tapping.”

“Maybe so. But now you know who your troll is. So my mission is accomplished, Major.” He gave Wally a mock salute.

But the headache remained for Wally. He called at the firm’s legal representative, Mr Stanley Grimpepper, of Howard, Swann and Needlepoint, whom he had consulted once before, in connection with a copyright infringement — a hatchet faced person who always dressed in black.

He was not happy when Wally told him about the wiretapping. “Frightfully risky business. Could land you in hot water. What do you propose to do about it?”

“Well I was hoping you could advise me.”

“Throw it away, get rid of it. Not the slightest use to you.”

“I mean about the staff member. Can we get rid of him?”

“Get rid of? Fire him? Good heavens no, not unless you can get evidence that he’s been up to this tracking or hacking.”

“It’s caused us a lot of trouble and expense.”

“This staff member sounds like a bad kettle of fish. But fire him? No. Not unless you can scrape up some evidence. Finger prints in that locked room? He could have been in there. Then you’ve got him.”

“That would mean calling in the police.”

“You want to nail him, you call them. You don’t want to call them. Then you try other options.”

“What other options?”

“You haul him in. Cross-question him. Try to get him to own up. But keep the tape out of the picture, unless you like hot water. Keep the whole thing between you and this kettle of fish. Then you get rid of him, or palm him off to another department.”

Albert Doubleday was on tenterhooks, since the ill fated phone call. He phoned his pal Byrom on his phone at home.

“Are you okay, Albert? You sound miffed,” said Byrom.

“What do you expect, after the wire tap?”

“Not to worry about that, Albert; they can’t use it. Just keep your cool and it will blow over. Like I said, take some leave.”

But the summons to Wally’s office came before he could do so.

“Shut the door behind you Albert. As I think you know, our network has been plagued by a mischief maker for some time.”

“I have heard rumours about it.”

“Well, we have been taking steps to find the culprit. And now we have some evidence.”

Albert had been expecting the wire-tapping incident to be raised, so he had an excuse prepared. “Is this is about a phone recording, Wally? Can I explain...”

“Who said anything about a phone recording, Albert?”

“It was just something I heard from the switchboard operator,” Albert said lamely.”

“No, when I say evidence, Basil Labotski, our network specialist, has been using a device to monitor the network to pin-point the trouble. He tells me he has managed to log some illegal tampering on the network.”

“Yes, I have seen Mr Labotski in the office. He said he was doing routine maintenance.”

“Well, he was doing more than that. In fact he installed a tracing device to find which computer was being used for the tampering. He says the trace leads directly to *your* machine, Albert.

Albert squirmed. “Well, I ...”

“The evidence is there, Albert. There can be no doubt about it. I think you must come clean.”

Albert looked away. “Okay Wally, it was just a joke. It didn’t do any harm.”

“That’s where you are wrong. Getting to the bottom of it has caused us a lot of trouble and expense.”

“Well, I’m sorry Wally. It won’t happen again.”

“You are right there. You have two choices. Either you resign, or I’ll have you transferred to another magazine.”

It was more or less a Hobson’s choice and soon afterwards Albert disappeared from the Art Department. Equally mysteriously there were no more hacking attacks.

FIFTY

Naughty Nelly

The book exchange run by Mrs Edna Stapleford could not be considered a gold mine but it made a small profit. She regarded the shop as more of a hobby than a business venture. She employed an old friend, Emma Calvert, to take the morning shift, while she worked in the afternoons.

Emma was mildly eccentric, riding about on an ancient moped with her pet parrot in a cage strapped on the back. The job suited her. Being an avid reader, the book exchange was an ideal way to spend her time, and she enjoyed being surrounded by books and chatting to other book lovers. Sorting and cataloguing volumes, advising customers on good reads, taking cash at the till, and other chores kept her busy.

It was a small premises, with a narrow frontage; popular books were displayed behind a glass shop window to catch the attention of passers-by. There was just enough space inside to accommodate ceiling to floor book shelves, packed with volumes arranged in categories and alphabetical order. Emma presided behind a cramped counter at the entrance.

The two of them managed comfortably and there was no need to employ anyone else, except when either of them was sick or on leave. Mrs Stapleford had an arrangement for a temporary assistant, Nelly Finklefont, to help at such times. Nelly, a small person with dyed black hair, did not get along well with Emma. In the first place, she objected to Emma's parrot, Jackass.

"I don't see why you should be allowed to bring that bird to work with you, Emma. This is not a pet shop.

And if you can bring your bird to the shop, why can't I bring a dog?"

Emma pointed out that there was obviously a difference between a dog and a parrot in a cage. For a start there was the question of dog hygiene. It could even bite the customers.

"Oh, and what about parrot sickness? Parrots could pass on germs to people. And of course they are noisy," Nelly argued

Mrs Stapleford settled the matter by saying that Jackass was no trouble, and had become quite an attraction to passers-by, which helped sales.

Nelly's services were not often needed and, when they were she worked in the afternoon and Emma saw her for only a short time, when she handed over at midday. Then she would be off on her moped to her garden flat at Crown Crescent for lunch.

Mrs Stapleford had bought the shop to keep herself busy after the death of her husband eight years ago. After a time she found that the shop was taking up too much of her time, and she had employed her old friend Emma to help, when she heard that Emma's ailing mother had died. Emma sold their property and moved closer to the shop.

Edna Stapleford had always been a healthy person; she had only once in her life been in hospital, and wanted to keep it that way. So Emma was surprised when she noticed Edna had been losing weight and looked tired.

"Edna, you need a break. You are looking a bit peaked. You must look after yourself."

“Oh nonsense Emma, I’m as strong as a horse. I can’t afford to take leave; there’s too much to do here. For instance, look at that pile of books at the back. We still haven’t sorted them out.”

She wouldn’t take Emma’s advice but at last admitted she was a little run down and made arrangements to visit her daughter. Before she left she gave Emma a list of “Things To Remember” and arranged for Nelly to stand in for her in the afternoons.

“Forget about the shop while you are away,” Emma assured her. “Everything will be taken care of and you will come back refreshed, with your batteries recharged.”

“I’m not sure about my batteries, Emma... But there is an extra job I would like you to do, if possible. Would you be able to do the cashing up at closing time? Unfortunately it would mean your coming back to the shop later. It’s not that I mistrust Nelly. But I would feel happier if you could do it.”

“Of course Edna, I would gladly do that for you.”

They used a card index system to keep track of customers and cash. There were flaws in the system, however. They did not keep a list of the books in stock. There would be nothing to stop a dishonest assistant from not recording a sale and keeping the cash. But Mrs Stapleford trusted her helpers.

Before she left, one morning, Mrs Stapleford called at the shop to give Emma last minute instructions.

“Oh dear I haven’t spoken to Nelly yet about cashing up,” she remembered. “I’ll leave a note for her explaining that you will be coming in to do it every afternoon at closing time.”

“Yes, please do, Edna. I wouldn’t like to be the one to tell her. She is so easily upset.”

“Just lock the cash in the safe,” Edna said as she was leaving. “Don’t worry about banking; we’ll do it when I come back. Please phone if there are any problems. And from time to time let me know how you are getting on.”

Mrs Stapleford did her own bookkeeping because she felt an accountant would be too expensive. All Emma had to do was keep their card system up to date — all the transactions were recorded on them. Each book had a price tag and customers could return it and exchange it for another at half the price, or if they wanted they could keep it. They had loyal readers, who often could find books not available in public libraries and there was no rush to avoid library fines.

The morning passed without incident. The usual customers called and sales were average. They seldom had a number of buyers at the same time. Emma had plenty of time to attend to other chores, such as replacing returned book in alphabetical order, or assessing new books and deciding on prices. Book loving friends often called to pass the time of day.

Jackass in his cage on a special stand near the entrance made himself at home and spent the morning watching passers-buy, who often stopped for a closer look. There was a kitchenette at the back of the shop, so Emma could make tea for herself and share an occasional sandwich with Jackass.

Nelly arrived at lunchtime, glaring at Jackass as she passed his cage. Jackass commented: “Late again, late again.” Several passers-by laughed.

“One day I’ll knock that bird right off its perch,” Nelly said angrily.

“Bath time, bath time,” Jackass jeered. “Naughty girl.”

“You really must teach that parrot manners. It’s a disgrace the way it talks to people,” Nelly complained.

“He means no harm. It’s just his way of saying good afternoon.”

Nelly deposited her bags behind the counter, while Emma counted the cash in the till, leaving the usual float and placing the morning’s taking in a bank bag, to be locked in the safe.

“So what’s this note on the counter?” Nelly asked.

“Oh, it’s a note Edna left for you when she came in this morning.”

Nelly read the note and her face darkened.

“I don’t see the need for you to come back to cash up, Emma. I’m capable of doing it myself.”

“I’m sure you are, Nelly. But it’s what Edna wants.”

“It’s almost as though she doesn’t trust me.”

“No, trust has nothing to do with it. She wants me to do it so I can report back to her in the evenings.”

“Well, I don’t like it. It’s as if she has put you in control while she is away.”

“You must remember, Nelly, that Edna and I have run the shop together for many years.”

“Even so, Emma, I am in charge in the afternoons. And I will not allow you to interfere. I would rather cash up myself, so there is no need for you to do it.”

“I’m sorry, Nelly, but I must do what Edna wants.”

FIFTY-ONE

Cash capers

Before handing over to Nelly Emma counted the cash in the till and entered the amount, less the float, in the book they kept for the purpose. She put the cash in a canvas bank bag and locked it in the safe at the back of the shop.

A customer arrived, so Emma left, wheeling Jackass in his cage away in a shopping trolley borrowed from the supermarket. Later that afternoon, after locking Jackass in her flat at Crown Crescent, Emma mounted her moped and rode back to do the cashing up. Nelly was on the point of closing the shop.

“Isn’t it a bit too early to lock up?” she asked. “We stay open till five.”

“It’s not worth the trouble. There usually aren’t customers that late.”

“Well it’s lucky I came early, or I would have been locked out.”

“Don’t worry Emma, I would have left a note.”

Emma opened the till but found it was empty. “But what’s happened to the cash?” she asked.

“Oh, I’ve put all the money in a bag. It’s under the counter.”

“It should be locked up, you know. And what about my float for tomorrow?”

“I’m sure you will be able to sort all that out.”

Emma began cashing up. “Well, I’ll leave you to it,” Nelly said as she left.

Emma found that there was not much to deposit in the safe. It appeared business had been slow, probably fewer

than ten customers — just how many, it would be hard to find out, since the cards had all been filed away.

Emma had pointed out this flaw in their system several times.

“Edna, wouldn’t it be good idea for us to keep a separate list of daily transactions?” she had suggested. “I mean cash, the names of the customers and the titles of the books they took.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Edna had said vaguely. “It would be a lot of extra work.”

“Maybe give us an idea of what books sell best.”

“As book lovers we already know that,” Edna had pointed out.

Emma had let it rest at that. But, she thought, in the present situation it would have helped to have more details. Not that she suspected Nelly of anything dishonest. It was just that, with Edna being away, she felt an extra responsibility to keep the business running smoothly.

Next morning was a busy one for Emma. She sometimes had three or four book lovers browsing at the same time. It didn’t often happen that way but when it did it was difficult to cope. But at least sales were good

The afternoon sales were poor once again, even though that was when they were usually busiest.

When she went to cash up the following afternoon she found that Nelly was once more preparing to close early.

“Locking up so soon again, Nelly?” she asked.

“Yes. But you’ll be here in case there are any last minute customers. I like to try and miss the traffic rush at five.”

“Did you have a busy afternoon?”

“Oh, so-so. They trickle in and out. Lots of browsers but it’s sales that count, isn’t it.”

“Well I hope they were better than yesterday,” Emma remarked as Nelly left.

Once she had cashed up she found there was a slight improvement but still well below what sales should be. Of course Nelly couldn’t be blamed, but Emma was puzzled that it was only in the afternoons that sales were poor.

For the next few days, the same pattern was repeated — good turnover in the mornings and poor in the afternoons. It should in fact have been the other way round.

She asked Nelly if she had noticed that afternoon sales were sluggish.

“I wouldn’t know,” she replied curtly. “You do the cashing up so I’m in the dark about what the figures are. We can’t control how many customers we get, Emma. If they don’t need books they won’t come. Simple as that.”

But the explanation couldn’t be as simple as that, Emma thought. She felt she should get to the bottom of it. There was a small coffee shop in the mall overlooking the book exchange that she visited from time to time. One afternoon she left early and did some shopping at the supermarket before calling in at the Express Bar and taking a seat near the window, where she had a good view of the book exchange.

She was surprised to see that the shop was closed with a “Be Back Soon” sign on the door. She noticed that

several would-be customers approached, then seeing the sign wandered off, probably never to return. Potential sales lost.

She expected Nelly to reappear within a few minutes, and ordered a second cup of coffee. Five minutes passed, then ten, but more than forty five before Nelly arrived back.. During that time Emma counted twelve would-be buyers.

When she went, half an hour before closing time, to begin cashing up she found Nelly, as usual, ready to leave. She was tempted to confront her with what she had seen but decided it was better leave it to Edna when she got back.

Pausing at the door on her way out, Nelly said: “I think it was busier today. I hope sales were better.”

But they were once again below average.

FIFTY TWO

Nelly nicked

It seemed the reason for the decline in afternoon sales was simply that Nelly was in the habit of closing the shop and disappearing on some errand of her own. Emma felt she owed it to Edna at least to find out how often it was happening.

Playing detective was not a role Emma fancied, but she would have to make a full report when Edna got back and she must have evidence. However she was no Miss Marple. Her old fashioned long skirts, and large round glasses would tend to make her conspicuous — a good sleuth should be able to melt into the background and dart agilely round corners.

Surveillance from the coffee shop was the best option. She ordered a cappuccino (against doctor's orders) paid for it and settled down to watch, having no particular plan in mind.

Everything seemed normal. She could see Nelly sorting books near the back of the shop and replacing them on the shelves. Several customers arrived and browsed without buying anything. An elderly book-lover came in with a bulging shopping bag of books, which Nelly counted and noted credits on a card.

Then she selected seven or eight books and paid for them in cash. It seemed quite a large amount. Nelly helped the customer pack the books in the bag, and after chatting a while she left. The bank notes were still on the counter and Emma expected Nelly would ring them up in the till. But before she did so Emma was surprised to notice that she slipped some notes into her handbag, before depositing the rest in the till.

Emma took off her glasses and polished them on a handkerchief. It was hard to believe what she had seen. But other customers came in and much the same procedure followed. Nelly was quick; her hand flicked to her bag with the notes in seconds and she made sure that she was alone in the shop when she did it.

During a break when there were no customers Nelly closed the shop and left, after sticking her Back Soon note on the door. She disappeared down the stairs leading to the supermarket. Emma hurried after her.

Nelly made her way to the entrance and retrieved a shopping trolley, then began a leisurely stroll along the aisles selecting items and dropping them into the trolley.

From a vantage point in a nearby dress shop she watched Nelly finally join the queue at one of the check-out tills. The groceries were packed into carrier bags and Nelly paid in cash – cash that should have gone into the till of Excelsior Book Exchange.

Emma followed at a distance as Nelly pushed her trolley to the parking lot, where she unloaded its contents into the boot of her car, and casually made her way back to the book exchange. She settled at the front counter as though it was all part of her afternoon routine.

Emma went back to the Express Bar and ordered a large cappuccino to steady her nerves.

At cashing-up time Emma was not surprised by how little there was to deposit in the safe, knowing that a large chunk had found its way into Nelly's handbag.

"Been a bit quiet this afternoon," Nelly remarked. "Must be the weather. Nothing much we can do about that, is there?" She briskly shouldered her handbag,

adding as she left, “Hope the traffic isn’t as bad as it was yesterday.”

So far all Emma had done was observe. She needed something more convincing. On the counter was the flat index tray containing their card system. In it in alphabetical order was a standard A6 horizontal card for each customer. It was frustrating to know that the true records showing amounts paid and credits were in there. All that was needed was to find the cards used, add up and compare with the till total. But there were hundreds. To find the ones Nelly had used was almost impossible. What was needed was a way to find only the cards used that day.

“I wonder if I could save you some work?” she asked Nelly next afternoon.

“How could you do that?”

“I’ve always found re-filing cards time wasting. It would be so much easier if we put them aside in a stack, and I could re-file them after I’ve done the cashing up.”

Nelly gave her a calculating look. “I’m quite capable of doing my own re-filing, thanks very much,” she said firmly.

The wooden card index tray had been custom made. It was a long narrow box in which the four by six A6 cards were filed upright in between tabbed alphabetical dividers. The width of the tray was supposed to match the width of the cards but for some reason the tray had been made more than a quarter inch wider than six inches.

The cards never lined up neatly. They looked untidy. Emma always took a ruler and pushed the row against one side of the box to line it up. She noticed that whenever Nelly filed a card one side stuck out of line with the rest of the stack. This could be the way to find which cards Nelly had filed during the afternoon.

She put the theory to the test next day. After cashing up and locking the proceeds in the safe, she carefully aligned the cards in the index tray while Nelly was busy at the back. When she went back at her normal time of about half an hour before closing time, she found Nelly impatiently awaiting her arrival so she could get away early.

“Had a good afternoon, Nelly?”

“Same as ever. Well, I’ll be off. Got lots to do.”

As soon as she had gone Emma examined the cards. A number were out of line and she carefully extracted them and stacked them on the counter. Eighteen of them. More or less the number of customers they usually had. She made a list of the names of the customers, the amounts they had paid and the date. Adding up, the total was a respectable five hundred and eighty-two and some cents — more than it had ever been since Edna went on holiday. She counted the till takings and after deducting the float found there was a discrepancy of exactly two hundred. There was only one place where the missing cash could have gone, and that was Nelly’s handbag.

FIFTY-THREE

Cadet capers

Although Rodney Thornton and his friend Philip Gillespie were relieved when they heard that the Head Prefect had injured his arm in a rugby match, it was not good news for the cadet band. His trumpet's trills and frills offset the bugles and without the trumpet the band sounded flat. However practising for the inter-schools cadet band competition had to go on with or without it.

The Head Prefect's arm was in plaster and he was forced to watch from the sidelines as drum major, Felix Atkinson, swinging his mace, and with a leopard skin draped over his uniform, led them round the playing fields in front of the school. There were six snare drummers in the front row, followed by the bass drummer, two side drummers, two cymbalists, and twelve bugle players including Rodney and Phillip. The absent prefect on trumpet usually led the bugle players, with the cymbalists on either side of him.

Major Crewe, the master in charge of School Cadets, was also responsible for the Band, though he didn't know a bugle from a bagpipe, so he had to rely on the cadet drum major Felix Atkinson, a final year pupil, to direct the music, while he kept an eye on the marching. The Headmaster was anxious to redeem the school's honour after a disastrous performance of the school orchestra and he was relying on the cadet band to capture the Silver Bugle trophy for the school. He called them both into his study.

"Ah, Crewe, and you too Atkinson, please take a seat. First of all I must stress the importance of the school winning the Silver Bugle, which as we all know we have

held for the last four years. But this year, because of the, hum, deplorable fiasco we have had it would be a, hum, major catastrophe if we lost that too.”

“No danger of that, Headmaster,” Major Crewe said confidently.

“That may be so, Crewe, but I’ve heard that you have lost one of your best players due to his arm injury. Are the other players up to scratch?”

“Most of them are experienced players. Our drum major here (indicating Felix) is certain to win an award and our line drummers are doing well. We have four new buglers.”

“Where did they come from?”

“We recruited several of them from the school orchestra, which as you know was disbanded recently.”

The Headmaster frowned. “Are you sure that is advisable? We are still suffering from the aftermath of that, hum, regrettable incident.”

“There are not many boys interested in the bugle, Sir,” Felix Atkinson explained. “Not everyone in the orchestra was to blame for the, er, mistake they made. The new buglers are all doing well.”

“Well so be it. But I hope you will keep a vigilant eye on them, or should I say, hum, ear.”

“Both,” put in Major Crewe. “Our display of formation marching this year will be impressive. I think we can be sure of keeping that trophy.”

At times Rodney was sorry he had joined the band. He enjoyed the admiration of the crowd watching when they practised during the lunch break and other times but not

the marching on the dusty sports field and the tedious practise after school hours.

“Why are you forever polishing that foghorn and those ugly army boots?” Karen complained. “The whole house smells of boot polish. And Mom is tired of washing and ironing that uniform.”

“We’ve got to look smart with such big crowds watching.”

“Anyway, when is your competition?”

“About a week before your sports do. And it won’t be at the school. It’ll be at that stadium in town where they usually have big ruby matches. Four different schools will be competing.”

Once a month there was a school cadet parade on the playing field. Lee Enfields, relics of bygone wars, (without firing pins) were used for rifle drill. They were stored in racks in the school’s armoury and a register was kept, in case someone took one home and replaced the firing pin. Cadets came to school in khaki uniforms and berets. Some of the masters acted as officers, wearing army jackets, khaki trousers and peaked caps with brass badges and Major Crewe appeared in full military regalia, complete with gold-topped cane.

The cadet band also took part in the parade, in full uniform, with boots and gaiters. The drum major and bass drummer sported leopard skins draped over their uniforms. Drum major Atkinson marched in front directing the band with an ornate mace.

Rodney brought home a photograph of the band in their full dress uniforms, hoping to impress the family. He wanted to have it framed and hung up in his bedroom.

“What’s that funny stick, with the knob at the end the person in front is carrying?” Karen asked. “Is it for hitting the enemy?”

“We use guns for that these days.”

“So why march around with a stick?”

“It’s called a mace, not a stick. The person in front is the Drum Major, and he uses the mace to tell the band what to do, like which way to turn and when to start or stop marching, and when to start or stop playing.”

“Why doesn’t he just shout?”

“Because we wouldn’t hear while we are blowing bugles.”

At least Mrs Thornton was impressed. “You boys look smart. But why are you so far back Rodney?”

“We buglers are actually the most important part of the band, even more important than the Drum Major. We make the loudest sound.”

“That’s quite true, Mrs Thornton agreed.

“We should really be in front, instead of those drummers. But I suppose they save the best for last.”

Rodney enjoyed the Band’s route marches along the streets near the school. Traffic made way for them and onlookers crowded the pavements cheering them on. The drums and bugles drew street urchins, who marched behind the Band along the streets, making as much noise as the Band itself.

Best of all was invitations to appear at functions. They performed at fetes and flea markets, on some Saturdays, honing their technique for the big day, but also basking in the spotlight. One announcement took Rodney by surprise.

“You won’t believe what a shock I’ve got for you,” he told Karen

“It won’t be all that much of a shock. Everyone thinks I’ve got a good chance of winning the long jump.”

“I’m not talking about that. This is much more important. It’s not official yet, so don’t tell anyone.”

“So what is it then?”

“It’s to do with our cadet band.”

“Well then it can’t be important.”

“That’s what you think. You’ll think differently when I tell you.”

Rodney pretended to walk out the room. “Hey come back here,” Karen shouted. “Tell me what’s so important.”

He came back in. “Okay, I’ll tell you but you must promise to keep it secret.”

“Alright! I promise. Now tell me.”

“Our band is going to play at your school on your sports day.”

FIFTY-FOUR

Dodging dilemma

Wilfred Snipes was given a choice. Uphold your journalistic ethics or rat on a drinking pal. When it came to the crunch he didn't need much persuasion to forget his ethics rather than have boiling tea poured on his toes. His toes were more valuable than Benny's skin. He had left the meeting with the warning that he might enjoy their hospitality a second time if he forewarned Benny. He decided to keep well out of Benny's way.

Benny tried phoning him at the newspaper office only to be told Mr Snipes was out and would phone back. After several calls it occurred to Benny that his pal Wilfred was avoiding him. It further crossed his mind that there might be a reason, and the reason could possibly be connected with his boss, Froggie.

He phoned Froggie.

"Benny? What's up with you? Why haven't you pitched up?"

"Can't make it Boss," Benny croaked hoarsely. "I feel like I'm near to cashing in."

"You holding out on me?"

"Swear on the Bible, Boss; I feel like a gonner with this throat."

"Yeah, you'll have me in tears. We're behind schedule so you better be here tomorrow, throat or not."

Benny increased his efforts to contact Snipes. Eventually he unearthed him lurking in a pub. Snipes saw him coming and quickly downed the last of his beer.

"Oh, it's you Benny. You've caught me at the wrong time. I'm late for an appointment."

“Hey, hold it there. I’ve been trying to get hold of you.”

“Not now Benny; I’m on my way out.”

“This is important, Wilfred. I’ve got to talk to you.”

“What’s there to talk about?”

“Plenty. Sit down Wilfred.”

Wilfred sat down reluctantly.

“So what’s wrong? I told you to keep away from me. We shouldn’t be seen together.”

“Wilfred, I think they are on to me.”

“C’mon. What makes you think that? There’s no way they could connect you with me.”

“Maybe, maybe not... You wouldn’t snitch on me would you Wilfred? Why do I get this feeling about you?”

“You re crazy, Benny. Why would I do that to a pal?”

Benny was a little reassured. “You swear I’ve got nothing to worry about?”

“Of course, Benny. You can trust me.”

Rat was getting impatient. He phoned Froggie.

“What’s going on Froggie? Have you got the snitcher?”

“He didn’t show up. Phoned in sick. Maybe he’s had a tip-off.”

Rat was unhappy. “This can’t wait, Froggie, you know that. The Mister has been on to me.”

“So what can I do? He’s not here and I don’t know where he’s at.”

Rat thought a moment. “Okay, don’t worry Froggie. I’ll handle it from this end. I’ll get some of my boys onto it.”

Reggie was taking it easy at home, when he was roused by a banging on the front door. He slipped the emergency chain into its slot and opened the door enough to see two shaven headed and tattooed individuals.

“Yes, what do you want? We don’t need insurance.”

“We’re looking for Benny. He may need insurance though,” said one of them. The other one sniggered.

“You won’t find him here. You’ve got the wrong house.”

“So you say. We think different. Mind if we come in and take a look?”

“Forget it. You can’t come in. This is a private residence.”

“You know what the big bad wolf said to the pig?” said the one with rings in his ears, who fancied himself as a comic.

Reggie started to close the door, but was foiled by a boot wedged in the gap.

“Do yourself a favour and don’t cause problems, chummy.”

Reggie made a dash for the telephone but when he reached it he heard splintering wood as the security chain gave way. The telephone was removed from his ear.

“No so fast chummy,” Earrings scolded. “This is not the way to treat friends.”

Reggie opened his mouth to protest but no sound came out.

“Okay, let’s start in the bedrooms,” said Tattoo, frog-marching Reggie in front of him.

"I dunno what you gents want but you won't find anyone called Benny here," said Reggie regaining his voice.

"Well we'll see about that."

They searched built-in cupboards, under beds, the broom cupboard. When they got to the parents' room they suspected one of them could be Benny in disguise. Then they hit pay dirt when in another room they hauled a battered suitcase from under a bed. Inside, hidden at the bottom was Benny's identification card.

"Look what we have here," Earrings crowed. "So if this isn't Benny is it his twin brother? Are they so identical they even have the same name?"

"I dunno how that got there," said Reggie. "Maybe it was left at my wife's shop by mistake and she brought it home."

"Yeah and maybe a little bird dropped it through the window by mistake. Anyway we'll hang on to this so we can personally give it to the rightful owner. And make no mistake, we will be watching to see if the rightful owner comes here to claim it."

Connie was dropped off after work by a friend. She stopped at the front door, taking in the damaged woodwork. She called Reggie, who tottered from the bedroom, still shaken from his encounter with Tattoo and Earrings.

"What have you done now, Reggie? Why have you smashed the front door?"

"I've told you, Connie, we must get rid of that sponging brother of yours. And now I've just been beaten up by

two thugs who came here looking for Benny. Your mother is still in shock. I think they beat her up too.”

Connie rushed to her aged parents’ room, to find her mother cowering under the bedclothes.

“It’s Reggie,” she quavered. “He invited two of his drunken friends here and without even knocking they came in and started beating us and searching for something to steal. I think my pearl necklace is missing.”

“You hear that Reggie? Who are these drunks you invited here?”

“I told you. They were thugs looking for Benny.”

Connie didn’t know whom to believe. They were interrupted by the phone ringing. It was Benny.

“Benny! We’ve had people looking for you. Reggie says they smashed open the front door and beat him up. They have stolen Mom’s pearl necklace.”

There was silence at the other end of the line as Benny digested the news.

“Do you hear me Benny?”

“Okay, I hear you. There is more to this than you think.”

“What do you mean Benny?”

“I’m in trouble, Connie. I’ve got people after me who want to do me in.”

“Who could want to harm you Benny?”

“Maybe that same lot who broke in. If they come back, you know nothing about me. Tell them I left months ago and you don’t know where I’m at... Sorry, got to go now. Something’s come up.” The line went dead.

At the other end of it Benny switched off his phone and went to the door, where someone was tapping. He was in a tacky room in a cheap back street hotel. He asked who was knocking.

“Room service. Gotta message for you from the bar.”

“Who from?”

“Gent named Snipes.”

“So what is the message?”

“Wants you to meet him in the bar. He’s got some news.”

“Okay. Tell him I’ll be down.”

Benny grabbed his phone, dialled the Daily Flash, and asked to speak to Mr Snipes, giving his name as “a contact”.

“Yeah, who’s that,” asked Snipes.

“It’s Benny.”

“Look Benny I’m in the middle of something. I’ll get back to you.”

“Wilfred, listen to me. You got me into this. You’ve got to help me out.”

“Benny, like I told you, you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said. But now I know they’re looking for me. They beat my brother in law up when he told them I wasn’t at home.”

“So where are you, Benny?”

“At a dump called the Pink Moon. I just got a message, says you are downstairs in the bar and want to meet me there.”

“Well it’s not me. I’m here at the office.”

“Exactly, Wilfred. They’re on to me. You’ve got to help me get out of here.”

“I don’t know what I can do.”

“You’re in on this too, Wilfred. They think you tipped me off. So they are out to get you as well.”

Snipes was suddenly reminded of his blistered toes, which were still bothering him.

“Alright Benny get out of there and wait in front out of sight. I’ll try to wrangle a staff car.”

FIFTY-FIVE

Hit-men horrors

Froggie was waiting in the bar downstairs. He called the waiter hovering nearby.

“Did you deliver the message, like I told you?”

“Sure I did — told him Mr Snipes wants to see him in the bar,. He said okay, he’ll be down.”

“Did you see him.”

“No Sir, he kept the door closed.”

“That was more than twenty minutes ago. What’s keeping him?”

“Dunno Sir. Want me to go up again?”

“Naw, I’ll go up there myself. You got a key to his room?”

“No Sir, I got no key. Only the desk clerk has spares. But he won’t just hand them out to anybody. That’s the rules.”

“Yeah? Maybe he’ll break them.”

The desk clerk was quick to bend the rules when a hundred note was part of the deal.

Froggy stopped at the door to room twenty-seven and listened. Then he flicked open the lock and burst in, hoping to catch Benny unawares. He was confronted by an empty room. He noticed one of the windows was open. Froggie cursed aloud and fumbled for his phone

“Rat? I got bad news. The bird has flown. We did like you said, but he must have got wise.”

“How about his car? I told you to have someone watch his car.”

“Car’s still parked in front. Rob was there and he says nobody went near it. He didn’t come out the front, so he must have got out through a window.”

“Have the boys search round there. He may be hiding out nearby. The Mister is going to be unhappy if we don’t find him. He knows too much about us.”

Wilfred cruised slowly past the Pink Moon in one of the Daily Flash pool cars and noticed Benny’s hatchback parked in front, with a person in a leather jacket lurking nearby, but no sign of Benny himself. He went past and was about to give up and leave Benny to his fate when a furtive figure came out the shadows. He drew up long enough for Benny to open the passenger door and jump in.

“Why so long, Wilfred? I’ve been hiding there more than half an hour. I thought you had let me down.”

“I came as quickly as I could. This place is difficult to find... So where to now?”

“First I’ve got to pick up my stuff. Then it looks like I’ve got to get out of town. I know a pal who’s got a beach cottage where I can hide out. Later the heat may cool off.”

“Is it safe to go back to your place?”

“I’ll phone first.”

Connie was debating whether or not to phone the police. But a search of the parents’ room had turned up the missing pearls and the damage to the front door was not serious, so calling in the law would be more trouble than it was worth, she thought. The uninvited guests had not called again. As for Benny, she decided, he must sort

out his own problems. She wanted no part of them. She was not pleased when he phoned.

“Keep away from here, Benny. It’s not safe for you, or us. Mom is still not over the shock.”

“Yeah but I’ve got to collect my kit.”

“Are you in your car?”

“I had to leave it outside the hotel. I’ve got a lift with a friend.”

“Look Benny, I don’t know what sort of troubles you are in, and I don’t want to know. Just don’t bring them here.”

“Okay; I’m moving out anyway. These people haven’t shown up again, so it should be safe enough.”

“That I don’t know, Benny. Could be they are not far away.”

“Don’t worry, I will be in and out of there quick.”

Reluctantly Connie agreed to pack up his goods and leave them outside the front door for him to collect while Wilfred parked in the street. A fused outside security light had not been fixed, so there were patches of shadow along the driveway, enough to make Benny nervous as he approached the house. As promised the bags were ready for him on the patio. He picked them up and started back up the driveway. Near the top he put them down so he could open the driveway gate. He froze when he was greeted by a voice from the shadows wishing him good evening.

“Are you battling with those bags, Benny? We would be pleased to lend you a helping hand. That’s what friends are for.”

The tattooed owner of the voice stepped out from the shadows, followed by his ear-ringed companion.

“What a surprise, Benny. We were beginning to think we were waiting here for nothing. And now here you are, bags and all,” said Earrings.

“I don’t know you people. Who are you?”

“Let’s just say we are friends of a friend.”

Benny picked up his luggage and started to open the gate.

“Don’t be like that Benny.” Tattoo sounded hurt. “We are just starting to get acquainted and now you want to rush off. At least let us help you with your togs.”

Without waiting for an answer Earrings grabbed a couple of the bags, while Tattoo slipped through the gate and approached the car. Wilfred, seeing the shaven headed character heading towards him, tried to start the motor, hoping to get away from a situation he had feared all along but, before he could, a tattooed hand snaked through the window and snatched the ignition keys.

“Don’t be selfish, chummy. Can’t you see me and my pal need a lift?”

Earrings and Benny, with the luggage, reached the car. “Hey, we are in luck,” Tattoo called. “This kind-hearted gent wants to give us a ride. It’s an offer too good to miss.”

“Yeah, it would be bad manners to refuse,” Earrings agreed, loading Benny’s bags onto the back seat. Wilfred thought of resisting, but noticed that both free-loaders wore studded knuckle-dusters clipped to their belts, and Tattoo wielded an old fashioned cut-throat razor after

seating himself next to Wilfred. "I always carry this in case I run short of razor blades," he said casually.

Benny was persuaded to take a seat in the back, squeezed against the luggage near the door, and Earrings made himself comfortable next to the other door. Following Tattoo's directions Wilfred drove until they reached a wooded area, and they stopped in front of a farm house. An ancient man in a creased shirt and baggy trousers shuffled to answer the front door.

"Why you so late?" he grumbled. "Well come in. I'll cut you some sandwiches. That's all I got. But Mister said I must get in a stash of hard tack. There's plenty of it there in the cupboard, glasses too."

They sat on some lumpy armchairs and Tattoo brought out the liquor so thoughtfully provided by the enigmatic Mister, while the ancient man, presumably a caretaker, shuffled off to the kitchen.

"Well help yourselves gents," said Tattoo, setting bottles and glasses out on a table. "We could all do with some refreshment after a hard day. Looks like Mister has done us proud. There's enough of the stuff there to drown an army."

They helped themselves liberally.

"So, now we're here what's the story?" Wilfred asked. "Did you bring us just for the free booze?"

"We don't like to drink alone," said Tattoo. "We like to please our guests."

"So what's next?" Benny wanted to know. "We have our drinks on you, then we wave goodbye?"

“It’s not that simple, chummy,” Earrings said. “You wouldn’t like to leave us stranded here without transport?”

Tattoo noticed Wilfred’s glass was empty. “Don’t be shy Mr Snippet. It’s on the house, so fill up and enjoy. You too Benny.”

Free booze was always a temptation to Benny. And Wilfred’s philosophy was if it’s on tap, turn the tap on. The other two were equally partial to something at someone else’s expense. The caretaker shuffled in with the sandwiches, and also availed himself of the liquid refreshments. Their combined onslaught soon demolished the sandwiches, but there was plenty of the more potent stuff left. Benny was the first to fall under its influence, followed by Snipes. The other two seemed immune. From time to time Tattoo would leave the increasingly jolly company to talk on his phone out of earshot.

After an hour of steady consumption both Wilfred and Benny were not the better for wear. The elderly caretaker staggered rather than shuffled to bed but the other two somehow seemed less affected.

“Benny, chummy, drink up,” Earrings scolded. “You’ve had hardly enough to fill a thimble. We don’t want all this to go to waste.” He filled Benny’s empty glass with neat vodka.

“Thanksh pal,” Benny mumbled and downed the contents. Earrings obligingly refilled the glass. Wilfred was given similar encouragement by Tattoo.

“You’re a good palsh,” said Benny as he finished a glass of pure gin. He tried to stand up, but instead slid to the floor.

“Looks like he’s passed out,” observed Earrings.
“How’s his pal doing?”

“Shouldn’t be long.”

Tattoo dialled Froggie. “Our pals have hit the rug. You can be on you way with the transport. Meet us at the site. We haven’t got much time. It’s due in about forty five minutes.”

“Okay I’ll be there.”

They hauled the sleeping Benny and Wilfred out and deposited them in the back of Wilfred’s car.

“Keep your gloves on,” Tattoo cautioned. “We don’t want to leave prints all over the place.”

It was a fairly short trip to the site, along a dusty country road, deserted at that time of night. They slowed near a green flashing light and Tattoo eased the front of the car over the tracks.

“You think this is far enough?” Earrings objected.

“It’s just enough to scare the hell out of them for ever.”

“Maybe it’s better to make a better job of it. They could talk.”

“Trust me they won’t. Let’s get on with making it look right. Both of them in the front. Benny in the passenger seat, Snitcher driving. A couple of half jacks on the back seat. Leave the luggage where it is, like they were on a trip somewhere when the car stalled. Throw in his ID so they know who it is.”

They left the car where it was and retreated to the shelter of some trees to await Froggie’s arrival with the transport. Time was running out, then, just as the green light turned red, Froggie’s van arrived in a cloud of dust.

“You cut it fine, Froggie,” said Tattoo. “But you’re just in time to see the fireworks.”

Not far off they heard the blare of a locomotive’s horn.

FIFTY-SIX

Seafaring solution

Shawn, suspecting his partner Andy had been stealing his customers, decided to sell his share of their hairdressing salon. But he had mounting debts and a shrinking income. Creditors were demanding payment, so to solve his problems he began selling his stock on the black market, and he used the proceeds to build up a personal slush fund as insurance.

His friend Mark was surprised to learn of this informal insurance, which, Shawn told him, was kept in a safe and amounted to “a number of grand”.

“It’s quite legal,” Shawn argued. “After all it’s my own stock I’ve been selling. With all these complications perhaps it’s best not to sell the business at all. Just let Andy take over the whole thing.”

“Do you think Andy will agree to taking over your share?”

“He won’t have a choice,” said Shawn.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we won’t be here.”

Rita, Shawn’s agent, had received a disturbing call from Andy, who told her Shawn’s salon was in danger of having the electricity cut off, due to non-payment. This was alarming. Even more alarming was that Shawn could not be contacted.

She paid a visit to Andy.

“Andy, I must talk to you about Shawn’s salon.”

“Why don’t you talk to Shawn himself?”

“I would, but I can’t get hold of him. He’s hardly ever at his salon. His assistant, Megan, is practically running the business on her own.”

“I have nothing to do with Shawn. If he was eaten by a lion I wouldn’t know about it.”

“What I’m worried about, Andy, is the electricity bill.”

“Yes, and so am I, as I told you,” Andy agreed. “I hoped you could persuade him to do something about it.”

“But Shawn’s mistakes could affect you too, Andy. If I can’t find a buyer you might have to take over his salon.”

“I would refuse. I would just let it close down and the creditors could sell the remaining assets.”

“Aren’t you still partners legally?”

“Legally? — I don’t care about that. We have been running our salons separately for ages. I can’t be expected to be responsible for what Shawn does.”

“Think of it this way, Andy. Wouldn’t it be better to let Shawn’s salon stay open in the meantime, while everything is being sorted out. Couldn’t you pay the electricity bill for now and claim it back later? And what about Shawn’s staff?”

Andy considered this. He had a good relationship with, Shawn’s staff. He wouldn’t like them to join the army of the unemployed. At length he was persuaded it would be in the best interests of everyone if he settled Shawn’s electricity account himself.

Shawn had a busy afternoon during which he visited three cruise ship recruitment agencies. Two of them, Luxury Services and Five Star Guarantee, were sure they could place a chef and a hairdresser, but they would have

to go through a lengthy application and interview process. But one of them, Green Trust, was more promising.

Shawn was at first unimpressed when he arrived at their offices, where a not particularly obliging receptionist was talking on the phone and motioned him to take a seat while she finished her conversation. Eventually she asked Shawn how she could help.

“It’s to do with a job application.”

The receptionist frowned. “Do you have an appointment, Mr ...?”

“Mr Fairweather. Well, not exactly, but I have heard it’s possible to come in without one in certain cases.”

“Oh, I’m not sure about that. What sort of cases?”

“I have heard through a friend that the Sea Empress is docking this week and they are short of personnel.”

“Well that may be so, Mr Fairweather. But we don’t approve people until they have gone through registration and been interviewed.”

“Yes, of course I understand that. But it is possible to short circuit the process in an emergency.”

“Well, I don’t know. I’ll find out from Mr Benningfield. It is unusual though.”

Mr Benningfield was also doubtful, but agreed to see Shawn in his office.

“I understand you have heard that we can speed up your approval, Mr Fairweather. How did you come by that information?”

“Well, I don’t want to put my friend in a awkward position. He mentioned that a special fee would apply, in cases where there was an urgent need for staff.”

Mr Benningfield pursed his lips and regarded Shawn speculatively.

“A special fee? Well, that could work out expensive, Mr Fairweather. I’m not saying it can be done. Obviously you would have to meet certain requirements. Such as experience in the job you apply for and first of all a valid passport.”

“Before we go any further, Mr Benningfield, I should mention that there are two of us who would be applying.”

“Two of you? That would increase the special fee considerably, I’m afraid. What sort of positions would you be looking for?”

“First of all we both have valid passports. I am a qualified hair stylist. I have owned and run my own boutique, which I have recently sold. My friend Mark Buttery is a chef with many years’ experience.”

“That sounds satisfactory. Of course we would need CVs and documentation. Provided you can afford the special fees, I think we could accommodate you. We have a ship docking this week. Would you be able to leave at such short notice?”

Shawn assured him that they would be.

“That’s fine, Mr Fairweather. But of course, nothing can be done until we receive the fees. How soon can you arrange that?”

“That would depend on how much it is.”

“I’m afraid we couldn’t charge less than five thousand each.”

Shawn looked dismayed. “Do you think we could negotiate on that?”

“Perhaps we could allow a discount if the amount was paid in cash. I might be prepared to allow ten percent, if you come up with the money by tomorrow.”

“Yes that can be done. But I must have a guarantee of a refund if we are not accommodated.”

“Certainly, but there is no risk of that.”

“Pack up! We’re all set to go,” Shawn announced when he got back to the flat.

“What do you mean?” Mark asked.

“I mean I’ve got us jobs on a cruise liner called the Sea Empress, which docks here this week. They need a hair stylist and a chef. I’ve arranged everything with a recruitment agent called Green Trust.”

“Hey, hang on Shawn. We can’t up and off at such short notice. We’ve got to give the flat agents notice and I’ve got to give notice at my job,”

“Why bother? Just leave a note that you’ve decided to quit. You’ve had your pay for last month, and you don’t have pension benefits. So what have you got to lose?”

“What about our furniture and all the rest of our stuff?”

“Don’t worry about it Mark. The furniture is on HP and it’s a hired car, so they can repossess it. All we need is clothes and small items we can take with us, like laptops, phones and cameras.”

“What do we do for cash?”

“Like I told you, I’ve got plenty. I’ve opened card accounts, a couple of foreign accounts, bought traveller’s cheques and converted local cash into dollars. They’ve got wi-fi on board ship so I will be able to use internet

banking with our laptops or phones. Plus of course we will be earning on board.”

“How about the salon?”

“Well that will be Andy’s headache. It’s more or less cleaned out. All that’s left are fixtures and fittings. Andy is welcome to them and he’s also welcome to the creditors.”

FIFTY-SEVEN

Hectoring Hortense

After the shock of seeing her entry in the Baking Queen competition damaged, Hortense Ogilvy had to be driven home by the Pastor's wife to recover. What was even more upsetting was that the crown had been awarded in her absence to her rival, Prudence.

Hortense regarded herself as an authority on confectionery but also liked to have a role in whatever activity church organisers arranged. After the baking competition the next event on the calendar was the Tableau, held each year.

Alice Thornton usually had a minor role in the crucifix scene, as one of the mourners round the cross, veiled and dressed in robes. Most of the costumes were kept in storage for reuse. Alice decided she was tired of the old costume and bought some gauzy material to make a new one.

She brought out her sewing machine and was hemming one side of the veil when Karen, hearing the unusual activity, peered round the door.

"Are you making a new dress for me, Mom?"

"It's for the church. You have enough dresses already, Karen. It's for the Tableau."

"Oh... Couldn't I also be in it? I could be one of the children round the manger."

"I suppose you could. I would have to find out. But do you think you could stand for a long time without moving?"

When she inquired, the Pastor's wife, Patsy Wellbetrothed, wasn't sure. "We could do with one or two more. But we are short of costumes."

"I could make one for her," Alice suggested.

"I'll bear that in mind when I talk to Pastor... By the way, Hortense Ogilvy is also interested. Her sister's daughter loves theatricals, and she wants to be in it. But in any case I don't think Hortense could provide a costume."

"After all I have done for the church it is a disgrace that I should be expected to pay for one," Hortense complained when Patsy explained that they were short of costumes. She suggested Patsy should appeal to the Women's Guild for someone to volunteer to make one for her.

Patsy didn't think anyone would be willing. "You know how busy we all are at this time of the year. Perhaps a dressmaker could do it. We have patterns."

"But I would have to pay for that! I couldn't afford it."

"Well, Hortense, I don't know what to suggest. Why don't you ask around yourself?"

"Oh, I could never demean myself by asking favours. I would prefer it if you could put in a word for me, Patsy. You have more influence."

"I'll see what I can do."

"I had an unusual request from the Pastor's wife," Alice mentioned to Winston that evening "I think I told you, Karen would like to be in the church Tableau. Patsy said she would be welcome, but I would have to provide the

costume. As a special favour she asked me if I could also make a dress for Hortense's niece, who wants to be in it too."

"Why can't she make it herself?"

"She would rather have someone volunteer to make it for her. She doesn't have a machine."

"You refused, of course?"

"Well I don't know what to do. I don't want to offend Patsy. But I'm not all that fond of Hortense. She is so pushy."

Patsy asked, when she saw Alice next day: "Will you be able to help Hortense, Alice? She is anxious to know."

"It will be difficult for me. As you know I am already making a new veil and robe for myself, and I'm shopping around for material for Karen's costume."

"I wonder if you would reconsider, if the church provides the material for the costume?"

"Well, that would help, of course. Can I let you know? I'll have to see if I can find the time."

"We would be so grateful. Can I get the measurements in the meantime and choose a pattern?"

Before any further discussion the measurements and patterns were sent to 48 Crown Crescent and soon afterwards the material as well.

"What's all this?" Winston asked, noticing all the dressmaking materials on the dining room table. "Are you helping that woman out, after all?"

"It's Patsy. Before I could even agree, they bought all this stuff and sent it here."

“I’m pleased someone has been found to make a costume for my niece,” Hortense said approvingly. “But I do hope it is a competent person. Like me, my niece is fastidious about her clothes.”

“You can thank Alice Thornton, who kindly offered to help.”

“Oh... Well I hope she is a better seamstress than baker. Quite frankly, Patsy, I was not impressed with that blue cake. I was surprised to learn that the judge gave her a special award.”

“Well, anyway, I have sent her a pattern that I chose myself. And she has your niece’s measurements.”

“I do think, Patsy, that you should have left the choice of pattern to me. I do sincerely hope that your choice will not disappoint me.”

“Don’t expect too much, Hortense. The dresses are meant to reflect the way they dressed in biblical times.”

“Anyway, I will decide to give my approval or disapproval when I see the finished article. I hope Mrs Thornton will not take too long. My niece is anxious to try it on.”

FIFTY-EIGHT

Dressmaking dilemma

Alice battled to finish her dressmaking in time for the church Tableau. Her own robe and veil were straightforward and didn't need much cutting out. The pattern Patsy Wellbetrothed had chosen for Hortense's niece was more complicated and to get a professional looking finish it was best to use an over-locking machine — something Alice lacked.

Alice was relieved when she managed to complete the costumes, but at the expense of working on her own robe. She duly handed Hortense's order to Patsy.

When she got it Hortense cast a critical eye over it, after unwrapping the parcel. "Why did she take so long. Patsy? Surely such a simple costume could have been made in an hour or so?"

"Alice also had other dresses to make. I thought she did very well, considering."

Hortense held the costume up. She frowned. "No, Patsy, this will never do. I expected something more becoming."

"It was made according to the pattern she was given."

"Well then it was a mistake," Hortense snapped. "This is very disappointing. I was hoping to show it to my niece today. It's far too plain. It will have to be redone. I want my niece to look smart, not like some peasant."

"I'm sorry, Hortense, there's not enough material to make another dress."

"I can't have my niece in that garment. It would reflect badly on me too. Some more will have to be bought."

Patsy was doubtful. "I don't think Pastor would agree to using church funds for more material. And I'm not sure Alice could make another one."

"That would be unfortunate. I may well have to withdraw my kind offer altogether, unless some compromise can be made. I know my niece would suffer, but that can't be helped."

Patsy looked disappointed. "I'll have to ask Pastor."

Pastor Wellbetrothed was at a loss. Church funds should not be squandered at the whim of a single parishioner. But as a man of God he strove to avoid any conflict among his flock. Hortense Ogilvy, for example, was one of the crosses he had to bear. His first thought was to forbid the frivolous wastage of funds. But the downside would be having to deal with a disgruntled church member.

"Hortense is so demanding," Patsy said.

"Yes I know. She should not get preferential treatment. But on the other hand..."

"Even if we buy more material, I don't know who would make the dress. We can't expect Alice to do it."

"Surely there is someone else?"

"Hortense is not popular, poor dear. No-one wants to help."

"Is there any way we could prevail upon Mrs Thornton?"

"I don't think so. Understandably, she is upset."

"Yes, quite so. Perhaps it would help if I spoke to her personally."

Alice was surprised at the unexpected visit by Pastor Wellbetrothed, as she was putting the final touches to her new robe and veil.

“I hope I am not interrupting your work, Mrs Thornton.

“No, not at all, Pastor. Can I offer you a cup of tea?”

The Pastor said he would be delighted. He examined the work in progress while she was busy in the kitchen.

“I was admiring your new robe,” he said when she came back with the tea. “Do you do a lot of sewing?”

“No, not really.” (They sat down and she busied herself pouring.) “Only when the need arises.”

“I was sorry to hear about the misunderstanding with Mrs Ogilvy. Very unfortunate, but these things happen. It must have been upsetting for you Mrs Thornton, or may I call you Alice?”

“Well, it was. But it can’t be helped.”

“It was very kind of you to help out. You showed true Christian spirit. And good deeds are not forgotten by Our Lord. Remember the parable of the Samaritan.”

“Well I do like to help where possible.”

“Of course the little problem Mrs Ogilvy had still remains. Unfortunately it’s a case of back to square one, Alice. But it is sad that young Cynthia may miss out through not having a costume.”

“I haven’t heard about that. Who is Cynthia, may I ask?”

“Why, she is the girl you made the dress for – Mrs Ogilvy’s niece.”

“Can’t she get another one?”

“Ah, that is the difficulty, Alice. For some reason no-one is prepared to help Hortense. So it looks as though Cynthia will not be taking part. Very disappointing for a young girl.”

“Yes, I suppose it would be,” Alice said, thinking of how Karen would feel.

“Well, it can’t be helped. We all have to learn to get over disappointments. However we will pray that the Lord will help us find someone to help Cynthia.”

Alice hesitated. “Well, maybe...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it Alice. You have already done enough.”

“Oh, I suppose if the poor girl is going to be disappointed, I will have to help out.”

“Well you are a true Christian, Alice and an example to all those who were reluctant to come forward. I think this gesture of yours could well be mentioned in my next sermon.”

“Oh no, Pastor. That would embarrass me. I am only too pleased to help the poor girl – Cynthia you said her name is?”

“Yes, Cynthia – Cynthia Blinkinsop. Your daughter might know her.”

FIFTY-NINE

Shifty Shawn

"What's happened to Shawn?" asked Megan, Shawn's assistant. "He always comes in on a Friday to cash up, do the banking and pay the staff."

Mrs Henshaw, the receptionist, frowned. "I've heard nothing from Shawn since he was last in, days ago."

"Shawn expects me to take care of everything," Megan complained. "He won't tell us what's going on. All he is interested in is taking away most of the cash every week."

"The only people who might know where he is are his attorney and Rita, the estate agent," said Mrs Henshaw. "I've tried his phone and it goes to voice mail. He doesn't phone back."

"Hasn't anyone been to his flat?" Megan asked.

"Rita has tried but nobody answers. He shares it with a friend, so it's strange that neither of them is there."

When Andy was informed he said he wanted nothing to do with Shawn's affairs. He had already been forced to settle the electricity account to prevent the salon being cut off. And now there was a new crisis. The staff had not been paid.

Mrs Henshaw suggested they should be paid out of the week's cash takings, which she kept in a safe under the counter. But she was not sure of the legal position.

After some difficulty Mrs Henshaw was put through to Mr McGruff.

"I'm phoning in connection with one of your clients, Mr Fairweather."

"In what connection, Madam?"

“Mr Fairweather has disappeared. He hasn’t been at the salon for a week.”

“Haven’t you phoned him, or called at his home?”

“We have, but he can’t be reached. What I’m phoning about is to do with paying the staff. I have enough cash in our safe to pay them.”

“You could do so if you are authorised by Mr Fairweather’s partner. If Mr Fairweather has in fact disappeared, which I hope is not the case, then a very serious situation will result. Will you please ask Mr Fulton to keep me informed.”

“I hate lawyers,” Andy complained. “He wants to drag me into Shawn’s mess.”

“All you have to say is yes, Andy. It doesn’t have to be in writing, and then I can go ahead and pay them.”

“Oh, alright, then do it, if it makes everyone happy.”

It was decided to wait a while before reporting to the police, in case Shawn turned up. In the meantime, Rita learned from Andy that Shawn’s companion, Mark Buttery, worked at a nearby restaurant, The Green Fig Leaf. She called round and asked to see the manager, a slim person in his thirties, who wore a bow tie.

“Mark Buttery? Yes, he worked here,” he confirmed.

“How do you mean ‘worked?’” she asked.

“I mean he did but doesn’t anymore.”

“How long ago did he leave?”

“Not long. Less than a week. No notice. Here one day, gone the next. Just left a note. I’m quitting. No reason given.”

“He lives in a block of flats near here, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, Northdale Mansions. Lives with a friend.”

“Have you been there to ask after him?”

“Why should I? He goes, good luck to him. I should care.”

Rita stopped by at the flats, and this time saw the caretaker, a Mrs Norton, who lived in one of the apartments. She came to the door, a shabbily dressed woman with her hair in a net.

“Those two in twenty-seven? Now you’re asking. I haven’t seen them in a week. Strange thing, their car is still in the parking lot. Yet they don’t seem to be in their flat. The lights are never on.”

“Do you have a key? Could we have a look inside?”

“Oh, I don’t think I could allow that. All their furniture is there, so they haven’t moved out. They’ve got to give notice before leaving anyway.”

Rita told Mrs Henshaw what she had found out. “There is something very odd going on, Adele. They have been away from their flat for over a week. Yet their car is in the parking lot and hasn’t been used.”

“Perhaps they left by air and got a lift to the airport.”

“I thought of that. I checked with the booking office and nobody with their names has bought tickets. I also checked with the bus and train offices.”

“Did you go inside the apartment?”

“The caretaker wouldn’t let me in.”

Mrs Henshaw’s eyes widened. “Could they still be in there? Perhaps unconscious?”

“I don’t think so. Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

They waited another week before reporting Shawn's disappearance, but the police were lukewarm. A sergeant took a statement and Shawn and Mark were listed as missing persons. They could not search Shawn's flat without a court order, but a constable was sent to investigate. He reported that the flat appeared to be empty and there was no reason to suspect any sort of foul play.

Shawn and Mark's whereabouts stayed a mystery. The police followed the usual procedures to trace them, but missing adults with no family ties were not a police priority. Neither of them had police records, no photographs could be found and Shawn had cunningly closed his bank accounts.

The owners of the Shawn's flat were forced to act when the rent was overdue. They tried to sell the furniture and appliances to cover their losses but found Shawn had bought them with a small deposit and owed the balance under hire purchase contracts. They were returned to the sellers. Shawn's expensive German car was taking up space in the undercover parking garage. The owners were traced but it turned out to be a hired car and Shawn owed a large sum for mileage.

Andy tried to ignore the chaos in Shawn's salon but found himself being drawn in. Somehow the creditors got wind of Shawn's disappearance. Shawn had opened his accounts in the name of, Shawn's Beauty Boutique, but creditors clamoured at Mrs Henshaw's desk asking to speak to the owner, who they assumed was Andy. Her phone rang incessantly, and callers blamed her for trying to stall them. Megan was also often accosted by anxious Reps, which upset clients waiting to have their hair done.

Hairdressing supplies were running low and the only way they could manage was for Andy to order from his accounts to help them out.

Much as he disliked lawyers, Andy was forced to visit Mr McGruff once again.

SIXTY

Legal lunacy

Mr McGruff prepared himself for Andy's visit by taking an extra dose of antacid tablets. He had the Chic'n Slick file on his desk when Andy was shown in.

"Ah, Mr Fulton. I was disturbed to learn of your partner's disappearance."

"Well you needn't be," Andy said. "I'm quite happy he has disappeared."

"Yes, I can understand that. However what concerns us here is how it affects your salon."

"All I want is to get on with my own business. I don't care what happens to Shawn's salon."

Mr McGruff sighed. "As I have explained there are legal consequences that can't simply be ignored. What complicates the case is that Mr Fairweather has left a trail of debts. We will have to establish who is to be held responsible for settling them."

"Shawn, of course. Who else?"

"It's not as simple as that. You are still bound by the partnership agreement. It has never been dissolved."

"I dissolved it when I tore it up. Both of us agreed to go our own ways. Shawn took his customers and equipment and staff, I took mine and we divided the shop. I kept the original name Chic'n Slick and Shawn called his Shawn's Boutique."

"Most inadvisable. And it has led to the present situation. Mr Fairweather's creditors will be looking at legal ways to recover their money."

“I’ll simply ignore the whole thing. The creditors can sell Shawn’s business and get their money.”

“Unfortunately that can’t be done. Shawn’s salon is still part of Chic’n Slick, which is a registered and fully licensed boutique owned jointly by the partnership, that is you and, er, Shawn, as you call him. Shawn cannot just set up a new business called Shawn’s Boutique without registering it and securing the appropriate licences. So in fact Shawn’s business exists in name only and he was trading as an unlicensed boutique, which is unlawful.”

“Well that was Shawn’s mistake, not mine.”

“Perhaps. But you were party to allowing him to operate on the partnership’s property.”

“Shawn did it on his own.”

“You could argue that in your defence, certainly. However Shawn opened accounts in the name of Shawn’s Beauty Boutique, which does not exist. He owes money on these accounts”

“Well, that’s not my fault.”

“The problem here is that the creditors may hold Shawn personally liable. And Shawn is a member of your partnership.”

“They can’t claim on my business.”

Mr McGruff sighed. “Ah, Mr Fulton, that is where your understanding of the position is faulty. It is not your business. The business is owned by a registered entity called Chic’n Slick, which is a jointly owned partnership.”

“Well I call it my business anyway.”

“The matter could be regarded in two layers. Firstly, the creditors may try to hold the partnership liable. And

secondly, Shawn's disappearance may mean the partnership has to be dissolved."

"I don't care for all this lawyer talk."

"If the matter comes to litigation then you would have to care, Mr Fulton. You would have to abide by the court's decision whether you like it or not."

Andy stood up angrily. "I won't stand for it. I would rather go to jail."

"Sit down Mr Fulton," said Mr McGruff, popping another antacid tablet into his mouth. "I may be able to extricate you from this predicament. A lot depends on the terms of the agreement, a copy of which you so recklessly tore up. I will have to study it carefully and decide on a course of action."

Andy left in a chastened frame of mind. The spectre of being forced to sell the business was not one to induce peaceful sleep.

"Andy, you look distressed," said Mrs Henshaw when he arrived at the salon.

"Who wouldn't be after talking to a lawyer. I have just had a meeting with that shyster Mr McGruff. He seems to think I may have to sell my business to pay Shawn's debts. Can you imagine that Adele?"

"Surely not, Andy. Perhaps you misunderstood him."

"Well he's so full of lawyer-speak that it would take a genius to understand what he means."

"What did he say about Shawn?"

"He said Shawn could be arrested for fraud. That's if they find him."

“Well I hope it won’t affect the salon. At my age it would be hard to find another job.”

“Never fear, Adele. I will fight tooth and nail to keep the sharks away from the business... Anyway, for now we will just keep running both salons as normal.”

He phoned Rita.

“Rita? This is Andy. I have just come away from a most upsetting talk with that shark McGruff. My nerves are in tatters.”

“Take a grip on yourself, Andy. What has upset you?”

“Well, in the first place he says you can’t sell Shawn’s salon.”

“Yes, it seems to be the case. Shawn has not been honest with me. He made me think that he owned the salon and I took him at his word. Of course I should have checked with the authorities before signing the mandate.’

“I hope you are not out of pocket Rita.”

“I am. I have paid for advertising, I have spent on phone calls and travelling costs, as well as wasting my time. And now I have someone who is interested in buying Shawn’s salon but it looks as if I will lose the sale.”

“It’s a terrible shame Rita. I wonder if there isn’t some legal way to allow the sale anyway.”

“That I don’t know. Perhaps you could ask your Mr McGruff?”

“The creditors appointed a lawyer, who liaised with Mr McGruff, so they were no longer harassed by debt

collectors. Andy paid for supplies for both salons, and took charge of the finances. He wasted no time in removing Shawn's signage.

"We are managing so much better without Shawn, Adele," he confided to Mrs Henshaw. "Everything would be perfect if it wasn't for the mess he left."

Shawn's customers had no objection to switching to Andy, and in fact most of them were glad of the change. Andy had thoughts of removing the wall that divided the two salons. But the fragile bubble could burst and the legal beagles could swoop and demand that the business must be liquidated.

SIXTY-ONE

Dutiful detective

Rene, Connie's boss at the pharmacy, had noticed stock was disappearing and had called on the staff to be on the alert for a possible shoplifter. A small business like hers couldn't afford surveillance cameras. Another possibility was that a member of the staff was responsible. Connie had wrongly believed that the culprit was a colleague, Gloria Wickham, when she spotted Gloria slipping a packet into her grocery bag. The offending article, though, turned to be a bottle of balm for bunions, which Gloria had been entitled to take. An awkward situation for Connie was defused by the boss, who said it must have all been a misunderstanding.

After that there was a truce, though a frosty one. But the problem of cash not balancing with the stock inventory continued. Connie was still convinced that somehow Gloria was at the bottom of it and kept a secret watch on her. She saw that Gloria helped herself to any product on the shelves that even remotely could be connected with foot care.

"I've been watching Gloria," she told Reggie. "She really goes to town with free medicine. I'm thinking of keeping a list of the things she takes. Maybe her feet may have something to do with these stock losses we have been having."

"So now you are a detective."

"You may jeer, Reggie. She uses her feet as an excuse for all sorts of things."

"So what does she do with all this foot stuff? She can't eat it."

“I think it’s a family thing. She’s got sisters and aunts and cousins, all with foot aches. So they all come to her for hand-outs.”

“She’s got a foot-ache and you’ve got a schnozzle problem.”

“Let’s leave my nose out of this, Reggie.”

Connie was a chronic allergy sufferer. At home she had an array of hay-fever pills and sprays, mostly from the shelves of the Westside Pharmacy. She tried out all available decongestants, ionisers, dust busters, inhalers or whatever new anti-allergen that came onto the market. But she was certain that compared to Gloria’s mountainous stockpile (unless a lot of it had been handed out to relatives) her own was a mere molehill.

She kept all the till slips of whatever she took from the shelves of the pharmacy in case the rapid turnover of nasal medication was queried.

At the pharmacy she kept a close eye on Gloria, who helped herself to products from the shelves almost on a daily basis. Connie guessed that over a month the number of foot care products she used was enough to treat an army of bunion sufferers.

Rene held another staff meeting on the shop-lifting problem. After it was over without any headway being made, Connie asked Rene if she could have a word in private.

“Yes, Connie?”

“I just wanted to thank you again for helping out with medicines.”

“I like to help staff where there is a genuine need.”

"I keep a record of everything I take. Do you mind if I show you what I mean?"

She brought out a large envelope and emptied a pile of till slips on the counter. "This is proof of what I have taken. And here is the list of what they are and what they would have cost."

"Really, Connie it's not necessary for you to do this."

"I just want to show you I don't take advantage of your kindness, Rene"

"No need for it, Connie. I'm sure my staff can be trusted."

"But in a way I think it is necessary," Connie insisted. "It could be the reason the books don't balance."

Rene looked skeptical. "How could that be?"

"Well, supposing when I take medicines off the shelves I forget to put them through the till. Then there would be no record on the computer. And it would be the same as if a shoplifter had stolen them."

"Yes, that's true. But your till slips show you haven't done that."

"What about Gloria? It's possible she is forgetting to go through the till. Couldn't the accountant check?"

"I don't know about that," Rene said doubtfully.

"It wouldn't do any harm to check. Then at least we would know why the books aren't balancing."

Rene thought for a moment. "Alright Connie, we'll check up like you suggest. But don't mention all this to anyone else. I wouldn't like the staff to think I don't trust them."

SIXTY-TWO

Till tip-off

“A strange request,” said Robert Renishaw, the accountant. “Did Connie explain why she suggested we do this?”

“It’s to do with our stock losses. I allow a couple of the staff to take medicines from the shelves, free of charge, for their chronic ailments. It’s possible some of this stock has bypassed our system.”

“You mean it doesn’t get scanned by the cashiers?”

“It’s a possibility.”

Rene handed him the package with Connie’s collection of till slips in it. He went off with it and after investigating came back next day, looking puzzled.

“There is something strange, Rene. You said there are two staff members who get discounts?”

“Yes, Gloria and Connie.”

“Well, we compared all the till slips you gave us, and they checked out. But no one but Connie received a discount.”

“So what are you suggesting? Is there something wrong with our accounting system?”

“Good Heavens no. I suppose the only explanation must be that the items were taken, but not scanned at the till.”

She called Connie in later. “Good news, Connie. We have solved the missing stock problem. You were right. It never went through the till.”

Connie sniffed. "I thought as much. I can't say I'm surprised."

"Well now we can put the whole thing behind us. No need to make a big issue of it. I'll have to have a talk with Gloria, though."

"Of course I put everything through," Gloria insisted.

"Well the accountant says there's no record of you taking anything at all. In any case we will have to change the system. In future we will have to keep till slips so we can keep track of the stock."

"I hope this will apply to Connie as well."

"She has always kept hers. I have them on file."

Gloria grudgingly agreed.

Later it dawned on her that it must have been Connie who had cast suspicion on her. Why else would she have kept all her till slips and handed them to Rene?

She confronted Rene. "Well Gloria, I would rather not go into all that. Let's just say that everything has been sorted out and we can now move on."

"That's all very well, Rene, but I feel I have been put under a cloud. And I think it's all about my sore feet."

"That's laughable, Gloria. What has sore feet got to do with it?"

"To me it's no joke. Connie has been on about my sore feet for a long time. She seems to think I rest too much. She is using this misunderstanding about till slips to put me in a bad light. I expect an apology from her."

She said nothing more for the next few days, but gave Connie an icy glare whenever they were anywhere near

each other. The following week she handed in her resignation.

Dear Rene, (her letter read)

I can't carry on working in a place where I have been treated so unfairly. Mrs Lawson has been allowed to insult me about my feet and I have not been given an apology. Why she should have been so unkind about my disability I do not understand. However, I have been fortunate to have been offered a more suitable position, as a receptionist, and will have a more sympathetic employer who will also be able to help me with my disability. I herewith tender my resignation. (I have leave due so need not serve notice.) Any correspondence can be addressed to me care of Dr Achilles Ditheringfoot, who as you probably know, is a well-known chiropodist.

(Signed) Mrs Gloria Wickham.

SIXTY-THREE

Buyout bartering

Since Shawn's disappearance Andy had taken over both salons, and would have been happy to continue that way. But legal problems threatened to burst the bubble. Shawn's many creditors were clamouring for payment and Mr McGruff, their attorney, warned Andy that Shawn's disappearance might mean that his salon would have to be liquidated. He had said he would study the clauses in their partnership agreement and decide on a course of action.

In due course his secretary phoned and arranged another meeting. Andy went prepared to fight tooth and nail, as he put it, to prevent any attempt to close his business.

Andy flounced in and took a seat. Mr McGruff shuffled through the agreement to refresh his memory.

"Yes, Mr Fulton," he said, "since our last meeting I have spoken to the attorneys representing the creditors. They are not *au fait* with the partnership agreement and want a copy of it, which we are bound to give them – in due course. Luckily I have an extra copy of the one you destroyed. Would you care to read through it?"

"I don't care about agreements. They are just scraps of paper."

"Nevertheless they are binding," warned Mr McGruff. "There are clauses that are relevant to our present case."

"I wouldn't understand a word of that gobbledygook."

"The first one has a bearing on whether Chic'n Slick can be held liable for Shawn's debts. I'll read it out and explain what it means, if necessary."

5.8 Each of the partners shall punctually pay and discharge its separate debts, liabilities, obligations, duties and agreements whether at present or future and keep indemnified the partnership property and the other partner from all actions, proceedings, costs, claims and demands of every nature.

“I think that is clear enough, Mr Fulton. It means Chic’n Slick is indemnified from Shawn’s debts. The creditors will have to recover their debts from Mr Fairweather himself, and not from the partnership.”

“How can they, when Shawn has disappeared?”

“They would have to trace him. But unfortunately they could still claim Mr Fairweather’s share, which is not indemnified.”

Andy interrupted angrily. “I will not allow them to make me sell the business.”

“Of course we will do out best to prevent that, Mr Fulton.

“So the agreement is useless. As I said, it’s nothing but a bit of paper.”

“There are other clauses, Mr Fulton, if you would be patient. I think this one may help.

7.2 The partners hereby reserve the right to withdraw from the partnership at any time. Should a partner withdraw from the partnership, the remaining partner will have the option to buy out the remaining shares of the partnership. The remaining partner may choose to allow a non-partner to buy the shares thereby replacing the previous partner.

“What’s that supposed to mean in ordinary language?”

"I think it is quite clear. It means either of you can get out of the partnership whenever you want to. In my opinion, by disappearing we could consider that Mr Fairweather is exercising his right to withdraw from the partnership. You could then buy him out."

"I haven't got enough cash to buy him out."

"That is only an option. We will have to explore what other action we could take."

"Explore? I want something done now. I'm tired of waiting."

"Patience, Mr Fulton. We cannot rush these things. The law grinds slowly. I will give further thought to the matter and let you know by telephone what progress we make. I will also have to negotiate further with Mr Newton, of Bigglesworth, Brown and Horton, who is acting for the creditors. Perhaps we can reach a compromise."

"They want me to bargain with the creditors, Adele," Andy complained when he got back. "That's what these lawyers love. The longer they can spin things out the more money they make."

"You mustn't bargain Andy. Shawn must pay his own debts. That's only fair. The people he owes must find him and make him pay."

"That exactly the way I feel, but not the way the lawyers see it."

"I wish we staff members could help, Andy. But it seems we are just pawns to be sacrificed."

When, later, he spoke to Rita she asked whether he had told McGruff about the client who was interested in buying Shawn's salon.

"Oh Rita, I was under so much stress it went right out of my mind. Poof! Just like that."

"Elaine is still interested. She has the money and wants to branch out for herself."

"Who is this Elaine?"

"Elaine Brinkman. She would be the ideal business partner for you. She is a qualified hair stylist and beautician. She works at Goldilocks Hair as an assistant and now she has come into a legacy."

"Lucky her! A legacy would help me."

"I've told her I'm still negotiating and she is willing to wait."

"What a pity. It was so dishonest of Shawn to pretend he owned the salon. I'll phone McGruff. He read some gobbledygook stuff to me from an agreement. I vaguely remember something about allowing someone to buy shares."

Rita was interested. "Tell you what, Andy. Don't phone the lawyer. I'll phone him myself and find out about this clause. It could be the answer to our problems."

Andy welcomed the idea of not phoning McGruff. "Sure Rita, be my guest. Good luck with speaking to that grouch."

She got hold of Mr McGruff the next day.

"I'm Rita Sellby. I was in touch with Andy Fulton, Shawn's business partner, yesterday and he tells me that there is a clause in their partnership agreement that allows

a non-partner to buy shares in the salon. May I confirm that there is such a clause?"

McGruff first wanted Andy's permission then when he received it he reluctantly confirmed that there was such a clause, and read it out to her.

Rita explained, "I'm interested in the part that says, '*The remaining partner may choose to allow a non-partner to buy the shares, thereby replacing the previous partner.*'"

"What is your interest Miss Sellby?"

"Well, as I told Andy, I have a client who would like to buy shares. She has the funds, and is also a qualified hair stylist. I thought she would make a perfect replacement for Shawn."

Mr McGruff was silent as he thought about this new development. He was inclined to agree that by disappearing Shawn could be regarded as having withdrawn from the partnership.

"Well, Miss Sellby, on the face of it, it seems Mr Fulton would be within his rights in allowing your client to buy into the partnership. Meanwhile you can make a start by investigating whether your client has the necessary funds and credentials."

SIXTY-FOUR

Salon survival

Rita phoned Elaine at Goldilocks Hair.

"I just want to keep you in the picture about the salon you're interested in. I've been in touch with the owner, but there has been a minor hitch."

"Oh dear." She sounded disappointed. "I hope this isn't bad news."

"No, not at all. The offer still stands, Elaine. It's just that instead of an outright sale the owner, Andy Fulton, would prefer to take you as a partner in the business, called Chic'n Slick."

"Well, I was hoping to be on my own."

"You would be your own boss as one of two partners. Andy, is running the business as two salons. So you would be in charge of one salon and he would be in charge of the other."

"Well I will have to think about it, Rita. I'll come back to you ASAP."

"How did it go with that shyster McGruff, Rita?" Andy asked.

"Very well. I managed to get him to agree that you can let someone else buy into the business, which would solve all our problems."

"You mean this girl Elaine. But how can she?"

"Think about it this way, Andy. She would pay in the same amount of money as you pay to buy Shawn out. It would be like you are swapping Shawn for this new girl Elaine. So it wouldn't cost you anything."

“What about Shawn?”

“The money can be paid into Trust for the creditors. But you will be out of it, Andy and you can go ahead running your salon as before.”

“Well it sounds too good to be true. What’s she like, this Elaine?”

“Very friendly. But of course you would have to meet her.”

Elaine phoned not long afterwards to say she would be happy to buy into the business – and a meeting with Andy was duly set up.

When Rita and Elaine arrived Andy was dressed in his usual colourful style, a pink shirt and white denims with cowboy boots. A gold necklace dangled round his neck.

“I’m so pleased to meet you Elaine,” he said, steering them to a row of cane chairs on one side of the salon. “It was wonderful to hear that you want to join the partnership.”

“Elaine was really looking for a salon of her own,” Rita remarked. “I persuaded her that joining your partnership is a much better idea.”

“And so it is! In any case, Elaine, you will have your own salon next door. It’s completely self contained.”

“Well, what did you think?” Rita asked as she drove Elaine back to her office.

“You’re right, Rita. It’s a good opportunity. I’m sure Andy would be an easy partner to work with.”

“Well it should be to the advantage of both of you. I’ll tell Andy’s lawyer to draw up the documents. Let’s hope that it won’t be too long before you can give notice and start as a salon owner.”

SIXTY-FIVE

School sports

Sports day at Karen's school was held on the main playing field. In the foreground were chairs for the staff and VIPs; a table holding trophies to be presented at the prize giving later; another table crowded with public address equipment; and a raised dais with a microphone on a stand. Behind that were rows of girls, some on benches, others standing, overjoyed at having time off, from lessons and revving up for the prospect of cheering on their favourite competitors.

The track round the perimeter of the field was marked with whitewashed lanes and flags. In front was a straight track for the sprint events, behind that the long jump runway and landing pit and not far from that the high jump standards and blue crash mat (broken bone inhibitor). The javelin throwers were at a safe distance (in case a lance impaled one of the less popular staff members).

Scurrying in all directions were track assistants and other officials with whistles and clipboards. Near the starting line was the starter armed with a pistol, loaded with blanks (hopefully not bullets); and, at the finishing line, judges with stopwatches and cameras.

In due course the headmistress appeared on the dais and gave the welcome speech. At the end she paused, then made a surprise announcement: "This year we have something special for you. Many thanks to our brother school, Southville High, for sending their cadet band (which only a week ago won the Silver Bugle at the inter-

schools competition) to open our sports day.” (Loud buzz of surprise, then applause.)

On cue, with a long drum roll, followed by a trumpet fanfare and then with bugles blaring, the band marched onto the playing field, led by the Drum Major swinging his mace. They wheeled left, then halted briefly in front of the dais for the salute, before formation marching up and down the field.

Karen, in the changing rooms getting last minute instructions from the coach, managed to catch glimpses of the band through a window but couldn’t see Rodney, who was lost in the centre of the buglers. Judging by the applause the band was a hit and when they finally headed for the exit there were shouts for a repeat performance. They were bundled into the bus they had come in and gave a parting bugle flourish as the bus drove off.

The programme started with the field events, the high jump first then the pole vault, neither of which Karen could watch, being too busy with preparing for her own competition. There was more interest in the long jump than usual because Karen, a mere novice, was rumoured to be close to bettering the record Cynthia had set up the previous year.

There were five qualifiers. Including Karen and Cynthia, they were Ashley, Vicky and Rachel, none of these three with noteworthy distances during their training. Cynthia had been openly critical: two of them hadn’t even exceeded thirteen feet and she thought they shouldn’t have been allowed to qualify. Cynthia had found out Karen’s practise best was fifteen point two. Cynthia had had a disappointing training season, with a best jump of fifteen point one, well below her own record.

The five of them slipped track suits over their jumping shorts and blouses and trooped onto the field (loud applause), followed by their coaches. A long wooden bench had been set up at one end of the runway for them to deposit their kit and rest on while waiting to be called. They all used special shoes with short spikes for gripping at take off. The line judge sat on a stool opposite the take-off white line, which had a dreaded red stripe border to mark the foul area. The eagle eye of the judge would be trained on it, ready to raise her red flag if the jumper's shoe dared intrude on it by even a quarter of an inch. The landing pit, filled with fine sand, was (hopefully) deep enough to make sure of a soft landing. Sand rakers and the measuring team had to be quick after each jump (to avoid being booed by the crowd if there was a delay).

Each of them would be allowed three preliminary jumps and the two with the best distances would battle it out in the final with three more attempts each. The greatest distance in any attempt would count. The jumping order was chosen at random. As it happened, Rachel, who had a not particularly good best, of less than fourteen feet, was placed first with Vicky second and then Cynthia, Ashley, with Karen last, which gave her the slight advantage of knowing what she was up against.

Rachel, who had taken off her tracksuit and warmed up, was duly called to the starting area at the beginning of the runway. A red polystyrene cone had been placed over the take off line to stop unauthorised starts. When Rachel was ready the line judge removed the cone, and she then had one minute to begin her run up. She got into the starting posture, with one leg behind the other, swayed back slightly, then launched herself forward and

accelerated until she reached her fastest speed a little before the take off line.

The critical part was to place her take-off shoe as close as possible to the white line without going into the foul area. Rachel mistimed a little and her shoe was a good nine inches short of the line when she took off and moved through the air in an upright position, landing feet first in a flurry of flying sand.

The line judge raised her green flag signalling a legal jump and the tape team rushed forward and measured the distance from Rachel's landing point to the edge of the take off line. The figures were chalked up on a large blackboard and also announced over the public address system: "Rachel Hendley, number three, first attempt, twelve point nine feet."

A not very impressive distance compared to the record of fifteen point seven.

Vicky went through the same process. Using the same technique she landed, thinking she had made a good effort, only to see the red flag raised.

Cynthia took her place, cheered on by her supporters. Her foot placement was Cynthia's strong point and the judge nodded in approval as Cynthia took off but landed a little awkwardly and put out a hand behind her to keep balance. This spoiled an otherwise good effort and she lost several inches through the offending handprint. It was fifteen point one feet. Her supporters nevertheless cheered wildly.

Ashley had a disappointing attempt. She landed on her feet without losing balance, but only managed fourteen point four.

Karen's crowd cheered eager to see her new technique in action. There was quiet as she rocked back then accelerated to a fast sprint. Her foot placement was not Karen's strong point and she lost three inches. As she took off she swung both arms in a double lift and her legs continued a running motion. When she landed she threw herself on her side in a shower of sand before scrambling back on her feet.

The crowd seemed impressed (loud clapping and cheering). There was more applause when the figures were chalked up. Fifteen point four. Not a record but the best attempt so far. (Cynthia looked far from happy.)

In the second round Cynthia made sure to keep her balance on landing. But her foot placement suffered and she took off two inches behind the line. Her final distance was under fifteen feet. She walked away scowling.

Karen managed an even faster sprint to the line and took off using her double arm lift and following through with running on air and sideways landing. It was an improvement of point one so her best was fifteen point five.

As expected Karen and Cynthia went through to the finals, Cynthia with a best of fifteen point one and Karen at fifteen point five. Karen was unable to improve on her best jump. Cynthia managed to gain point one. So with only one more attempt each left there were only three point's difference between them – Cynthia fifteen point two and Karen fifteen point five.

Cynthia went first, She launched into the approach and took off. It was a dead tie with Karen's best of fifteen point five. (Loud cheers from her supporters.)

It was all up to Karen. She used the two arm lift, landing on her side, and scrambled upright. Neither flag was raised. She went back to the bench, while a knot of officials gathered round the take-off line.

After each attempt a thin layer of white powder was always sprinkled over the red foul area to leave a shoe imprint in case there was an appeal against the line judge's decision. Karen noticed someone had produced a ruler and appeared to be measuring the imprint she had left. The line judge said it was a tenth of an inch in the red. A final decision was made by the main judge, the Sport Mistress, and Karen's final jump was declared a foul and not allowed.

There were cheers of approval from Cynthia's supporters and groans of disappointment from Karen's. A tie was an unsatisfactory result, though, and there was further discussion among officials. Then the final result was announced, declaring Karen the winner.

The decision was not popular among Cynthia's supporters, who stood up angrily, booing, while Karen's fans cheered. The commotion went on in spite of the headmistress appealing for calm over the public address loudspeakers. Both sides became more and more aggressive, the ringleader of Cynthia's faction urging her followers to attack Karen's crowd. Things turned ugly as the girls clashed, with screaming, hair pulling, scratching, biting and kicking. The headmistress's appeals were ignored, and members of the staff rushed to separate the angry factions.

It took nearly half an hour to restore calm and continue with the sports programme. Later, when Karen was presented with a silver cup during the prize giving,

the headmistress first congratulated her on her win, and then gave those who had behaved so atrociously a serious dressing down.

“The girls who objected to Karen’s perfectly fair win should be ashamed of themselves,” she said. “Anyone who has bothered to understand the rules would know that if there is a tie the competitor who has the second best distance is the winner. And all of you knew, or should have known, that Karen’s second best distance of fifteen point four was better than Cynthia’s second best of fifteen point two. We expect an apology from all who unfairly objected to the decision.”

SIXTY-SIX

Nelly nixed

Discovering that Nelly had been helping herself to cash from the till to buy groceries while the owner, Edna Stapleford, was away, put Emma in a delicate position. To confront her immediately would have awkward consequences. She had evidence to show Mrs Stapleford when she came back from her holiday, but that was only in a week's time. Her immediate concern was to stop Nelly in the meantime.

That morning one of their old customers, Mr Banks, came in with a complaint.

"I don't like to cause trouble, Emma," he confided. "I made a special trip here yesterday afternoon with some books to exchange, but the shop was closed – for a while, according to a notice on the door. So I went away and did some shopping downstairs. While I was there, who should I see but your assistant, chatting to one of the staff. I didn't like to interrupt, so I paid for a few items and then went to the chemist. It must have been close on an hour later I went back to your shop, and was disappointed to see it was still closed."

"Well I must apologise, Mr Banks. Of course Nelly should not have been away for so long. Can you remember what time it was when you first called?"

"Quite early, about two o'clock I think it was, and nearly three when I went back. I couldn't wait any longer, unfortunately."

"I'll have to speak to Nelly. Mrs Stapleford will be back from holiday next week, so it shouldn't happen again."

Nelly arrived late as usual, glaring at Jackass stationed in his cage near the entrance, as she came in.

“That bird gets cheekier every time I see it,” she complained. “It’s trying to put the evil eye on me, I do believe.”

“Late again, late again,” screamed the parrot.

“Don’t worry, it’s just his way of saying good afternoon,” Emma explained.

“I can do without that sort of greeting,” Nelly snapped, settling behind the counter. “She opened the till and began checking the cash float. “Can’t be too careful, can we? I wouldn’t like to be accused of robbing the bank.”

Emma got ready to leave, loading Jackass and cage onto the shopping trolley she always borrowed for the purpose. Pausing at the entrance, she remarked casually, “By the way Nelly, an old customer called this morning, complaining that the shop was closed yesterday afternoon.”

“Of course it wasn’t,” Nelly said indignantly. “I was there the whole afternoon.”

“Well, Mr Banks said it was.”

“I don’t know this Mr Banks. He must be confused. So many of the elderly customers are.”

“I wouldn’t say Mr Banks is forgetful.”

“Well, you can believe him, or you can believe me,” Nelly said defiantly.

“It’s not up to me, I can only tell you what he said. But I should warn you, Nelly, that Mrs Cronwright in the coffee shop opposite has a good view of our shop. Mr Banks often goes there.”

Nelly tossed her head dismissively and went on counting the float.

By a strange co-incidence when Emma cashed up at closing time there was a big improvement in the afternoon's turnover. Perhaps Nelly had taken the hint.

Emma welcomed Mrs Stapleford back the following week.

"Well, how did things go while I was away?" she asked Emma.

"Let's give you a chance to settle in before we discuss that, Edna. Did you enjoy the break away from the shop?"

"Actually I couldn't wait to get back. But I must confess I feel better for the change of air."

She looked around the shop briefly. "Well everything looks fine. I see the shelves are full again. You have reduced that pile of unsorted stock quite a bit."

"Yes, I thought I would get stuck in while you were away..

"And Nelly? I hope she coped with the extra responsibility."

"She said she would call round to say hello. Of course you will be taking charge this afternoon?"

Emma carried on dealing with the customers, while Edna went through the records and sorted the cash in the safe for banking. Emma had already done the preliminary work and each day's takings were in separate bank bags. Edna had to enter totals in her ledger before the money was deposited in the bank. It wasn't long before she

noticed the discrepancy between morning and afternoon sales.

She looked up, frowning, "Our afternoon sales are very disappointing," she remarked.

Emma sighed. Perhaps now was a good time to explain.

At first Edna was disbelieving.

"How can you be sure of all this?"

Emma brought out all the evidence she had gathered. In the first place Nelly's long absences from the shop and her shopping expeditions, which Emma suspected were paid for by cash from their till. Then, to prove her suspicions, how she had managed to retrieve the records on the cards, which showed that a lot of the cash that should have gone into the till had landed in Nelly's handbag.

Edna sat down on the nearest chair. "But why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"In the first place I didn't want to spoil your holiday, and second I couldn't be sure. I would have looked silly if I had dragged you back here and then found I was wrong about Nellie. I had to have proof."

"Well I still find it hard to believe that Nelly could be so disloyal. I am grateful to you for uncovering Nelly's shocking behaviour. But the question is what should I do about it? I'll have to dismiss her, of course. But that won't recover what she took."

"You could open a case of theft. She could be arrested."

"I'm sure I could. But would it be worthwhile? Think of the court appearances, and the bad publicity for the shop."

"It seems wrong she should get away Scot free," Emma said angrily.

"Do you think you could stay on this afternoon, Emma? It would help to have moral support when Nelly comes in. I've no doubt she will deny everything, but I will have to dismiss her in any case."

They waited for Nelly to arrive. Many of their old customers called to welcome Edna back, so they had a busy afternoon, though marred by the thought of the coming confrontation, and it was almost a relief when closing time arrived, but still no Nelly.

"Perhaps she suspects that she has been found out," Emma suggested. "I did warn her that Mrs Cronwright in the coffee shop was keeping an eye on her. And Mr Banks said he saw her shopping in the supermarket downstairs when she should have been at the shop."

The next day there was again no sign of Nelly, and nor was there any answer when they dialled her number. Then a headline in the local newspaper caught Emma's eye.

MISSING SUSPECT IN FRAUD CASE ARRESTED

After being on the run for nearly a year, Mrs Kathleen Conway, a suspect in a fraud case, has been arrested at a local residential hotel. Mrs Conway was previously employed by William Price, Wholesalers, as a bookkeeper. Auditors uncovered discrepancies, which she was unable to account for.

Mr William Price opened a case of fraud, but police were unable to question Mrs Conway, who had left her residence and could not be traced. Police investigations determined that large sums had been transferred from the firm's account over an extended period. Mrs

Conway's banking account had been closed and the balance withdrawn in cash.

Since then police have not been able to trace her, until this week a resident at the hotel recognised her and contacted the Criminal Investigation Department, who obtained a warrant and she was taken into police custody, pending further investigation.

It was discovered that Mrs Conway had registered at the hotel under the name of Mrs Nelly Finklefont and was believed to have had been employed at a local shop.

SIXTY-SEVEN

Hospital horrors

The locomotive ploughing into Wilfred Snipes's car sounded like a bomb exploding; almost enough to rupture the eardrums of anyone nearby. Even next to the truck, parked some distance away, Froggie and his friends were left with ringing ears. It was worse for the driver of the locomotive and his sleeping co-driver. The driver at that late hour was dozing lightly when it happened. For a moment he was dazed.

"Holy smoke, what have we hit, brother?" he shouted.

His partner, woken abruptly, looked wildly around expecting some kind of life threatening attack, and dived to the floor. The screech of metal being ripped and several thuds followed. Yet the thousand-ton goods train continued on its way as though no more than a mosquito had brushed its front fender – until the driver wrenched the emergency brake lever almost out of its socket.

The pool car Snipes had borrowed was struck near a front wheel and spun sideways, then dragged a long distance and finally tossed into the undergrowth at the side of the railway line. The train's brakes locked but it went on sliding along the rails with sparks showering from the wheels. When at length it stopped the driver, who by then had got over his first shock, jumped out with a torch.

"C'mon bro, we got to see what's going on," he shouted to his mate, who was still lying on the floor.

He stumbled along the track, his mate following, till they reached the place where the car had been dumped. It was

on its side, not much left of the front but the back relatively intact. Loud snores came from inside.

“Holy snakes, bro!” said the driver. “These geezers have slept right through it.”

“Let’s get away from here,” his mate warned. “This thing may go up in smoke any moment.”

“No, we got to get them out.”

Benny and Snipes, reeking of liquor, were firmly strapped in by their seat belts. They were dragged out and moved to a safe distance. They didn’t seem to have any visible injuries. Benny briefly opened one eye and muttered, “Thash enough pal, thanksh all the shame.”

“Plastered as skunks,” observed the driver.

They went back to the cab and radioed for help and in due course the medics arrived and examined them for injuries.

“Lucky to be alive, wouldn’t you say, Joe?” one of them asked.

“Maybe the booze saved them.”

“Be careful getting them onto the stretchers. Looks like broken legs. Possibly cracked ribs from the seat belts as well. Necks seem okay, but we better fit braces. . . These two are going to feel it when they come to.”

“Looks like they’ll have hangovers as well.”

After being admitted to trauma, then emergency surgery to have traction pins inserted, they finally landed up in the orthopaedic ward next to each other, with their legs in traction and chests bound with crepe bandages.

Benny was the first to come round, with a headache and raging thirst. The nurse hovering nearby noticed signs of life.

“Who put me here?” Benny demanded hoarsely. “I got a right to a fair trial.”

“Don’t worry we’ll look after you,” the nurse reassured him. “You’ll soon be out of here like new.”

“Just bring me a cold beer for my throat. And get that thing off my leg,” he croaked.

Benny’s pal Wilfred, in the next bed, was just coming round. He stared about wildly. “Get me out of here,” he pleaded. “I’ve got to get the car back.”

“Calm down, your car is being taken care of,” the nurse said soothingly. “What’s left of it.”

He spotted Benny lying with a leg attached to pulleys. “Is that Benny? What’s the matter with you, Benny? What are you doing here?”

“I dunno what I’m doing here. But I can’t get up. They’ve got me tied down.”

“Let me up,” Snipes pleaded. “You can’t keep me in this place. Call the cops.” He struggled and the nurse rushed over to restrain him.”

“You must be quiet, Mr Pipes,” she scolded. “It’s not good for you to wriggle around like that. You might damage your legs even more.”

He gave up after a minute and lay back panting.

“I’ll call doctor to talk to you,” the nurse said. “He can give you something to make you feel better.”

Dr Vinigar arrived shortly, tubby with a stethoscope round his neck.

“What have we here? Heroes, taking on a train? You can’t win that sort of contest, you know. What can I do for you?”

“I want out of here,” demanded Wilfred. “You can’t keep me here.”

“You won’t get very far with two broken legs, my friend.”

Benny, in the other bed asked, “What is this place? Are we in the loony bin?”

“Maybe you could call it that. We get quite a few loonies brought here.”

“How did we get here?”

“In an ambulance, I believe. You were lucky it wasn’t a hearse.”

Benny was slowly convinced that he was not under arrest and Wilfred that he had not been hijacked. But they both had only a dim recollection of events leading to their present predicament. Benny’s ex was officially informed that he was in hospital, and Wilfred’s nearest relative, his mother in a retirement centre, was also given the news.

Benny’s ex, Marcella, was not particularly surprised; nothing surprised her about Benny. But it was a juicy subject for gossip, and she immediately phoned Connie.

“Hi Connie, it’s Marcella.”

“Oh, is it?”

“Have you heard the latest about Benny?”

“I haven’t, and I don’t even want to. . . But anyway, what is it?”

“He’s been hit by a train.”

Connie was quiet for a moment. "Say again, Marcella?"

"I said he's been hit by a train."

"A train, you said? Hit by?"

"Yes."

"Why should a train hit Benny?"

"That I don't know. I only know they took him away to hospital. What's left of him."

"So he isn't dead?"

"Perhaps he is by now. They just told me he was hit and taken away."

After another pause Connie said, "Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I always thought Benny would come to a bad end. You did say hit by a train?"

"Yes."

"Well, I must say I didn't think it would happen like that."

"Yes; trust Benny to do something drastic. He's not content with passing away quietly in bed like the rest of us. But he has to go and get hit by a train. Mind you, he might not be dead."

"What's that all about? " asked Reggie, after she rang off.

"It's about Benny. He's been hit."

"Who hit him?"

"A train."

Reggie batted an eyelid. "I suppose he walked in front of it. Just like him. Selfish. Who does he think is going to pay for the funeral expenses?"

“I didn’t say he was dead. We only know they took away the bits and pieces of him that were left, in an ambulance.”

“Well that sounds as if he must pretty well be dead. In any case ambulances and hospitals cost money. We can’t fork out for that.”

After the echoes of the train crash died away, Froggie said: “That seems to have taken care of our little problem. We shouldn’t have any more trouble from them two.”

“Yeah, Mister will be happy. There can’t be much left of them,” said Earrings.

“We better be getting out of here before the mob arrives,” Froggie cautioned.

They drove back to the farmhouse, to avail themselves of what was left of the liquor, which had been severely diminished by Benny and Snipes. They found The Mister waiting for them, sipping tea made for him by the caretaker (who grumbled at being awakened again at such an unseemly hour).

“Well boys, back from your joyride, I see. I thought you might be attracted back here,” he said, gesturing towards the table. “I can’t say I’m fond of the stuff myself. Bad for the liver. But you boys go ahead. No doubt you have earned it.”

“All taken care of, neat and clean,” Earrings reported.

“Excellent,” Mister said, sipping his tea. “I like something to be neat and clean. A messy job is like not tying your shoelaces properly. You could trip up. I am addicted to details, I’m afraid. I would be interested to hear the full story of how you went about this jaunt.”

Earrings glanced at his tattooed friend. "You tell him, bro."

Tattoo launched into a long account. When he got to the part where they reached the green light, Mister interrupted. "Very good, excellent. I take it you then left the car on the tracks with our two friends peacefully sleeping on the front seat?"

"Happy in dreamland," Tattoo agreed.

"What next?" Mister prompted.

"Froggie arrives with the transport; he parks quite close, then we wait to see the fireworks."

"You watched while they went off, did you?"

"Sure, we didn't want to miss that. Loco hits the front of the car, spins it sideways and drags it out of sight along the line."

"Hit the front, did it?"

"Sounded like the A-bomb. They didn't stand a chance."

Mister put down his cup thoughtfully. "How do you know they didn't, my friend? You followed up?"

"Couldn't. It was dragged a long way. People in the train would of seen us."

"Quite so. So we can't be sure, can we?"

"They had no chance, Mister. Isn't that true, bro?" he appealed to Earrings.

"They were mincemeat, for sure," Earrings agreed.

The caretaker shuffled in with his portable radio. "You wanted the news, Mister. Take a listen, though it's almost finished."

He switched on. “. . . Oh, and here’s a late report just come in,” said the news reader. “Two unidentified men were seriously injured in a level crossing accident near Deepbury Road, late this evening. Their car was dragged some distance, before landing in bushes at the side of the railway line. They were removed by ambulance. No further details are available.”

Mister sighed. “How very fortunate for them. But not so fortunate for you two. It would be too bad if you happen to trip over your shoelaces.”

SIXTY-EIGHT

Police probe

"It's your own brother," Connie's elderly mother protested. "He's lying in hospital at death's door, through no fault of his own. You must visit him."

"He brought it on himself and he nearly had us all murdered as well," said Connie. "He has no thought for the family. Why should we care about him?"

"Do you want an old woman like me, who can hardly walk, to go instead? Someone from the family must. It's our duty."

"What about Marcella? She should be the one to go."

"I have never trusted that woman. She *used* Benny. She took advantage of a fine, hardworking young man, who has done nothing but good, a shining example to us all. (She wiped a tear.) You paint Benny in a bad light, Connie. You don't see him as he is. Honest, generous, good looking, always ready to help anyone in need."

"You make him sound like a saint, Mother."

"Well so he is."

"We don't even know where the hospital is. Probably miles away. He may even be dead by now, so it would be a wasted effort."

"It would be easy enough to find out, and well you know it."

The hospital in question was indeed miles away and Reggie's decrepit car was not a long distance runner. It overheated several times before they reached Deepbury Sanatorium, deeply buried in the countryside. Reggie

refused to go in and insisted on waiting in the car while Connie paid her duty call. It was a battle for her to get in, because they had arrived outside visiting hours: and the Matron had to be called before Connie was grudgingly given special permission.

“We are strict about the rules here,” the Matron said severely. “We don’t allow alcohol of any sort on the premises, except, of course, for medicinal purposes. And tobacco is absolutely forbidden.”

“I don’t touch cigarettes and liquor would never pass my lips.”

“Well and good. Regrettably Mr Bertram – your brother, I believe – does not follow your example. A difficult patient, if I may say so. However, we have to take both the bad and the good.”

Connie was shown to Benny’s ward by the Sister on duty.

She found him with earphones plugged in, watching a Disney cartoon on a TV screen overhead.

He turned his head and reluctantly unplugged one earphone. “It’s you, Connie! Whatcher doing here?”

“It’s not because I want to be here, mark my words, Benny.”

“Don’t be like that, Connie. Can’t you see I’m a sick person?”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Meet my pal Wilfred over there. He was the driver, not me.”

“I don’t care who was driving. You should not have been in that car.”

“So what brings you here then? Maybe you brought a little refreshment with you?”

“Still trying your luck, Benny? You know I don’t touch the stuff.”

Benny removed the other earphone. “Well maybe you’ve come to get me out of this place.”

“You’re going to stay put, right here, Benny. I hope for a long time.”

“Don’t ask me how I got here; I still don’t know. I was on my way to visit a pal of mine on the coast. I thought I could do with a change of scenery and my friend Wilfred here kindly offered to take me. I think we picked up two hitch-hikers. They helped us out with a little refreshment, just a couple of teaspoons each. We dropped them off; drove on a bit, then wham, bam. Something hit us. Next thing here we are in this place.”

“You know what, Benny? I think there’s a lot more to this than what you are saying. And who’s going to pay for all this?”

“Don’t worry about it. Third party insurance. And make no mistake I’m going to score big out of this. Hospital, pain and suffering, loss of amenities, brain damage, maybe more.”

“Well, good luck to you Benny. The family certainly couldn’t have helped.”

The Matron was in her office attending to a complaint from the accountant about a discrepancy in drug orders, when the receptionist called to say two gentlemen wanted to speak to her.

“Who are they?” she asked sharply.

“They say they are Police Officers, but they aren’t wearing uniforms.”

The Matron did not welcome visits from the police. It usually meant trouble.

When they arrived in her office she was proved correct – they said they were there to see a Mr Bertram and a Mr Snipes, which could only mean trouble. They produced police badges to prove their identity.

“If you want to arrest them it might be difficult,” the Matron warned. “Their legs are under traction, so they can’t be moved.”

“No, madam. This is just an inquiry about an accident,” the older one explained.

“It’s not convenient, and will disturb our routine,” she said. “But I suppose it can’t be helped.”

They were shown to Benny’s ward and sat on chairs next to his bed.

“Are you Mr Benjamin Bertram, of Crown Crescent?” the younger one asked, producing a notebook and pencil.

Benny eyed them suspiciously. “I don’t need prayers. They never did me any good.”

“No, Mr Bertram, we are police officers, not from the church.” They showed Benny their badges. “We are just making a routine inquiry.”

“You people are wasting your time. I’ve never been in trouble with the law.”

“No-one is accusing you of any wrongdoing, Mr Bertram. This is about a car accident in which you were involved.”

“Well, you’ve got the wrong person. That’s your man, over there. He was the driver, not me.”

“Yes, Mr Bertram,” the one with the notebook said patiently. “We will be getting to him presently.”

“Okay. What do you want to know?”

“Can you remember what happened on the night of July twenty-fourth?”

“All I remember is sitting in the front seat, while my friend over there was driving, on the way to the coast. Breaking no traffic laws, well within the speed limit, car in perfect condition. Then suddenly wham out of nowhere we get hit. I wake up here in this hell hole.”

The officer scribbled busily in his notebook.

“I take it you were sober at the time?”

“Sober! Officer, I never touch the stuff. Well, except for the occasional noggin, like everyone else. I was as sober as the Archbishop.”

“No need to be upset, Mr Bertram. We must ask these questions. But I should tell you that forensics found evidence of alcohol on the seats. Can you explain that?”

“Look, Officer, that was a pool car, borrowed from my friend’s company. It was used before by who knows who.”

“We have questioned the paramedics who attended you. They seem to think you could have been inebriated.”

“They must have been in-berated themselves to think that,” Benny said indignantly. “I was out cold for the count. Lucky to be still signed on.”

“Fine, then that will be all Mr Brandy, er, I mean Bertram. We’ll have a statement typed for you to sign later.”

“Statement? I never sign anything without my lawyer.”

“You may need it, Sir, for insurance purposes.”

Benny thought a moment. “Yes, that’s true. Sure, I’ll sign.”

They then questioned Mr Snipes at length. He had “accidentally” listened with interest to the interview with Benny, so was able to corroborate all the details.

“I can’t figure why they are still ticking, Mister,” said a puzzled Earrings. “Maybe they cashed in later in the sick bin,” he added hopefully.

“It was inconsiderate of them,” Mister admitted. “I wouldn’t like to speculate on the reasons why they ignored the trumpet call. Whether it was just stubbornness or, worse still, through poor engineering. I can’t bear to conjecture that it was the latter.”

“Whatyer mean, Mister? asked Tattoo, puzzled.

“He means,” said Froggie, “that maybe you blew it.”

“How so?”

“Tattoo’s story was, the front was hit. How come not the middle?”

“Ah, an interesting query, Mr Tat,” Mister mused. “How do you account for that?”

“It was dark, Mister. We stopped on the tracks. Seemed to me we was in the middle.”

“Sure, that’s true, Mister. We couldn’t see,” agreed Earrings “We were in a hurry to get out of there.”

“Maybe this is all coming down to shoelaces, Mr Ear,” Mister said sadly. “I hope we are not going to be tripped up.”

Froggie shook his head regretfully. “So what do we do now, Mister?”

“I think you boys must make recompense. You didn’t tie your shoelaces. Very slovenly. So you should tie them up properly. Perhaps use a double knot.”

“I think the boys get your drift Mister.” said Froggie. “Perhaps they can put things right. It can be painful to make mistakes with shoelaces. What if you fall flat on your face and maybe don’t get up again?”

SIXTY-NINE

Tableau tricks

Karen was not overjoyed to hear that the costume her mother was making (for the second time) was for none other than her rival in the long jump event.

“Of course I didn’t know who she was,” Mrs Thornton explained. “But, even if I had, that wouldn’t be reason enough to refuse to help.”

“I just hope I won’t be next to her in the Tableau.” Karen complained.

“There will be six children, as well as Mary and Joseph, three Wise Men, shepherds and even a cow, around the manager, so it’s not likely you will be.”

There were to be two rehearsals, both in the early evenings, the first mainly to sort out their costumes, which would probably need laundering after being in storage for a year. The stalls and background props would only be ready for the dress rehearsal the evening before the opening, so there would be just an empty hall to begin with.

Hortense was finally satisfied with her niece’s dress, though grudgingly so. The hall was already full of bustling performers and organisers when Mrs Thornton and Karen arrived. After much confusion about which costume belonged to whom, the organisers managed to sort everyone into Tableau groups. The main one was the Nativity scene, in which Karen took part; and there were several others depicting various biblical scenes, including the Crucifixion, in which Alice Thornton had a part.

Patsy, the Pastor's wife, was in charge of the Nativity and she herded her group into the chalked-off space where their stall would be. The centre of the scene would be the manger, filled with hay – and children, shepherds and wise men were to be grouped around it. Hortense took her niece under her wing and asked that Cynthia should be at the head of the manger, bending over the infant. Karen was pleased that she would be among the group of barefoot children some distance away.

Hortense took Patsy aside. "I don't think it is wise for the children to be barefoot in cold weather," she advised. "I must insist that my niece be allowed, at least, to wear sandals, which would be suitable for a biblical scene."

An amusing innovation that year would be a cow that would move about the stall eating hay. Everyone would have to remain frozen, like statues, except for the cow. Two volunteers from the Youth Guild would wear the cow costume (hired from a theatrical props shop) one in front and one behind.

Hortense pooh-poohed the idea. "It's supposed to be a Tableau, Patsy, which means nobody moves."

"Well Pastor likes the idea, for a change. It will add colour to the scene."

The important thing, Patsy impressed on everyone, was to remember their positions, so that when the curtain was due to go up there were no delays.

"How long do we have to stand without moving?" a small girl asked anxiously.

"It won't be very long. Only during the guided tour times, really. Of course during that time we have to be strict otherwise it would ruin the show."

The problem of Karen's hair was solved because she was to wear a cloth head-gear. Their dresses were plain beige or white and loose fitting, draped in folds below the knee. They were supposed to be peasant girls, except for Hortense's niece (in her more fashionable dress) supposedly a visitor from a prosperous family.

Mrs Thornton was also to be dressed in the plain robes of Biblical times. She was to be one of the group of mourners seated around the cross. The actual Crucifixion would have been a problem, because none of the male members of the congregation was keen to be suspended for several hours wearing only a loin-cloth, even in the service of the Lord. Fortunately in one corner of the hall there was a large Crucifix on the wall, which solved the problem. A few Angels and Roman soldiers with dangerous looking spears would complete the scene.

The dress rehearsal was more organised, because all the costume problems had been sorted out. The volunteer carpenters had been busy earlier in the week and all the props and lighting were in place. The show was to run for a Friday and Saturday night, after which the hall had to be cleared for Sunday services. The Pastor was pleased that everything went smoothly and even more pleased when there was a big turnout the following evening.

The stalls were arranged in the centre of the hall. There were three conducted tours during the evening with intermissions between each. A modern, though somewhat incongruous touch, was a large TV monitor at one end of the hall, on which a video of Crucifixion scenes from a commercial production was screened. It had been decided that the church Gospel band would not

be appropriate, and an array of loudspeakers provided more subdued background music.

The audience waited in the adjacent tea-garden until the Pastor was ready to lead the next group along the horse-shoe aisle, pausing at each stall to deliver a commentary from his large iPad tablet, the batteries of which, hopefully, would not run flat at an inconvenient moment.

Winston Thornton and Rodney had been roped in to attend, being promised take-aways in the tea garden while they waited their turn. The Nativity scene was the first and largest. Rodney found it amusing to see Karen in a statue-like pose, and tried to distract her by pulling faces and making unseemly and ribald gestures; and almost succeeding, before he was whisked away. The cow, munching hay, seemed to get more attention than the infant in the manger. A real live infant during the dress rehearsal had refused to co-operate and had to be replaced by a large realistic doll, which was far more obedient.

Hortense was gratified to see that her niece, Cynthia, at the head of the manager, was separate from the lowly peasant girls,. Her fashionable (for the period) garment had challenged Alice's dressmaking skills and stood out from the austere dresses worn by the other girls.

"Why did you make a special costume for Cynthia?" Karen had asked.

"Well, it was because her aunt, Mrs Ogilvy, wasn't happy with the first dress I made."

"What was wrong with it?"

“Nothing really, as far I could see. But Mrs Ogilvy insisted it didn’t suit her niece and she managed to persuade the Pastor to have another one made.”

“By you?”

“They provided the material, of course. But it was the least I could do, because her aunt said otherwise she wouldn’t let Cynthia take part.”

“I wish she wasn’t in the Tableau. She is so stuck up.”

During the first night’s performances Karen had nothing to do with her long-jump rival, who was under her aunt’s watchful eye at all times but during an intermission on the second night, while Hortense was away, Cynthia went across to the group of peasant girls.

“Oh, and what are you doing here, cheater?” she asked Karen.

“Don’t call me cheater.”

“Well, I will, because you are.”

The others looked on in surprise. One of them asked, “Who are you? You don’t belong to the church.”

“My aunt does, and she is an Elder. They needed someone who knows acting to be next to the manger. That’s why I was chosen.”

Before anyone could reply her aunt arrived and called her away. “I don’t want you talking to those peasant girls.”

Hortense had come back from asking the Pastor’s wife about the straw in the manger, which she said, was damp and musty.

“I’m one who seldom complains, Patsy,” she explained. “But my niece is battling, poor dear. As you know she

has to be bent over the manger and she is a delicate child, prone to nasal congestion.”

“Don’t worry Hortense,” Patsy assured her. “We have managed to get some fresh hay to replace it. So everything should be fine for the next session.”

Everyone was in position, waiting for the curtain to go up, as the crowd following the Pastor stopped in front of the Nativity stall. The peasant girls found it difficult to keep straight faces when they saw that Cynthia, bent over the manger, was struggling to keep herself from sneezing. The Pastor began his commentary.

As the curtain rose Cynthia could contain herself no longer and jumped up sneezing and with streaming eyes. The Pastor broke off his speech in mid sentence and dropped his iPad. Cynthia, still sneezing, rushed to the exit, knocking the youth in the back of the cow off his feet. The one in the front fell over too and they lay on the floor struggling to get out of the cow costume. Then someone had the presence of mind to lower the curtain.

“I am mortified,” Hortense announced, “that this innocent child has been subjected to such humiliation. It will sear her memory for the rest of her days. On no account will I allow her to continue.” She bundled Cynthia, still sneezing, into her car. “As for that dress it would be a constant reminder to this poor child of what she has been through. We will have nothing more to do with it.”

For the remaining sessions it was decided that Karen, wearing the dress her mother had made, would replace Hortense’s niece.

SEVENTY

Slippery snitchers

"Well how are the train spotters doing?" asked Dr Vinigar. "Doing your exercises, I hope?"

"When can we get out of here?" Wilfred Snipes demanded.

"As soon as your bones say you can. Then we can pull those pins out. You can thank our friends Perkins and Steinmann that you're not in plaster."

"If they're the ones who tortured me, by drilling a nail into my leg, then I've got nothing to thank them for," Benny said sourly.

"We put a pin through your thigh with ends sticking out, so we have something to hook the rope and weights on, to pull your bones straight," Dr Vinigar lectured. "Anyway it wasn't very clever to park your car in the middle of the railway tracks, was it?"

"They are bad patients, Doctor," nurse Hummingbird scolded. "They are supposed to sit up and do knee bending over the edge of the beds, like the physio showed them. But Mr Bertram won't co-operate."

"They won't even let me have a thimble or two of brandy," Benny protested.

"Let's see whether your fractures are joining," said Dr Vinigar. "They should be by now."

Wilfred was the unlucky owner of two broken femurs. Benny got off lightly with only one.

"There doesn't seem to be movement at the breaks. Looks like we've got union in all three," Dr Vinigar said, after examining them. "No pain when I pressed?" he asked Wilfred.

“The pain is where I’ve been spiked. I can’t wait to get them out,”

“Right, that won’t be a problem. We can do it under a local. But we’ll have to put your thighs in plaster.”

“Anything is better than having that contraption stretching my legs.

“Does that mean we can soon be out of here?” Benny asked hopefully:

Doctor Vinigar said cheerfully: “We’ll pull the pins out, put your thighs in plaster and bundle you off a.s.a.p. By tomorrow, if we can book an ambulance to take you to rehab.”

“Mister wants to know how your shoelaces are doing?” asked Froggie, when he spotted Earrings at the Starving Horse.

“I got no problem with them,” Earrings said, looking down at his shoes.

“You know what I mean,” Froggie rasped, “Have you got onto those two yet?”

“We know they were taken away somewhere in a meat-wagon after the smash. Benny lived at his sister’s place, so we got her on the line, thinking she could tell us more. She says she knows nothing and slams the blower down.”

“Okay, what then?”

“We try to find the wagon that picked them up. We get hold of the two services that operate up there. Nobody knows, or they won’t say. So next we figure they must be at the nearest butcher house; there’s only two at that Buried Under hole. We get onto them; they won’t tell us

– confidential information, says some old bag who calls herself the Matron. They only tell close relatives.”

“So what was your next move?”

“I tell them I’m Benny’s loving brother, looking for my missing kin I’ve heard was hurt in a train accident. They said, yes he’s there.”

“Then?”

“We give Mister the good news – we’ve found him and we wait for further instructions.”

“I suppose he told you to tie your own shoelaces?”

“Right. Then we told him we are working on a plan.”

Froggie looked doubtful. “Well, its up to you to get it right. You know what trouble sloppy shoelaces can cause.”

“We’ve found the car, Chris,” Vic Hornsby, News Editor at the Daily Flash, told the Editor.

“Good. I hope it’s back in the pool. Management have been on to me about it.”

“No, sorry, bad news, Chris. What’s left of it is in the Police pound. They say it was hit by a train.”

The startled Editor digested the news. “Who was driving it?”

“One of our reporters, Snipes.”

“He’s the one who hasn’t pitched up for a week. Was he injured?”

“The whole thing is a mystery. Police say he was taken from the scene in an ambulance. So it seems he survived the smash. They are investigating but won’t give details.”

“But why was he driving around in a pool car? It was taken out the basement without permission. Mr Snipes is going to have to do a lot of explaining.”

“We are trying to locate him, Chris. He must be in a hospital in the area. It beats me what he was doing in a pool car at midnight, miles from anywhere, not on duty, and they suspect, under the influence. And he was parked in the middle of the railway line when the train hit him. There was someone with him, also drunk. It looks bad for Snipes.”

“Keep this under your hat, Vic. We don’t want it to be blown up by the opposition if it gets out. We’ll deal with Snipes when we find him.”

“I see your point.”

Benny and Wilfred were taken in wheelchairs to reception to be discharged. Their belongings, which had been retrieved from the wreck and put in storage, were meanwhile stowed into the ambulance waiting to take them to rehab.

“Why all this red tape?” Benny asked the receptionist.

“It’s just standard procedure, sir. Luckily your ID’s were found among your personal belongings the ambulance driver handed to us. We need all these details so we can claim on State medical assistance.”

They were handed documents to sign.

“What’s this here about authorisation?” Benny asked suspiciously.

“That’s to get your permission to give out details about your treatment, and how to contact you.”

“I don’t want anyone to contact me.”

“Well I can add a request not to give information to anyone except Officials. (Turning to Wilfred) Would you also prefer that, Mr Snipes?”

“Yes I would. I can get hold of my office myself, when I feel up to it.”

She attached a note to their discharge forms, which they duly signed.

“So where are you taking us?” Wilfred asked, as they were wheeled to the ambulance.

“St Mark’s Rehabilitation Centre, if that means anything to you,” said the driver.

“Is it a long trip?”

“You can say that again. Much too long. It’s at the end of beyond. They said it’s the only place that could take you at short notice.”

“Suits me,” Benny said. “The end of beyond is better than this hell hole.”

“I got bad news, Mister,” Froggie reported some days later. “Those two shoelace bums have slipped up.”

“They’ve lost their shoes, have they? Bare feet can be very vulnerable.”

“Seems they followed the trail to a dump called Dead Beat Sanatorium, or something like that. That’s where the meat wagon dropped them off. Then Tat and Ear were stone-walled by some old dame called the Matron, when they got her on the blower. But the bird on reception let slip that they were there resting, bruised and shook up but otherwise okay, but only kith and kin allowed to visit.”

“What then?”

“Ear gets this idea to call himself Benny’s long lost brother who has heard he’s tangled with a train and he wants to visit. But by the time Ear goes back with his story they tell him sorry the birds have flown. They’re gone. The hospital won’t tell what treatment they got. And they don’t know where they were headed.”

“A sad tale. I’m almost reduced to tears. Are our shoelace buddies still up there?”

“They figure those snitchers must have been picked up by a taxi, or hired a car. Maybe fetched by the sister and taken to some bolt hole. So now they’re trying to get a lead by asking taxis and car hire firms if they picked them up.”

“Waste of time. Birds could fly anywhere. Maybe off to build a new nest. I think Ear and Tat should be given some gentle instruction on tying their shoe laces. You could arrange something, couldn’t you Froggie?” Mister suggested.

“Sure, Mister. It would be my pleasure.”

A few days later an ambulance arrived at the Deepbury Sanatorium to deliver two victims beaten up by thieves, who had divested them of their cell phones and whatever cash they carried. The Matron was puzzled to find that both victims were barefoot. It seemed the thieves had removed their shoes as well, for some obscure reason.



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