

SPAWN!

Book One of the Chronicles of Cartledge & I

**A novel by
Graham Charnock**

First published in Great Britain in 2006

This paperback edition published 2006

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(Remember when doing any structural welding, always
use a face visor)

‘God is love and he embraceth the entire world in one
degree’

--- Some Old Hymn

‘Yes, but what about the other 359?’

---‘Bon mots, Grand Mals, and Tiny Drawings of
Squirrels’

(Philip K. Cartledge, 1942)

PROLOGUE

A group of students in the USA were asked how long they thought the Second World War had lasted.

These were kids had been born in the mid-eighties, forty years on from the end of hostilities.

Answers ranged from seven days to seven months.

In these days of ‘instant’ wars settled within minutes or hours by overwhelming military force, we should probably not find this response so surprising.

The important point is not that the kids didn’t know about WWII, but that they didn’t need to or care to know about it. Knowledge for its own sake is useless knowledge, especially if it gets in the way of trying out for a major league baseball team, or figuring out which bimbo to invite to the Junior Prom. All knowledge is relative; its importance depending upon its usefulness. There is no inherent virtue in a well-rounded education.

The same applies to the knowledge of the possible and the impossible. It’s not useful, if you’re freezing to death, to seek to know and test the possibility of striking a match on a bar of soap. Except of course if these are the only items you possess, and you think, oh what the heck? And when is that likely to happen?

Strangely in 1871 the renowned mountaineer Samuel Mott was found entombed in an ice cave on the Matterhorn, naked and with only a match and a bar of soap and a hairclip, all of them in a used condition.

He had failed to light a fire using these items, but, despite the absence of mice, left behind a perfect working mousetrap. Such is the admirable, but misguided, spirit of the adventuring scientist.

Yet even more strangely, years later the American microbiologist, Michael Behe would use the mousetrap as a model of an irreducibly complex mechanism, the various elements of which had to be invented and brought together at one and the same time to serve any purpose. He gave exact examples of such mechanisms in the world of cellular biology, and posited that it was impossible, because of their irreducibly complex nature, for them to have ‘evolved’ and they were therefore evidence of a Grand Designer. Let’s not skate about the issue: he meant, God, of course.

Darwin or Behe?

Right or wrong?

Do we really need to know how a mousetrap is constructed in order to rid our hovels of vermin? Do we really need to know if there was a Grand Designer or not, in order to get through life, let alone shop at a Supermarket on Sunday? I leave it to you.

Meanwhile, ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to those intrepid articulators of a knowledge-free society: Cartledge and I.

Weather Report

Sarah Wilmshurst predicts temperatures taking a tumble, with sleet and snow pushing south, at least as far south as East Fakenham, and the Adler Arms, where a small group of paintball enthusiasts will fortunately be frozen in for several weeks. Flights are suspended between East Grissop and West Lessop. Please put out nuts and water for our less fortunate friends, even if they are only drunks and winos. And remember to break the ice on your local horse trough, so that horses, as well as winos, can drink. It could be a crisp, white Christmas, in Eastern Areas, but not, unfortunately, in Kennington.

If you live in Hollywood all this of course is irrelevant because you are probably too coked out of your mind to notice the weather.

Today I am wearing Marks & Spencer. Tomorrow I will be wearing a range from the British Home Stores 'Miss Sensible' catalogue which shows no cleavage at all. Bad news for John Sila who keeps sending me emails from somewhere in Wiltshire.

WHAT IF

I was in the garden laying out some bedding plants, for after all it would soon be winter, the season of fecund growth, with temperatures rising into the mid nineties. With luck, egrets would soon be amongst us, migrating in from the salt marshes of the Southern Mediterranean; that is if the weather predictions of Sarah Wilmshurt were to be believed.

There was a rustling in the foliage and I glimpsed a cold reptilian eye staring at me. With another rustle it vanished.

Mrs Grace announced that tea and muffins were served, so I dusted off my knees and elbows, parked my garden kneeling pad (made from recycled materials), hung up my dibber, and went inside.

Cartledge was halfway through his second muffin and was standing at the window, staring reflectively at the view. He was wearing a particularly unsightly Hawaiian shirt. His obsession with surfing was a recent thing. He had taken to hanging five off the kitchen table and waxing his woodie on every possible occasion. It was all slightly disturbing and, frankly, disruptive, of our daily routine. And the loud music of Dick Dale was giving me a headache.

What a world, he said. There's Pobjoy, the postman, on his way back to the sorting office after finishing his morning round. And see, Coggins' lad playing conkers with Arthur the Lunatic from the vinegar distillery. The insufferable Oswald Norton, the fake chiropractor, has just had a brand new bicycle delivered, an Acme Racer, I

believe. He'll be bragging about that every night at The Swindler's Revenge for weeks on end. Dandle the Baker just passed by. His acne hasn't cleared up; his face looks like a pizza with extra red pepper. He was carrying a bunch of faded violets. Those will be for his new sweetheart, Nessie Bottle, the undertaker's daughter. Oh, and here's Parson Vemity, following the coal-cart as usual, with his shovel and bucket, collecting manure for his rose gardens. And there's Dr Hornby showing the Morgan-Detweilers at number 42 his new speculum. And sweet Maggie Murphy, my how that girl has grown. If only Roger de Villiers were here to see this.

He turned away from the window and adjusted the crotch in his red and yellow check golfing trousers. Rarely had he looked more radiant.

I often wonder how we have arrived at this, my friend, he said, How did you and I fetch up in this place in this universe at this moment of time? I say, you're making a bit of a fist of that muffin; Mrs Grace will damn you if you don't clear up those crumbs.

I finished the friable muffin as best I could. It was true. I had made a considerable mess on the Turkish rug.

What's all this about, old fellow? I asked. Is the indigestion playing up again?

By no means, he said. My fettle is as fine as it can be. Dr Maserati made a point of checking it on my last visit. I merely wonder what if things had worked out differently in the scheme of it all. Would you and I be in this room, in this universe, at this point in time, having this conversation?

You have a point, I said. My alarm clock did fail to go off this morning. If an excruciating pain in my bunion hadn't woken me, things might have been much different. I

could have enjoyed a considerable lay-in.

I was trying to make light of things, of course. I had seen Cartiledge in this mood before; usually it presaged a dental appointment, or a visit to Bosey Matthews' Nail Emporium in East Dulwich for his lip enlarging treatment.

I mean, Cartiledge continued, what if Shakespeare had not vacated the bowling green at Plymouth Ho!, in time to raise his Armada and defeat the French? Would Ogden and Sumption still have written *The Pirates of Penzance*?

If Lewis and Clark had not perished in the hinterland of America and a whole generation of settlers had spread across the mid-west, would the Mexicans still rule the Pacific Coast today?

And if the Polish emigrant and entrepreneur Andre Thwark had not invented the Thwark System of Self-analysis, epitomized by the famous 'if Bill has three nozzles and Jessica has five how many nozzles have I?' conundrum, I believe most of our white-collar class workers would not be the gibbering wrecks they are today. And furthermore, the hapless Marvin Spielberg would never have been prime minister.

And if all this had not happened, said Cartiledge, would I still be standing here following the mundane adventures of Pobjoy, Coggins' lad and Arthur the Lunatic, of Oswald Norton, and Dandle the Baker and his sweetheart Nessie, of Parson Vemity, Dr Hornby, and Maggie Murphy.

Indeed, said Cartiledge, would spring still follow summer?

That's all very well, I said, but one thing bothers me. Who is this cove Roger de Villiers?

He was my fag at school, said Cartiledge. He lost his sight from trichinosis while working in the Congo for

Mavis Beacon's Overseas Volunteer Typists. He now lives in Basildon and has perfected a method of painting by Braille.

Mrs Grace came in, scowled at the mess on the carpet, and handed me a card.

I found this on the doormat sir. I suspect Coggins' lad is playing jokes again.

It was a 'Get out Of Jail' card from a game of Monopoly. On it someone had scrawled in a rushed, untidy hand: 'The false moustaches are the key – collect and then replace all three.'

The writing looks familiar, I said. But I can't place it.

I handed it to Cartledge.

More like the work of Arthur the Lunatic, he said, flipping it into the fire.

THE RABBIT MUSEUM

I am thinking, said my friend Cartiledge, drawing upon his pipe, in this case a rare Meerschaum of 1897 with a perfectly crafted, but fake, embossed escutcheon of Prince Albert's Seal upon its base, of setting up a Rabbit Museum.

I had just drawn the curtains in our apartment, upon a cold and icy winter scene. Now the coals, husbanded in the grate, reflected in his eyes, which appeared to burn with their own internal fire.

Just think, man, he went on, of the hitherto unrecorded, nay unconsidered, history of the rabbit. It's a wonder no one has thought of it before. What, for instance, do you know of the evolution of the rabbit, its scientific importance, the richness of its cultural importance, in art and literature?

Very little, I confessed. Apart from Ouspensky's famous opera, *The Bartered Rabbit*.

Mrs Grace entered the room at this point, with a tray of truffles and homemade scones. She put another shovel-full of coals upon the fire, whooshed at Cartiledge when he complained about the dust and smiled benignly on me with her tar-specked teeth.

Cartiledge paused discreetly, and continued when she had left. My museum, he said, will have little in common with Jonathan Carroll's masterly baroque creation, or Jack Finney's revised Broadway Museum where rehabilitated, double-jointed strippers, re-enact old musicals in different Time-streams, or even Borges' famous Museum of Real Time which is simply a small empty shed in Mexico City where derelicts occasionally urinate.

It will have nothing to do with Jeff Koontz' Museum of Kitsch, except it will perhaps include a gallery where every exhibit will really be kitsch, and not just laughable. As for the Museum of Tracy Emens, we will at least provide all the facilities she thinks are passé: a real gravel drive, flat parking including a valeting service, not just one, but several toilets, and a small animal petting area that could in no way be thought of as encouraging young children in the pleasures of bestiality.

I confessed myself impressed by the depth in which he worked the idea through.

Mrs Grace entered the room again at this point bearing a silver tray upon which lay a visiting card. Cartledge took one look at it and tore it up with a derisory laugh. Damien Hirst, he said simply, and that was that.

There was a long silence while we twisted our fingers and sucked our teeth. At last the overwhelming odour of sulphur, which had entered the room with Hirst's visiting card, dispersed.

I took up the poker and knocked sparks out of the fitful coals in the grate.

How about that museum we visited in Lyme Regis? I asked, in a recollective mood. Fossils were embedded in every brick of it. Nautilus, ammonite, trilobite. There we saw a museum straddling infinite time. Every phase the Earth could have passed through was there for us.

Cartledge considered this, sucked on his pipe and after a long silence said, with an air of finality, I do not recall that it contained any fossils of rabbits.

TELESCOPE

That night Cartiledge and I dined at the recently opened restaurant of the acclaimed Bolivian chef, Gaspard De La Nuit. The diminutive South American was there in person, clad in leather gazpachos, to direct us to our seats.

I had the so-called lamb with a supplicant's offering of goat's cheese and slight spit. It reminded me of nothing so much as a casserole of Snake and Putrefied Hedgehog I had once enjoyed in the Himalayas, whilst on a geological baffling* expedition with the Rhodes scholar Seamus Doughty except perhaps the flavour of spit was more pronounced. (*This was routine subdural baffling, of course, not that of the tectonic variety, and most of us returned home to the warmth and safety of our families, except poor Gillespie, of course.)

Cartiledge, as I remember it, and although I counselled against it, had gritted eel with a faint moustache. When, at last, he managed to unstick his jaws, he pronounced it 'interesting'.

We left early, before the floorshow, and the free dancing performed by a troupe called the Free Dancers of Bolivia. An earlier review in the Thunderer had forewarned its readers that if anyone really expected 'free' dancing in any form they would certainly be sorely disappointed.

On the kerb, outside the club, whilst awaiting a cab, Cartiledge called for his trusty dog, Helen Young. I had to remind him that the animal had been put down several years earlier due to premature yelping.

The streets were foggy and slick with an early formation of ice, which, according to Sian Lewis, had started in Northern England and then come down slowly through England & Wales. There would be a deep frost that night over areas of Suffolk, and there was a danger that a small pond near the hamlet of Much Ducking might freeze over. I heard the ghost of barking somewhere in the night, as if a young and very voluptuous dog was baying at the apprehension of its ultimate fate. My fingers bit deep into the palms of my hand leaving tiny half-moon scars. Oh, Helen, I yearned. Fortunately no one heard.

Eventually we arrived home and after the ever-attentive Mrs Grace had ushered us into our chambers, and we had thawed out our wickets against the blazing logs in the hearth, Cartledge turned to me and said, the time has come, old friend, when I really should visit the family kennels.

I reminded him that not only did he have no kennels, but that he was the last surviving member of his family and had absolutely no assets at all, except a share of the lease on the premises he occupied with me, which in fact he had long since lost to me in a card game.

This did not appear to represent a setback to him. In that case, he said, I must simply invent the largest telescope in the world. I can rely upon you, he said, to supervise its construction. Remember its refractive index must be 1 over 67.5 optares at the very least. The lens itself should be a kilometre across. Gascoigne & Co, of Crewe can cast the main elements in several sections, but it will be up to you to assemble them on a convenient site, such as the Salisbury Plain and bolt them together. Then you will have to grind the thing to its optimum specification. I suggest you hire a team of skilled ice-skaters, possibly relaxing during summer-season, equip with skates clad in sheepskin

impregnated with jeweller's rouge, and let them get on with the job. Provided they follow Hawking's equation relating refractive index to polar diagonal dimension, everything should work out okay.

I nodded, placed another marshmallow on the tines of my fork, and rotated it in the cooling embers. My tinnitus was getting slightly better, but I still could not make out a word he was saying.

My aim, Cartledge said, is to reveal the network of channels on our neighbouring planet Mars for what they really are, simple lava flows along the intersections of previously formed volcanic plates. You see how this will make my name, and how I will finally be able to challenge the Astronomer Royal to an arm wrestling bout, which will settle the matter forever.

He settled back in his chair and soon fell asleep. I tucked the travel rug about his legs, kissed his brow, removed the ten-pound note that was protruding from his breast pocket, and bid him goodnight.

ESTHER RANTZEN

The bright wintry sun was shining in though the huge bay windows. In the street below couriers and messengers passed, oblivious to the Grand Design that Nash had imprinted on the terrace that surrounded them, and wondering what they could do to make their lives meaningful. One in particular was carrying a bomb, with which he hoped to blow up not only himself but also the Albemarle Street Post Office. His name was Lawrence Chatterton. He was a bat-fancier from St Neots in Cambridgeshire who while suffering a mild version of rabies, contracted from one of his pets, became convinced he was pre-ordained to rid the world of grey squirrels which he was convinced inhabited all the major post offices of our land. We need not concern ourselves further with him and his delusion.

The postman had just called, ringing twice, before leaving a huge parcel for Mrs Grace and two letters. Mine was a demand for child maintenance with a postmark from somewhere in Peru, which I immediately consigned to the flames of the fire.

Cartledge read the one addressed to him, and then passed it to me. I could tell by the smug smile on his face that he was inordinately pleased with its contents. The envelope, of a handsome parchment fabrication, I noticed, had a postage due sticker upon it, in the sum of 1 shilling and pence. I took the letter from the envelope and read it. It struck a chill into my heart.

You would appear, I said, as calmly as I could, to have been invited to appear on stage with Esther Rantzen, in her forthcoming show at the Golders Green Empire.

He nodded. His fingers moved almost instinctively towards his moustache.

For God's sake man, I said, don't play with your moustache at this stage of the game.

I waved the letter. You claim you are an ex-offender involved in street crime, I said.

He nodded again. Yes, and you see they offer not only to pay my travel fees, providing I provide receipts, but to provide dressing room facilities and a warm meal. How could I refuse such an offer?

I stood and stumped around the room for several minutes.

Mrs Grace appeared at the door and said, chastisingly, would you please stop stumping sir. I've just received a baby in the mail; I'm trying to feed it.

I stopped stumping and sat down.

Good god, man, I said, you have no more been involved in street crime than I have, if we forget that incident where the market trader contended that picking up discarded courgettes from the gutter was tantamount to theft. You can't fool me. This is all too plainly a petty attempt to gain publicity for your battery operated communal electric-chair project.

Cartledge wilted somewhat.

As usual you've seen through me, he said. But as soon as Coggins and I can devise a transformer capable of stepping up from 10 volts direct current, via a voltaic jar such as this (at this point he produced a recycled pickle jar

containing something resembling a testicle, but which was probably a pickled onion), into 200,000 volts AC, the future of criminal justice in this country will be in our hands. He settled back into his chair with the air of a man consumed by a vision, and then asked, do you have any wire, by the way, any wire at all?

With a heavy heart and an awful sense of inevitability I handed over the few oddments of wire I had about my person.

STUBBS COTTAGE

After enjoying one of Mrs Grace's robust wildebeest and ostrich stews I decided to take a post-prandial constitutional stroll down to the local Walmart. There was nothing I needed, but I always enjoyed patrolling its extra-spacious aisles (designed for the larger shopper@, as their slogan read) and marvelling at the range of totally unnecessary goods on display (although I must admit was tempted by their range of ride-on lawnmowers).

On my way back home I noticed with some surprise, that the 'For Sale' sign on Stubbs Cottage, just across the way, had been taken down.

The property had been vacant for more than five years, ever since, in fact, it had achieved considerable notoriety as the residence of the infamous Kennington Slasher.

This mass-murderer who had haunted the neighbourhood, uncaught, for many years earlier, had proved to be an ostensibly mild-mannered Welshman called Gryf Rees Pickersgill who, it between committing acts of ritual dismemberment and other incredibly carnal atrocities, had eked out a meagre living carving decoy ducks from flotsam.

The property had recently begun to show signs of dereliction. Many tiles had slipped from its roof, and posters advertising everything from an Onion Bhajee Franchise to a weekend soul experience on Camber Sands, had been plastered over its exterior.

On an impulse I knocked on the door.

A sour-faced individual opened it and regarded me with an expression of distaste.

Non-deterred I offered him my hand, which he ignored.

Pardon me, I said, but I live just across the way and notice you have taken possession of this property. I merely wish to extend my greetings as a neighbour and offer you any assistance you may require in settling into our community.

You are as mistaken as you are long-winded, said the man. I act merely as an agent for the purchasers of this property.

And who might they be? I asked.

I am not at liberty to disclose their identity, he said. In fact they have specifically forbidden me to release personal information about them to hoi polloi such as you. I bid you good day, sir.

And with that he shut, nay slammed, the door in my face.

Thus rebuffed, I returned home, to pick over the carcasses of Mrs Graces wildebeests and ostriches.

THE TALKING DRUM

There was a grey fog outside and inside a chill that seemed to echo round the bones. I put down the I was reading novel by the famous Australian solipsist, Thomas M. Dish, which was quite frankly boring me. I trimmed the gas mantles, arranged my carpet slippers, knocked out my pipe, and settled down to scanning the obituaries in the Thunderer.

A visit to my dentist earlier that afternoon had left me with a numb jaw, which was now thankfully wearing off.

Ooo ar nag arhghry, I'd told him. Yes, he had replied, many people make that mistake. Actually, I'm Lithuanian. My father was a gypsy prince and my mother a convicted shoplifter.

I quickly scanned the obituaries.

Eggsucker's gone, Cartledge said.

So I see. Choked on a pickled gecko egg in that bloody Peruvian restaurant, poor fellow.

He always did take risks with irony, said Cartledge. With a name like that you'd have thought he would have been a bit more careful. Did he owe you money?

A small amount. He owed me for a transfer of shares in The Eternal Peanut Company. I'll write it off for tax purposes. It was only peanuts, after all.

There was a small squeal of surprised pain from the grate.

Who put this mandrake root on the fire? Cartledge said, attacking it again with the poker. Damn thing's getting on my nerves.

That was Mrs Grace, I said. The arrival of this new baby has knocked her bit doolally. She seems to have developed an overwhelming desire to feed things, such as the fire, and even the pitcher plants in the garden. And how long have we had that bizarrely-dressed Kimono Dragon?

Ah yes, the baby, said Cartiledge. I could see how that might take it out of one. It's not as if she even sent off for it.

She says, I said, with what I felt was a significant but not heavy-handed weight.

I turned to the front page of the paper.

I see the whole of London is agog in anticipation of the forthcoming state visit of the Chief of Ognulaland. The Queen intends to take him for a fish dinner in the famous Sprats Fish Restaurant in the Edgware Road. All well and good, I say, as long as they avoid that damn Peruvian place.

Ah yes, Old Fatsui, said Cartiledge.

You know him?

We were at school together in Surbiton. He was a fine sportsman. He wore the colours of the Wimbledon Speedway Team on many occasions and knew how to fine-tune a JAP engine. But there was a spot of ugliness when he failed to take the title off the famous Rand exporter, Split Waterman, and then threatened the man with an asswigi, which is a kind of ceremonial frog.

Otherwise he was a complete Charlatan. Came up with a scheme to buy end of line audio equipment and sell it for twice the price, and convince people he was doing them a favour. And then there was the famous talking drum incident.

What was that exactly?

Claimed to have an original Ognula talking drum. I paid him fifty pounds for it. That's it over there. He indicated a small, shrivelled piece of lumpen artefact in a corner of the room I had hitherto ignored.

Damned if I could ever get a word out of it, said Cartledge.

THE AETHERIAL DEVICE

All the auguries the night before had presaged snow in the morning, so I rose early and put on my warmest clothes, thinking I might challenge Coggins' lad to a snowball fight or perhaps visit the local park and enjoy a spot of tobogganing before helping to chip the ducks out of the frozen lake. Imagine my disappointment when, drawing the study curtains, I saw the streets below bathed in a warm sunlight, which reflected from the stained glass windows of the church across the way, lighting them up like sparkling gems. I wondered how I could ever have been misled into believing it would snow in January.

Cartiledge was already up. He'd posted a notice on his workroom door, which read 'Do Not Enter Under Pain of Death', so I went in to see what it was all about. His workbench was littered with coils of wire, metallic plates, skeletal frameworks of wood bedecked with terminals, and a variety of small intricately crafted components, in brass and copper. An array of Lassiter's Patent Voltaic Canisters gleamed in the subdued light of the gas lamps and Bunsen burners.

Cartiledge made a brief motion with his hand to greet my entry, but otherwise ignored me.

What's up, old chap, I said. I haven't seen you so engrossed since you tried to make a structural load-bearing material out of porridge.

I would have succeeded, he said, if I'd only had access to the latest resins derived from the rare marine umflufulla tree found only in the Amazonian Delta, and twenty fathoms down at that.

This, however, he said, is guaranteed to work. It says so in this advertisement in Popular Mechanics.

He handed me a copy of the aforesaid magazine, and pointed out an advertisement on the back page.

Coggins managed to get one for me, at no small cost, I might say, imported through a dealer in Whitechapel, who I understand has since closed down due to rat infestation. This may be the only one in the country.

What is it?

An Arbillally & Son Patent Aetherial Scanner, he said.

I read through the text of the advertisement:

New Aetherial Delights Guaranteed, it said. The Secrets of the Universe mastered in only five days. Arbillally and Son absolutely guarantee that, if constructed properly, the Arbillally and Son Aetherial Scanner will enable you to scan the aether and decipher the messages contained therein.

What is the aether? the advertisement went on in an educational tone. *Some of you may have had bad experiences with tooth-pullers and other so-called dentists, who have put their inadequacies down to fluctuations in the so-called aether they supply down tubes into your mouth. Ignore them, for they are charlatans who cannot tell the difference between theaether and nitrous oxide.*

For years scientists have recognized that the space between stars and planets is not empty, but in fact full of aether. What is the purpose of aether? Recent scientific tests have revealed that its function is to carry messages

between sentient beings on various stars, planets and nebulae. Just as when I shout at you, my message needs a medium to transmit it (air, or atmosphere, in our case, or if you are a dolphin, water), so when aliens shout between the galaxies, their messages are transmitted through the aether.

Purchase the Arbilly & Son Patent Aetherial Scanner, with translocational locking and multi-functional dithering at no extra price, and you too will soon be party to the Secrets Of The Universe, or at least know where the party is going on. Price 76 dollars and 54 cents (jewel case included), construction plans available extra at 40 dollars 34 cents. (Allow 42 cents extra carriage if ordering from Bali).

The address was post restante, somewhere in Flatlands, Ohio.

Cartledge had been working feverishly all this while.

One more connection to make, he said, fiddling with several complicated leads from the Lassiter Canisters to the outboard terminals. He had constructed a megaphone-like cone from pages of the Thunderer, laminated and bonded with a milk-derived glue, which he set upon the whole structure.

He made the final connection. Now, he said, we shall hear the truth from the stars.

Swoooooosh, said the megaphone, *schwionggggg*.

Cartledge picked up the Device and started to dance around the room with it. He took it to the window.

I have to find the optimum transmission mode, he said. It says so in the directions.

Venus, the morning star, was still glowing low on the horizon. He twisted a tangled coil of wire formed into the

shape of a funnel and pointed it, in as much as it could be said to be pointed, towards the distant planet.

The *swoosh* and *swoong* faded and was replaced by an irregular metronomic ticking.

Do you hear that, Cartledge said? It's a polyrhythm, two over twelve, alternating with three over twelve. Venus is the second planet from the sun in a sequence of twelve whilst we, of course, are the third. They are sending out a message.

Yes, I said. But it seems to be an exceedingly boring one.

Where's your imagination man? Cartledge said and his visage suddenly paled.

This message is not meant for us. Don't you see? It's a beacon, pointing to our planet, pointing the way for what can only be an invasion fleet.

TAPPETTS

The latest edition of Tappett's Universal Register of Defamation & Scandal (available on subscription only) has arrived, and as usual, it makes fascinating reading. It contains new insights, for instance, into the matter of Lord Percy Spillworth's Mysterious Nocturnal Ramblings, and a complete list of those accused of arson in Her Majesty's Shipyards (excepting Lord Percy, of course, who was only charged with Mysteriously Rambling After Dark).

Its revised entry on The First Instance of Sodomy Amongst the British Working Classes details the adventures of Josiah Slocombe and his cousin Harry Mandy in Broughton-on-the-Water, which pre-dates the well-known atrocities of Tilsney Barraclough by several years.

It reveals that Biles' Withering Disease has been responsible for shortening the average overall wingspan of the British Postal Pigeon by 2.7 centimetres over the last fifty years, and that the last verger at St Swithins in Crippendale had an extra finger on his left hand, which is useful when playing the ocarina.

I was sitting happily browsing through this entertaining tome when I heard a noise from the hallway. I went to investigate, knowing that Mrs Grace had taken herself off to the hardware store in search of a new fittling stick.

I was surprised to find Cartledge. He gave me a startled and somewhat guilty look. He was carrying a large bundle under his arm his tied up in brown paper.

Good Lord, man, I said. I thought you were at your lip-enlarging clinic this morning.

I am, he said, in a flustered fashion. I mean, I'm late. I'm so late, in fact, that I should be well on my way home by now if I'm not careful. I'd better be on my way.

What's in the parcel, old chap? I asked.

It's just my collection of the complete works of Jules Verne. I'll never read them now. I'd thought I'd just drop them by the charity shop. Well, must be off.

There's a delight for you when you get back, I said. The new edition of Tappett's has arrived. It has a complete list of all those accused of arson in the Royal Dockyards.

Yes, I know, said Cartiledge.

But you haven't read it yet

I saw a review.

Again Cartiledge appeared flustered. I could only put down his peculiar demeanour to his anxiety over his appointment. Yes, he said. I read a review, and with that he swept hastily, almost at a run, out of the front door.

I shook my head in puzzlement and returned to leaf through The Register.

I was startled to read that Harold Munday, King Michael III's Royal Surgeon had not only been revealed to have been a woman upon his death, but to have secretly given birth to triplets whilst an octogenarian.

Scant minutes seemed to have passed, so engrossed was I in the book, when I heard someone at the front door and, shortly afterwards, Cartiledge entered the room, beaming at me with freshly enlarged lips.

My word, I said. That was quick. Normally your appointments with Bosey Matthews take hours. And I see you've even had time to change your cummerbund.

He looked at me as if I were quite mad, then said, Ah, I see the new Tappett's has arrived.

THE INVASION FROM VENUS

Cartledge entered the room, scraped the brine from his upper lip, stowed his tackle behind the chaise longue and hung up his galoshes. He sat down and gently steamed before the fire. Outside we were deep in the grip of autumn. Leaves rattled against the windows like a machine gun attack.

What is the latest news of the Invasion from Venus? he asked. I saw several shooting stars when I was on Chesil Beach. I wondered if they might represent the vanguard of the fighting troops, since they already appear to have transferred all the poor dysfunctional fools programmed to do nothing more than stumble about in our shopping centres in an affectation of drunkenness whilst in fact gathering information on special offers or three-for-two offers which might be of use to an invader.

I shook my head. I've heard nothing since the last message. I think the batteries on your Device might be dead. They smell of dried fish. I tried topping them up with cooking sherry, as you instructed, but it had no effect. I also rearranged the wires, inverted the interossiter, and realigned the misalignment coils, as you suggested, but, damn it, I'm not a technical man.

A silence ensued broken only by a faint mewling from below stairs.

Cartledge shot me a haunted look.

How about you, I said. I see you've been whistling for shrimp again. Any luck?

Three, he said. One of them a ten-pounder. God, he was a fighter. I played him for three hours before landing him. He was a huge pink chap, with long bristling whiskers and

his legs joined together. Reminded me of my Great Uncle Ellis on that occasion his drama group attempted to re-enact the invention of lobster thermidor.

Again, the sound of a child in exquisite pain, as if being fed sorghum, wailed up to us.

I've put an ad in *The Lady*, I said. God, man, I hate to do it, but we can't go on like this. Mrs Grace has been stewing nappies all day and the plants on the first floor landing are wilting.

Cartledge nodded sympathetically. We're on the verge of an invasion from Venus, and we have to put up with this. Any replies yet?

There was one from a governess from Bavaria - a hearty woman who demonstrated she could use an alpenstock to good effect, but she was prone to dyslexia. Her name was Anna but she spelt it Anna, and she couldn't make a Black Forest Gateaux to save her life. Something about her didn't quite ring true. Then there was a woman from Shadwell who was plainly a trollop, but at least claimed to have had experience in slaughtering goats.

That might be useful, said Cartledge, reflectively. Mrs Grace always drew the line at goats, said Cartledge.

The downstairs bell rang at that point, indicating we had a visitor. Cartledge half rose from his seat, but with a motion of my hand I indicated I would see to the matter.

At the door was Coggins' lad. He held in his hand a peculiarly coiled piece of metal, with two terminals.

Mr Coggins wanted Mr Cartledge to have this sir, he said in a fluting voice. He said it should enable him to retune his wireless set to Hilversum. And he says he can call by to check his aerial's correctly aligned, if given notice.

I took it and pressed a silver florin into the boy's hand.
Gor blimey, thanks guv, he said and skipped off merrily.
When the boy had gone I buried it deep beneath the
aspidistra in the hallway.
Cartledge need never know.

ST SWITHINS

I went to visit the vicar of St Swithins in Crippendale. I was interested in his extra digit, as reported in Tappett's Universal Register of Defamation and Scandal, especially since my reading of Michael Behe's latest texts on evolution had hinted that this was the direct result of a recessive gene which had mutated into an irreducibly complex mechanism (i.e., a finger, by definition irreducibly complex because it contained more than one joint). The whole process dated back to the years when we were all amphibians, if you believe Darwin.

I'd seen a day trip advertised by a charabanc company outside my local Sainsburys. It also offered to take in the beach at Swanage, the ancient Roman Aqueduct linking Frogmore in Hampstead with Ware, and a new Shopping Mall at Eason St Mary, which held the only English franchise to sell Murphy Beds.

The vehicle still paraded the antique posters of an ancient Amnesty International campaign, designed to draw attention to the poor quality of drinking water in Lancashire, and sponsored by Boddingtons.

Mrs Mandolini, who was sitting next to me, was entertaining company. She had a vast supply of stories to tell about her husband, Maurice, and his career as a spy in the war against Greece, when he had apparently secreted a telescope in his oesophagus and travelled through the local villages with his portable organ, wooing the local young girls with sentimental songs. Mrs Mandolini struck me as someone who would believe anything.

After the war his career as a fish importer had gradually worn their married relationship down, and when she was called upon to explain to British Customs the deficit in

weight between Shrimps Loaded and Shrimps Landed from her ship, the Cutty Mary, she broke down and pleaded insanity, as any reasonable person would.

We stopped at Wigglesworth Services for the opportunity to enjoy their bathroom facilities and buy stale chips. Mrs Murray got stuck in the disabled toilet for three hours, which set our timetable back somewhat. She was finally released when someone thought to deflate her Innovations Catalogue Patent Travel Commode.

Crippendale was a quaint and money-grabbing parish in the Heart of England, which apparently lay somewhere between The Old Lumley Shags and The Ruts of Winslett. We charged through narrow lanes with high hedgerows, pausing only to peer nosily into the sumptuous gardens, bedrooms and toilets of the rich and famous who dwelt in the various halls and mansions upon our route.

We proceeded to St Swithins, parking opposite the Crippendale Pie, Faggot and Cream Tea Shoppe, which pleased the more portly and less energetic of our party.

St Swithins was an old and crumbling place. Voles and stoats, weasels and field mice flitted to and fro in the graveyard, always keeping a weather-eye open for owls, and marauding sparrow hawks, not to mention local cats with names like Glamour, Wyvern and Old Todger owned by people with names like Kristen, Flavia, and Rudie. It was the perfect environment for writers researching the habits of Small Creatures with a view to writing best selling novels about them, and I found one such, grey and grizzled with years of matted hair growth, encamped in a crude shack in the corner of the graveyard, but I am sworn not to reveal his name (except that it is an anagram of Gary Killworth).

The Vicar took some finding. He was hiding behind a

haystack in a field two miles away. One look at him and I could tell he was obviously only half the man he once might have been.

I shook his hand. He had the regular number of fingers but there was a large scar and a bunion-shaped malformation of the bone where his extra digit had been removed, plus evidence of scar tissue between the fingers, as if an amphibian web structure had been cut back.

I had to have surgery, he explained. And still the press continues to hound me.

He pulled out a copy of the Crippendale Advertiser and showed me the front-page headline: *'FROG SPAWN OF SATAN - LOCAL VICAR'S DOUBLE LIFE AS AMPHIBIAN'*.

Suddenly I felt an acute attack of what can only be described as vertiginosity, although I had no idea what vertiginosity was, except that it manifested itself as an intense desire to be quit of the vicar's company, even if it involved first beating him into a pulp.

I forbore from shaking his hand once more, but did leave a generous donation for the upkeep of the church's fine Norman rood screen.

On the way back we sang songs detailing the erotic adventures of various young maidens from French provincial towns which Mrs Mandolini accompanied with loud rhythmic farts.

JESUS AND THE THIRTEEN APOSTLES

I've been looking at Michelangelo's Last Supper, said Cartledge. In fact I've been more than merely looking at it. I've been studying it in considerable detail. I had a special camera commissioned, which would take a custom 30" by 20" plate, in direct ratio with the work itself. De Quincey & Associates made the plate for me. They used evaporation techniques to deposit silver salts with an exceedingly fine specular dimension upon the glass base. The lens, with a fixed and exceedingly small aperture, was especially ground for me by Nicholas Boggs of Kennington, famous for his work on the Kennington Cyclorama, which unfortunately has now been closed and is subject to a demolition order. I gather the caretaker was a serial arsonist, with a penchant for places of entertainment. The destruction of the Beckenham Grand, the Sidcup Royal Masonic Rehearsal Room, the Lewisham Gaiety Bingo Hall, and Doctor Thurrups scale reconstruction of the Suez Canal, have all been laid to his charge.

The camera, lens, plate and all was shipped to my friend Noel de Barga, who owns a hat shop in Vatican City and who had obtained a special dispensation to photograph the work.

I hardly have to tell you that there are traditionally held to be thirteen people depicted in this work, Jesus, of course, and his 12 disciples.

You will notice there has never been any reference in the literature to the whole infrastructure, which would normally surround an event of this magnitude, and Michelangelo is probably at fault in being selective in his vision. Where are the Spanish waiters, or the Australian

bartenders? Where are the girls in black fishnet tights selling cigarettes? Where is the pop group playing Y Viva L'España, Hi Ho Silver Lining, and You Look Wonderful Tonight? It all signalled that there was something slightly bogus going on.

Through close scrutiny of the exposed plate under the microscope I have to report I have discovered what I consider to be an extra party, a thirteenth disciple if you please. An extra guest at the feast.

He stands just behind St Paul's left elbow, as the disciple himself appears to be reaching for a portion of chorizo sausage, or possibly KFC sizzle-fried chicken wheel-nuts, and appears to be whispering advice into the man's ear, possibly warning him of the danger of botulism. Such is the skill of Michelangelo's technique that he has rendered his appearance as hardly more than that of a ghost. And yet, thanks to the microscope, we see his moustache clearly, in sufficient detail to make us worry as to whether it might not be a fake. We see the huge alien bulbous growths on his forehead and, tellingly, just behind his left ear, the arcane zodiacal sign for the planet Venus.

I am of course loath to make these disclosures public. I realize it strikes a dagger at the heart of normally perceived opinion, not to mention the Catholic faith, and I might suffer persecution in consequence, not in the least by having my Railcard rescinded, and the regulars at my over-60's drop in club sneer at me, and seek other partners with whom to play dominoes.

What are you trying to say? I asked Cartiledge. That a visitor from Venus infiltrated Our Lord's Final Supper?

Why yes, said Cartiledge. But at least he had the good sense to avoid the fajitas.

SAND

It was quiet outside, ominously so. A man I had met in the street, a civil servant in fact, named Leroy Kettle, had warned that a particularly high-pressure zone was working its way up towards England from the Sahara. It meant that by noon tomorrow the whole of the country from the Isle of Wight to the Gorbals could well be covered in several inches of sand. He claimed to have received this information from someone called Michael Fish.

I recollected my days as a subaltern in Admiral Briggs' African Expeditionary Force, when, using a crude form of sand-yacht to explore the hinterland behind Algiers, we had found absolutely nothing... but sand. It had all proved inordinately depressing, although a mess officer bought all the rights, and later founded an industrial empire manufacturing egg timers.

Mrs Grace caught up with me in the hallway upon my arrival and immediately asked if I had any sand upon my person. She said she had recently taken delivery of a Gila Monster and intended to build a vivarium.

I confess I was a little short with her. I was not in the best of moods and sand was the last thing on my mind.

I entered the room and confronted Cartledge outright. Have you seen my slippers?

The ones made out of carpet off cuts, with the cheap gilt brocade trimming usually found on substandard curtains and pelmets? Asked Cartledge.

It is not the quality of their construction, but their whereabouts that concerns me. They were particularly important to me for sentimental reasons, having been made by my Great Grandmother on my Nephew's side in a croft

on the Hebridean island of Skank.

For God's sake man, I know nothing of the whereabouts of your slippers, but I think I may have a solution to your problem. It so happens that I have arranged a séance this evening, not, I must remark, with the express intention of finding out the whereabouts of your slippers, for I insist I know nothing of them, but rather to settle certain doubts about my own family history, involving kennels, an old dog of mine named Helen Young, and my venous Uncle Artimus Jefferson Clinker.

To this end, I have booked a certain Madame Desiree Cousteau who promises us a singularly entertaining session. She it was who was responsible for finding the Maharani of Baroda's ceremonial hairbrush, in a place where no one but a contortionist would have thought of looking for it. And when the Maharaja himself lost the leather customized gear knob of his BMW she was able to put her finger right on it. I'm sure your slippers will pose no problem for her.

So it's come to this, Cartledge, I said. While the whole country prepares itself for a deluge by sand, you await the arrival of a dubious medium and refuse to face up to the fact that you are wearing my missing slippers at this very moment.

Cartledge looked at his feet and gasped. An infant screamed from downstairs. The front doorbell rang. The lights went out.

MADAME COUSTEAU

The lights went on again.

Madame Cousteau swept into the room. She was a fulsome woman with a huge corsage. She bore with her a collapsible card table and the faint aroma of a Great Western Parcels Office Circa 1874. She set up the card table in the middle of the room.

Mrs Grace pulled shut the curtains. Manhandling the tough folds of brown velour raised a sweat on her brow.

Cartledge watched her insouciantly. On another occasion, I felt, he might have assisted her, but there was no denying a certain coldness had developed in their relationship, especially since I had subtly laid the responsibility for the insertion of the advertisement in *The Lady* to him by forging a payment docket in his hand and leaving it in her view.

I felt no guilt about this, for I knew Cartledge considered her in breach of her contract as a housekeeper, by virtue of the untoward and previously unannounced introduction of a baby into our hitherto comfortable arrangement.

I was not at all sure where we stood legally, especially since she maintained the child was an unsolicited gift. I made a mental note to consult my solicitor Humphrey Major-Garteringue (pronounced 'Gathering').

Now, with Cartledge's blatant misappropriation of my slippers with only the mildest pretence of deception, and the consequent slur on Mrs Grace's character, arising from the inference it cast on her professional abilities as a housekeeper, none of us knew where we stood, least of all myself.

There were certainly bridges to be built. But not right now.

Moving like a wraith, Mrs Grace turned down the gas mantles, adjusted the shades on the oil lamps, trimmed and manicured the wicks on the candles. She draped a cloth over a particularly obnoxious grease-lamp formed from the shrunken skull of a pygmy Cartiledge's deceased brother The Reverend Norris had sent him from Borneo.

Earlier that day, on my way home from the British Library where I had been researching material for my ongoing work on the so-called Bond Street Arcanum with its insights into primeval hairdressing, a news vendor on the corner of Great Portland Street had told me that the threat of Saharan sand had passed, but a dry wind still rattled the sashes of the windows in their boxes.

With the curtains drawn and the lamps trimmed in anticipation, of Madame Cousteau's forthcoming theatrical presentation it was hard to make out much detail in the room, save for the glowing embers of cannabis sativa in Cartiledge's pipe. I adjusted my antimacassar nervously and hoped I would not need it.

Madame Cousteau insisted we all draw our chairs around her table. As we rearranged the furniture I thought I heard the whisper of escaping hydraulic gas, which gave me pause for thought. Mrs Grace skulked about uncertainly, but I insisted she joined us.

When we were all ready and present, Madame Cousteau unbuttoned her corsage and said, I must first of all apologize for my late arrival. It was due to unforeseen circumstances beyond my control.

BIG PIG ROAST AT THE LAST RESORT

I took Madame Cousteau's fat and fleshy hand in my own. There was a ring on her middle finger. A distant candle sparked a light in it, which was enough for me to venture the basis of a professional evaluation.

My friend, the famed Hatton Garden jeweller, Sir John Julius Ipswich, for whom I had worked for many years in my youth as a valuer, used to say I had magic fingers, but just how magic neither he, nor fortunately his auditors, never fully realized.

This ring I now perused was 200 carats, worth at least in excess of \$50,000, a sum which was radically reduced when adjusted to allow for the standard 45% devaluation upon valuation.

Then there was the 60% allowance known as the Rat Deduction under Federal tax rules, payable to certain subterranean dealers in Los Angeles in order to fund a witness protection scheme for the nefarious criminal Willy the Rat. Furthermore, in anticipation of wholesale farm tax and shipping duties to be announced in a forthcoming budget, including an export tax known as Her Majesty's Finger, a dealer would easily see another drop in 80% of face value. How was I to tell her that her fabulous gem was worth approximately 3 shillings and sixpence on the open market? And why should she believe me?

Fortunately she never asked me.

At that point the phone rang, but we ignored it, because we didn't have one.

Mrs Grace sat on my left, between Cartledge and myself. Cartledge was facing me, and I was facing him. I could just about make out his nose. If I squinted out of my left eye, I could just make out Mrs Grace's Basilisk stare. She was squinting in my direction. If I squinted out of my right eye, I could see nothing and both my eyes started hurting and my vision went blurred.

Now, La Madame boomed, we are gathered together, us four, to receive news from the hinterland. I ask the spirits: has anyone made contact?

Bizarre though it may seem, at that very same moment I felt the chill of an exterior force as if a cold hand had touched on the tight herringbone serge of my trousers in the region of the crotch.

A wolf coughed in the night. Or at least it seemed that way to me.

A foghorn baritone voice rumbled: it is I Beluga Lugosi, a Hollywood star locked in the body of a sturgeon spawned in the Caspian Sea. Pity me and mark my words.

At the same the table raised itself a good ten inches. It was nothing to do with me.

Madame Cousteau produced a moustache and laid it on the table. I found this in my boudoir last night, she said. One of you will recognize it for what it is. At this point, Mrs Grace uttered an audible scream, rose and rushed from the room.

In the chaos that followed, Madame Cousteau's hand slipped from mine and did so without the ring. Perhaps in the morning she would realize it was missing and file an insurance claim. Perhaps not.

THE FALSE MOUSTACHE

I arose at dawn and went downstairs to find Cartledge already hunched over his microscope. I drew back the curtains. The insipid sun was like an infant's milky mouth just rising above the rooftops. I thought I glimpsed Coggins' lad, passing in the street below, wearing a jaunty beret and a pair of homemade spats, and tossing a set of five-stones in his hand.

I scraped a few flies from the flypaper that hung in the bay window and put them aside on a small porcelain ashtray bearing the famous Kensitas cigarette-brand trademark for Mrs Grace to feed to the pitcher plants.

I've made a preliminary investigation of the moustache, Cartledge said. It's fake of course, formed from the skin of some small, stiff-bristled creature. I suspect beaver. Then again, it could simply be horsehair.

The horse is hardly a small creature, I said.

Cartledge looked at me as if I was stupid. My point entirely, he said.

So Madame Cousteau had been entertaining some one with a false moustache, possibly derived from a beaver, in her boudoir, I said. Why should she choose to confront us with the devilish thing?

Your guess is as good as mine, said Cartledge. I'm only annoyed that I never got to ask her about the spiritual afterlife of my beloved Helen Young.

You don't think she could suspect either of us of such outrageous behaviour?

I have a clean conscience, said Cartledge. There was a long pause and he looked at me pointedly and said, and for

that matter, my own moustache.

I staggered backwards grazing my knee against the elephant leg umbrella stand.

Are you suggesting that I would consider wearing a false moustache in order to consort with such a woman? And to what end, for god's sake man?

I have no idea, Cartiledge said. It might be of course that you were interested in a certain ring of hers.

The idea's preposterous, I said. You know about my war wound, how it makes me tetchy and gives me headaches every Saturday night. Why would I take the risk of revealing to her that I was no longer a whole man?

I hardly think that a mild case of gas-induced asthma would cast any aspersions on your manhood, said Cartiledge, or, for that matter, would mitigate in your favour in any court case brought against you.

There was a few minutes bristly silence, whilst each of us considered how far we could push our respective retorts, without the threat of a fundamental breakdown in our relationship.

It dissolved into a weary perplexity.

But what do you make of Mrs Grace's reaction? I asked. Do you think she recognized the moustache?

That's a hypothesis I hadn't considered, confessed Cartiledge. I assumed it was merely the stress induced by her recent elevation to ersatz motherhood.

Perhaps we should interview her at the earliest possibility, I said.

No time like the present said Cartiledge, ringing the housekeeper's bell.

Mrs Grace came into the room. I know what you're thinking, she said. And even if I don't, I don't like what I might be thinking that you're thinking.

Cartiledge immediately took up the initiative. Mrs Grace, there's no doubt in my mind that this moustache can be laid at your doorstep; God knows where you found the beaver or what was its ultimate fate. Probably the same supplier who supplied you with the Kimono Dragon and the Gila Monster had a hand in the matter. Can you deny that the whole aim of your life over the last few weeks, ever since, in fact, you received your unauthorized baby, has been to defame your employers and that your attempted liaison with Madame Cousteau, along with the ridiculous false moustache which no one saw through, was yet another attempt in this direction?

Mrs Grace bunched her tear-stained handkerchief in her hand and sobbed inarticulately.

In the absence of any reply, Cartiledge proclaimed the fateful words: Mrs Grace, I'm afraid you have let us down. You are dismissed. You will leave this house forthwith.

Mrs Grace made one final appeal: That is not my moustache, sirs, she said. And I will live to prove it and to clear my name with you.

With that, and a curt twist of her head, which left the bangs of her hair nodding in her wake, she left the room, and our employ forever.

Almost.

I intercepted her with the Kensitas Ashtray.

Please do not forget your flies, Mrs Grace.

Her eyes were bitter blue agonized gems, which burnt through into my soul.

THE SPIDER

I drew the curtains back on the bay window. A spider had attached itself to the streamers of the flypaper. It seemed symbolic, especially the way it still twitched with residual life. A grey drizzle was setting in. A down town train passed by in the distance on the overground; as it passed by the switches its wheels sparked up like a succession of new dimes. Cabs passed by in the street below; the horses hooves were muffled with sackcloth to stop them skidding on the wet cobbles. Mr Coggins' lad passed by clad in a flat cap and a muffler. He looked up at me with a cheerful grin and gave me a cheeky wink. I made a mental note to have a strict word with Mr Coggins about him.

I rubbed a hand over my chin, reminding myself that my razor and brush hung untouched in the bathroom cabinet.

Cartledge had been napping in his Chesterfield. A copy of Browning's "Gravy Recipes" lay open on his lap. He came awake with a sudden start.

I was just dreaming of the Pylons, he said. My god, it was horrible. They were cousins on my mother's side. Ernest Pylon was a particularly joyless soul who claimed to have studied static electricity at the famous Floyd Codlin institute in Prague. Mildred Pylon had particularly sturdy thews. What are thews, exactly? In my dream they were large oaken timbers used to shore up ancient piers and riverworks. But hers had a propensity to throb with a deep bass rumble. At the same time my ears were filled with a high frequency hissing as of rain falling on high-voltage cables. Am I going mad, dear friend?

Quite possibly, I said. For myself, I had this terrible dream that we had just sacked Mrs Grace.

My god, said Cartledge, that's right. You sacked her.

I merely handed her the flies, I said. You sacked her, Cartledge. And I think you were rather peremptory and heavy-handed about it if you don't mind me saying.

Whatever the outcome, said Cartledge. It's done now. We must be realistic and face the consequences. Presumably she will take her child with her and that awful shabby IKEA cardboard box it came in. Perhaps we should offer to house the Gila Monster and the Kimono Dragon until she has found premises suitable for their containment. She will be looking for a post as housekeeper in a small zoo, I imagine. But these are small logistical details. My friend Master Cliff Arcadie owns a baby elephant and trap and might be called upon to assist with removals. My biggest worry at this moment is about who will serve our afternoon tea and cook our muffins just as we like them. Who will cook our abalones until they have reached just the right degree of tenderness? Who will turn down our sheets on a daily basis and scent them with persimmon and vinegar?

There are but two choices I said, the Slut from Shadwell or the Bavarian dominatrix.

The slut from Shadwell it is, then, said Cartledge.

MRS FLAAAGHTHLY

Next morning Cartiledge and I nervously looked out for the arrival of our new housekeeper, Mrs Flaaaghtly. It was a cold day, with a pronounced chill in the air. The sunlight was bright but unwarming. A clutch of ravens cawed mournfully from the rooftops nearby.

A man wearing a crocheted wool hat passed by gibbering inanely to himself. I have always been aware of the sadness of such souls and had promised myself from an early age I would never become like them. So now when I walk along the street and talk to myself I practice the subtle arcane arts of ventriloquism, so that no one can see my lips move.

The pantehnicon arrived promptly and Mrs Flaaaghtly dismounted. She was a slight woman with sunken cheeks, smoking a Balkan Sobranie. Her hair looked as if it had been attached to the terminals of a large spark generator. She had two breasts, one on either side.

Coggins' lad stood on the pavement watching proceedings. She hacked his shins, clipped him round the ear and pushed him roughly aside. I warmed to her immediately.

Cartiledge stepped forward to shake her hand. She stood on his carpet slippers, making muddy marks on them, and kissed him on both cheeks, and after farting very loudly, flounced into the house, with a veritable circus of brats and under aged infants, nephews and brothers and suchlike in tow.

She approved the room we had selected for her quarters. I hope you won't be expecting me to be running up and downstairs, all the time, at your every whim, she said. I'm

hypoglaecemic, you see. Changes in elevation bother me. She shook off a small infant that was clinging to the hem of her skirts, and lit up another Sobranie. I showed her the bedroom. It's small, she said, but none of its walls are load bearing, so I am sure there is scope for development; the gasholder in the next yard along is unsightly but has distinct possibilities. Tell me, what is the subsoil like, shale or alluvial? I do hope it's not clay. I shall want a confirmation of the water level at the earliest opportunity.

She went back outside to direct her helpers in unloading her goods from the pantehnicon. They worked at it like Trojans, and then hung about stealing our cheese. Not just the household cheddar, but also the rare vintages we had laid down in our cellar where Cartiledge also kept his collection of hero-magazines each individually wrapped in acid-free cellophane wrappers. I caught one of the urchins with a whole Edam, took him around the corner and taught him a lesson in ballistics.

We needn't have worried about what was to happen to Mrs Grace's Gila Monster or the Kimono Dragon. Within half-an hour, her helpers had constructed a series of interlocking cages in our back garden, from which I would wager a tiger could not escape. A single goat stood tethered close by the cages, looking exceedingly mournful.

Coggins' lad lifted himself from the flagstones, spat out a broken tooth, and set out to limp his way home. I waved and he signalled back with a jaunty crook-toothed smile.

MUFFINS

Cartledge hacked with a knife at the charred edges of his muffin. All in all, I think, he said, Mrs Flaaaghtly is a real find. When I think of all the years we put up with Mrs Grace serving us those lukewarm under-cooked things she laughably called muffins.

I crunched happily on mine. Her argument that they are good for your teeth and gums is certainly persuasive, I said. I would be happier, however, if she could manage to keep her mud out of the butter.

Ah, the mud, said Cartledge. I understand she's hired Coggins' lad to help her clear it from the basement. Where do you think it's all come from? Mrs Grace never seemed to have any problem with mud.

A silence ensued. I moved almost instinctively to the window to look at the weather. It was alarmingly bright for a Sunday morning. Swifts were rising over the roofs of the city in the warm spirals of air thrown up by the hot slates. Venus, the morning star, was in apogee and already visible glowing like a white-hot penny on the Western horizon.

I turned away grim-faced. Mrs Flaaaghtly's muffins, although undeniably healthful, were having a distinctly costive effect on my constitution.

Cartledge saw my expression and nodded sympathetically.

Yes, he said, I know how you feel. Venus grows ever larger and moves ever closer and still their transmissions remain enigmatic, giving us no clue as to the eventual date of their invasion.

The telephone rang. It came as a surprise to both of us, since we hadn't realized we were connected. I lifted up the Bakelite receiver. It weighed a ton. I envisaged a day sometime in the far distant future when, with the introduction of new materials and suchlike, phones might become more mobile and one might be able to have a telephone conversation for more than ten seconds without requiring a body-building course. And if wirelesses are wireless, I thought, why aren't telephones? I made a mental note to file patents at the first opportunity.

It was Mr Coggins on the other end of the line.

I have a word to say, he said, regarding your employment of my lad. Lord knows I'm grateful for any opportunity of advancement offered to the boy, and a farthing an hour is a fair wage in this day and age. But he is being returned to our household in such a grubby condition that it fair makes my missus cry. Even my bloodhound, Hatchet, curls up in the corner when he comes in the room and refuses to go near him. I'll be honest with you sir, we are spending more on cleaning his gabardine and other accoutrements, and on laundering his smalls and other vestments, than he is coming home with in his pocket. I'm not saying he doesn't enjoy the work; Lord knows he's as happy as a sand boy. In fact, by all accounts, he is a sand boy. If you could see your way to contributing a little towards his laundry fees, I'm sure we'd all be satisfied with the arrangement.

I don't know, Coggins I said. We could maybe offer some cheese, goat's cheese, of which we seem to have a surplus at the moment, and maybe subsidise his galoshes.

You're a kind man, sir, said Coggins. I'll leave it in your hands. And perhaps you could ask Mr Cartledge from me, how his reception is these days.

I put the phone down. Cartledge raised his eyebrows.

Wrong number, I told him.

DAMN CRITTERS

Cartiledge rose as I came into the room, which worried me, since I had hardly seen him out of his Chesterfield for the last six months. However, his legs seemed the same length as I remembered them, so I was not unduly worried. I had heard of Chinese surgeons who could lengthen or shorten the legs at will, and was only too pleased to see he had not fallen under their thrall.

A breakfast table had been set up, with pots of curdled jam, saltina biscuits (the so-called Graham Crackers), salt-fish ackee, and whey-flavoured toast. A small dish of mud was set to one side with nachos for dipping, and next to that an instrument I recognized as Cartiledge's service revolver, a .33 gauge six-gun. Inscribed upon its stock was the nostrum: "per ardua ad nauseam".

Well, my old friend, Cartiledge greeted me, how did you sleep?

With my mouth open, I replied. Occasionally I turned from side to side. I'd say on an average I spent 35% of my time on my left side, 60% on my right and 5% on my back. Of course, I'd twist and turn throughout the night, so all of these estimates are notional. Oh, and I dreamt I was a dwarf with a rabid fear of pickles. I mean literally rabid - pickles in vinegar were okay but as soon as water or brine for that matter was introduced into the equation, I'd froth at the mouth.

What are you doing now? Cartiledge picked up his gun and was toying with it nervously. There was an absent smile on his face.

At that moment Mrs Flaaaghtly came into the room with a tray of fresh muffins, or they might have been coals

for the fire. Everything's sorted, she said, so you can just put that gun down. I had a word with Mr Coggins, and I'm going to grease up his boy for no extra charge, and spray him down at the end of each day with coal tar soap and essence of vanilla. He's a bright lad and I've also offered to tutor him in seismology, and basic geological surveying. And as for you, Mr. Cartledge, I've booked your tickets, as instructed. You'll take a steam packet from Dover and after being washed up on a beach in Normandy, will make your way overland to Rouen, to pick up the Orient Express. If you successfully manage to launch yourself from the bridge and clamber aboard, a full manicure and pedicure service will be available at no extra charge.

What is all this about, Cartledge, I asked?

My dear friend, he said, there comes a time when despite the indisputable bond between two like souls, a man needs more than muffins at midnight, A man needs to know he can go forth in society and function under his own terms. Therefore I shall be leaving you for a short period to venture abroad. I am going to The Annual All-European and Pan-Asian Yurt Building Exposition in Mongolia.

He pressed the gun into my hand. By the time I come back, he said, the Venusians may well have taken over. Use this well.

He swept out of the room. A hackney cab was waiting for him below and before we had a chance to exchange any more sentiments, he was gone.

A vole scuttled along the gutter. A stoat followed the vole into the nearby graveyard. A weasel eased itself through an aperture between two rusted iron bars, that was too narrow for the stoat. Beneath a weathered gravestone (Brian Chitling, B. 1618, D. 1843) the weasel plucked out the vole's heart, shredded it, and served it up on a barbeque

for its fellow weasels who lived in the North Devon village of Mortenstone. The stoat was invited as an honoured guest, but after giving a speech, in which it typified weasels as racists, was promptly lynched from a small hawthorn tree. I sensed that sometime in the future someone would write a book about these primal struggles and make a fortune. Damn critters.

A LETTER FROM ABROAD

My dear friend, wrote Cartiledge. Not much of substance has happened to me since I left you to depart on my journey to the icy wastes of Mongolia. Thank Mr Coggins' lad for waving the Union Jack on to speed me on my way, and I hope his collision with our rear offside tyre caused him no permanent harm. And tell Mrs Flaaaghtly not to kill the goat before I get back, because I have news of a dramatic new medical procedure, which may interest her.

Just outside Surbiton we collided with a bakery van, owned by The Aereated Bread Company of Surbiton. Bagels were spread all over the highway and my driver was decapitated by a piece of lava bread. A replacement was sent for and soon found, lava bread being particularly popular in Surbiton, A replacement for the driver, however, posed more of a problem and we spent five or six hours by the wayside spent playing fivestones with the local children before we were able to proceed with our journey. An exceptionally precocious child wearing a large black felt hat and an eye patch asked me at one stage if I was a spy for Napoleon, but since I didn't entirely understand his question, I merely chuffed him and offered him a cigarette which he took only to place behind his ear, saying he would smoke it later.

We headed for Rochester, where I was sure there would be icing on the road, due to the proximity of a nearby catering college. I was proved right, and our carriage shod several wheels. We hired more horses and wheels from a local farrier and continued on our way. To be frank we found ourselves with a surplus of horses and a shortage of wheels, and some of them had to ride piggyback upon unicycles.

We made good time and soon arrived in Deal, just

outside Dover, although some of us wondered why we were there, when we had been heading for Dover. I bought a book in the local bookshop entitled *The Deal Bookshop*. Its owner a brash young man called Guy with a veritable furze of thicket-like beard directed us towards the coastal road, which, as it happened led towards the coast.

There we were met by a group of masked horsemen who led us down a steep road into a cliff-surrounded bay. I say masked, some of them merely wore Raybans, and others had simply cut out Tony The Tiger cardboard spectacles from cornflake packets.

A Steam Packet stood offshore, the wraithlike trails of vapour from its smokestack limned against the grey and frosty night sky.

Two swarthy sailors offloaded our party and its belongings, except the surplus horses, into a boat and rowed us out across the calm green luminescence of the sea.

We boarded the packet safely and were soon stowed and locked up below decks, which I thought was strange. Where would we go? At around twelve (or six bells) the Captain made his rounds. He was a man of few words, most of them dealing with offal, desecration, and libidinousness. We slept with crucifixes around our necks, that night, except for the horses of course.

THOMAS HARDLY

That night, taking advantage of Cartiledge's absence, I made a thorough search of his sleeping quarters. If he had been guilty of misappropriating my slippers there was no knowing what I might find: my collection of vintage wine foil caps; that set of antique mouse traps I had lost several years ago, perhaps. or my press-clippings file, the loss of which had meant I had not worked professionally in the theatre since I was a young man and played principal boy in a production of Aladdin at the Balham Foot Baths.

Beneath his bed, underneath the demob clothes he had brought home from his spell of service in the United Empire Air Auxiliary Forces - Balloon Branch East Africa (UEAAFBBEA) I found a tin box which laid claim to once having contained Mrs Cloysters Lacquered Oysters. Inside, wrapped in oilskin, I found a brass compass, a tinplate protractor, several small broken pencils and a small leather-bound pocket book bearing the inscription, 'Bon mots, Grand mals, and tiny drawings of squirrels'. I turned to the first page, which was blank, the second and subsequent pages were all likewise blank, save, halfway through, for a small smudged pencil cartoon of a squirrel-like creature.

I fancied then I heard a heavy step on the stairs outside, so I pocketed all these items for later examination.

Coggins' boy greeted me upon the landing outside Cartiledge's bedroom.

We're broken through, sir, he said, with a jolly, albeit muddy grin. He held something out in his hand for me to see.

What's that?

A specimen of igneous shale, sir, he said, proudly. Very rare in this district.

I pushed past him, never daring to ask what he was talking about.

Downstairs in the study, I put a small log on the fire, and then a larger one. The smaller log flared up, fell from the grate and set the carpet on fire, I beat the flames out with my carpet slipper, but no sooner had I done so than the larger log fell from the grate and set my carpet slippers on fire. I poured a bottle of claret on my slippers to put them out and finally, having adjusted the fire so that it emitted a convivial warmth, I settled down to read the opening chapters of Mr Thomas Hardy's latest blockbuster: *The Dutch Cap-maker's Daughter*.

“It was a wintry day in mid-summer and beneath a sky that was gradually enblackening with flocks of crows, ravens to which sundry seagulls added incongruent flecks of white, a solitary figure strode out on Cragdon Heath, ignoring the Foot & Mouth restriction notices posted there only the previous evening. This was Johannes Fluck, the Dutch Cap-maker whose daughter had recently disappeared under mysterious circumstances, leaving him in sole charge of her six-month old illegitimate child...”

ANOTHER LETTER FROM ABROAD

Mr dear fellow, wrote Cartledge, his crabbed hand barely readable on the back of a postcard of a French Gendarme directing traffic. We have arrived safely in Normandy. Wish you were here.

We disembarked in the middle of the night, with a high tide running and a six-foot swell. Only six of our party drowned and they, fortunately, were foreigners. The captain screamed insanely at us for having short-changed him on the price of our passage and then weighed anchor, leaving us on the lonely beach in the company of our courier, a florid Spaniard named Guido.

We slept until daybreak, then built a fire, and Guido roasted some marsh-sedge for our breakfast. He found some barnacles and we stewed them up in a liquor made from bladder wrack. You will not believe the refreshing beauty of such simple honest peasant fare. It is good to know, as long as we have Guido with us, we will not starve.

I had hoped to read a few chapters of Mr Hardly's latest epic, which had after all cost me four shillings and sixpence, including 20% discount on recommended retail price, but Guido insisted we should be promptly on our way. He led us to a small shack where we found some pedal cycles. They were ancient boneshakers, but he assured us they would serve their purpose and carry us safely along on the next stage of our journey.

And so we set off, across country, following what lanes and rutted tracks we could find. From time to time we would stop and Guido would feed us off the bounties of nature, plucked from the hedgerow and ditch - various fruits, flowers and berries, and sweet-tasting larval grubs.

On the first evening we camped in an abandoned barn. Guido caught a giant yellow-backed frog and we goulashed it with some tomato-like berries we had found on a hawthorn-like bush, and some jolly red-capped mushrooms. He found some wild honey and used it to caramelize some small dead bats he had found. It seemed there was no end to his culinary innovations, although I noticed he ate but sparingly of his own creations, being content for the most part, to nibble on a piece of obnoxious beef jerky, occasionally augmented with a raw carrot.

Later that night, settling down on a bed of straw, I gazed up through the broken rafters of the barn at the full moon, which shone down on me bright as a lamp. It was an idyllic experience, and I can tell you I was more contented than I had been for a long time. It recalled the best moments in your company with good conversation, and Mrs Grace serving us port and Stilton.

I intended to read some Hardy, before engaging the comfort of a deep sleep, but alas was distracted by certain members of our party who, most selfishly, made no effort to contain or limit their tiresome moaning and spasmodic retching.

I awoke to find our party much depleted. Guido explained that some of them had expressed doubts about their willingness to continue in his company and had voluntarily departed. Strangely they had chosen to leave their bicycles and some of their goods behind them.

Well, our journey onwards towards Rouen will be all the quicker without them.

MORE HARDLY

I put Cartiledge's postcard on the mantle, along with the one Mickey Dobbs, our resident Fabian and Socialist, had sent us from the Toronto Radio Tower, just before embarking on his fatal white river rafting expedition upon the Colorado.

It was a beautiful evening with sparrows twittering in the eaves. A flight of geese flew overhead heading for the local reservoir, and then flew back again, after realizing that it was now a housing development. I trimmed the lights as low as they would go, and then lit a single candle, as if in communion with my missing companion, Cartiledge.

Then I settled back to read more of the masterly writing of Mr Hardly.

"Fluck pressed on across the heath like a man who had not slept for two days, which in fact he had not. His grandchild's beseeching mewling had penetrated each and every waking hour, driving him away even from the solace provided by his habitual reading of the bible. Mrs Babbage from the nearest croft, two miles away, had called by in a trap driven by two pigs she liked to call Chloe and Elsie to offer her help and advice, which largely consisted of the earnest enjoinder that he consider advertising for a wet-nurse in the local press. She had briefly tried to demonstrate to him how to fold a scrap of dinner linen into a shape, which might contain the child's frequent involuntary bowel movements, but he had reminded her that he was a skilled cap-maker not a commis-chef. More than anything else at that moment, even the suppertime sausages he had left burning in the pan on his kitchen range, he was aware of the ancient

clock in the hall scratching out the seconds, as if they were fulsome replies to Mrs Babbage's well-meant comments.

Back on the heath he stumbled up to his knees into a tract of boggy marsh, and stayed there thoroughly miserable, sinking ever more slowly as every second passed. remembering not only the lonesome death of his great uncle Jeremiah Thonesque (pronounced Jones) in just such a predicament in Wales, but the fact that he had not renewed his subscription to New Scientist.

At that moment as desolation seeped into his soul and as he was on the verge of denying the redeeming glory of Jesus, he heard the sound of someone, or something, approaching through the bracken.

Are you there, Dulcie, he cried, this being the name of his departed blood-daughter.

Out of the mist slowly shambled a shape that was surely a sheep.

I'll repeat that.

No, I won't.

It was Old Clowdie, the ewe that had gone missing three weeks ago in a freak thunderstorm. She approached and nuzzled his brow, looking for lice and suchlike. He dug his fingers deep into her pelt and chided her so that she backed away, dragging him with her out of the mire. Later he was sorry he had chided her, and tried to make it up to her, with gifts of diamond rings."

I put the book aside. Hardly had done it again. This was writing worthy of the Turner prize.

THE ORIENT EXPRESS

My dear fellow, wrote Cartledge, tragedy has struck our humble party. We reached Rouen in good time to make our connection with the Orient Express and while waiting on the road bridge crossing the railway track, Guido, our good and faithful guide, suggested we partake of one last meal. It was intended as a celebration of our companionship on our long and arduous journey together but it turned out to be a veritable last supper indeed.

We built a fire and set our billycans upon it. I can tell you it brought back my days in East Africa and I started to recount to the assembled company the occasion when I was lifted up by a rogue balloon and carried for ten miles behind enemy lines only to be deposited in a pile of camel dung at an allied oasis.

Guido plucked some herbs and wild flowers from the embankment, dandelions, weasel-wort, henbane, valerian, bella donna, and something he called anthrax mycotoxin. These he brewed up into a strong infusion, adding some capsules he had brought with him which contained what he called his special stock. They added an overwhelming, but not unattractive scent of bitter almonds to the final concoction.

Then he sat back, pulled out his beef jerky and his raw carrot.

Enjoy, my friends, he said, giving a jolly chuckle and biting down on his biltong. His chuckle turned into a raucous cough. He thumped his chest and his face turned rapidly purple. He grasped his throat and indicated towards his mouth. We laughed, enjoying his mime, but then he toppled forwards onto the fire, upsetting the billycans and ruining any anticipation we might have had of a hearty

meal.

One of our party, a Portuguese peddler, leapt upon him, and suspecting the savage was trying to take sexual advantage of him I dragged him away. It turned out he was only trying to perform the Heimlich manoeuvre.

At that moment we heard the approaching whistle of the Orient Express and I saw it in the distance roaring down upon us. It was obviously going so fast that none of us would be able to launch ourselves upon it without fear of dreadful injury.

Just then Guido uttered an immense gasp and staggered to his feet. He spat out a mangled piece of beef jerky. His eyes blazed with fury. He raised his arms and his claw-like hands lunged towards us. Then he slipped on his carrot and fell backwards, toppling from the parapet of the bridge directly onto the rails in the path of the oncoming train.

The driver slammed on his brakes and the train slowed to a crawl, but not before it had reduced Guido himself to a kind of beef jerky. We took advantage of the situation, me, the Portuguese Peddler, and a man from Swindon, called Dewaulder, who proclaimed his only interest was to photograph steam trains, to leap aboard the express.

So, I find myself hurtling towards my destiny in Outer (or possibly Inner) Mongolia.

NUMBER 42

It being a brisk resilient sunny morning, with only the faintest stench wafting on a westward wind from the nearby Vinegar Brewery I walked down into the old part of the town to pay a visit to our local Portuguese delicatessen. On the way an ambulance cart drawn by three strong lads overtook me. I hailed them and asked what the matter was. There's been a cave-in at no. 42, they said. The Morgan-Detweilers. They hadn't checked their sump level and they hadn't got the right bracing on their crossbeams. It's little things like that, sir, that can lead to disaster. Mrs Morgan-Detweiler has already ingested a significant amount of clay, and may have to have her fingernails removed and rebuffed very expensively at a nail emporium in Hackney before having them re-instated.

I let them go on their way with no real idea of what they were talking about.

On the pavement outside the Portuguese delicatessen were heaped the usual piles of dried figs and taramasalata, herbs twisted into bundles and fastened with corncrakes. Wickerwork baskets, or creels were piled high, and contained dried squid, turtle and mystic zombie fish, more dried taramasalata, and small vials containing essence of sild.

I went inside, brushing aside a small child that threatened to bite me, and greeting the patron, Guiseppe de Navarre, a small stocky man with silver hair, who was offering a free tasting of the wine of his home district, La Campagnola: La ZogZag a la Tauri Vesicule, which roughly translated as Bulls Testicle Milk.

I took a glass from him. There was a faint and very peculiar odour of gimlet about it, with overtones of household cleansing fluid, nutmeg, and natural pine wax. I spat it into the tasting bucket and instructed him to send a case round.

While a Portuguese violinist serenaded us with jaunty folk tunes, a Portuguese saxophone player stood by moodily outside playing soulful phrases from George Gershwin. Guiseppe explained that they were gay lovers.

I'm so happy, Guiseppe confided in me, while in the absence of an air conditioning system his wife fanned people with her D-cup brassiere. My eldest son Paulo, after studying with Sir Norman Foster at the Paris L'Etoile, has won a scholarship to visit the Yurt Building Biennial Exposition in Central Mongolia. Here, I have a postcard mailed today from on board the Orient Express itself.

The postcard showed a French Gendarme directing traffic. I turned it over. Portuguese is not a major language of mine. There are far too many cedillas in it for my taste. I was relieved from the chore of attempting to translate it, by the Saxophonist, who took it from my hand.

He says he is having a fine time, sir. A gay time with good gay companions; it is almost as good as being in Manhattans, with all the nightlife, maybe even in Queens. He says his fellow travellers are good people, even though none of them is practised in the trombone. One in particular keeps him awake at night by reading to him from the English author Hardy, but he is willing to forgive this because his companion has a good bush, which I translate as moustache.

A fine story, I said, and put it immediately from my mind. I purchased half a dried squid and a time-share in a fisherman's cottage in the coastal village of Los Gatos D'Amor and made my way home. Outside number 42 the emergency services were bringing out livestock and marshalling them into transporters. Mr Morgan sat on the doorstep consoling his wife Mrs Detweiler.

It's all right, my dear, he told her. A little underpinning will see us as right as rain. We'll re-establish the herd. I tell you, they haven't seen the last of pedigree heifers at No. 42.

I finally arrived home.

Mrs Flaaaghthly, I cried out, has the world gone mad.

Why yes, sir, she said, hadn't you heard?

THATCHER

I see you've been making some improvements in the garden, Mrs Flaaaghtly, I said.

I took a puff from Cartiledge's pipe since I had temporarily mislaid my own. It gave my Old Shag something of a narcoleptic quality.

You're got rid of that goat, for one thing, I said.

Oh, no, sir, she said, we could never part from Thatcher. She's been in the family longer than my cousin Clyde, twice retarded on his sister's side, and is far more useful, to tell the truth. She's forgotten more about goats than Clyde ever knew, and she's a better conversationalist. We've moved her up into the attic, on a temporary basis, while she's with child. You're welcome to pop up and see her anytime, sir. In fact I'm sure she'd welcome some company. We've done it out real nice, with Winnie the Pooh wallpapers and Beatrix Potter friezes. And she's got one of those mobiles from Early Learning, which teaches you the alphabet.

So, I said, grand news, we may soon be expecting a kid from Thatcher.

Whatever you want to call it, sir, said Mrs Flaaaghtly I would only point out that these days animal and human rights march hand in hand towards a bright future.

I coughed, and found myself nearly asphyxiated from some residue in Cartiledge's pipe. Mrs Flaaaghtly beat me rigorously on the back and I soon recovered.

And this construction, I said, pointing towards a huge dome-like building made of breezeblocks that reared upward through several stories at the end of the garden and

extended across the allotments beyond.

Yes, the Ice House, said Mrs Flaaaghthly. We're all rather proud of the Ice House. From green field site to completion in ten days, including two phases of town and country planning permission (phase A Town & Phase B Country) and three courts of appeal. And I might point out I was charged twice for completing form P35/2a/406 - my special submission regarding exemption from European Gas Emissions. But I bear no grudges.

And what is it exactly?

It's an icehouse, sir. It will provide us with a means of keeping our summer and autumn food stocks freshly frozen through the winter. Imagine sir, fish, orchard fruits, wild berries, sweet corn, peas, rudebakers and galangal, readily available for us at any time of day at any season.

I rather thought, I said, that was the purpose of my refrigerator, for which I pay Mr Coggins' Electrical Emporium a rather high rental fee.

Mrs Flaaaghthly lit up a Russian Sobranie and offered one to me. It seemed a little loosely packed, and the way the paper was twisted in a rough curl over the end seemed a little careless. Nevertheless I lit it up and took a healthy draught.

BADGER

I awoke the next morning at an abominably early hour and finished off the remains of the previous evening's light supper. Then I finished the light continental breakfast Mrs Flaaaghtly had laid out for me including eight muffins, or they may I suppose have been coals for the fire. The cold collation of various meats, pickles and mustards was particularly welcome, especially the jambon gelee, as indeed were the three flans, the Pavlova and the trifle.

I then thought long and deeply for a while about the word badger, and how such a diffident, harmless loveable creature should lend its name to the act of harassing and hectoring a person. Then I thought about the word hector and how a term for harassing and badgering a person could have found itself attached to one of the great military heroes of ancient Troy. Perhaps, I speculated, he had had a pet badger, or more likely a winter coat, which he wore for shopping, patterned in black and white stripes, which resembled the faithful Brock.

I then made a rather intricate model of a man, including a complete working vascular system, out of a small scrap of newspaper and wondered if this might not be worked up into a possible stage act.

Mrs Flaaaghtly entered the room to clear things away.

Why, sir, she gently chided me. You've hardly left anything for Thatcher.

Just felt inordinately peckish, I said. What time's lunch?

Now now, sir, it's barely six o'clock in the morning. Which reminds me, Coggins' lad is already half an hour late reporting for duty. I hope nothing's wrong with him; he's usually very prompt. It's not as if he's on shovelling

this week, merely pointing and making good.

Mrs Flaaaghtly, I said. If I only understood half of what you were talking about I'd know twice as much as I pretend to.

When Mrs Flaaaghtly had left I settled down to read a little more of *The Dutch Cap-makers Daughter*.

Returning home in his pig-trap from a night serving as relief barman in the hamlet of Sorencester, twenty miles away, Johannes Fluck finds the enigmatic Squire Graveney brooding by his dung pile.

“Johannes hardly knew the good squire only ever in the past having rubbed shoulders with him at Harvest Festivals and at the funeral of the seamstress Dolly Wicket from Cheltenham, where they had both served as pall-bearers. He knew him to be a man of modest income and lavish tastes. Rumour had it his debts were largely paid for him by an Uncle in the East India Company. His profligacy however was locally thought to be caused by foolishness and over-enthusiasm rather than any real malice. He was generally, in other words, considered an honourable but misguided man. What income he did accrue due the efforts of his own labour, largely derived from the poems and desultory writings he regularly submitted to a number of London literary magazines, and from raising subsidised grants for land drainage materials which he sold on for a profit to outside contractors.

Johannes reined in his pigs and dismounted. Graveney was shivering with cold, or fear, or both. Fluck took him inside and sat him before the warm hearth. God, man, he said my door is never locked. Why did you not wait for me within

I was afeared to, sir. Because of the terrible wailing from within, as if all the demons of hell had been let loose.

Nonsense sir, that's just my granddaughter. Her wet-nurse is staying over night. I trust she will have settled her by now.

My God, said Graveney. Is that what children do? I never realized.

Fluck arranged a travelling rug about Graveney's legs and plied him with port, but not with Stilton, because the rats had eaten all of it.

Now Squire. What is it you have to say to me that could have brought you out on a night like this to stand shivering for hours beside my dung pile....?

It was no good. I could stand the pangs of hunger no longer. I rang for Mrs Flaaaghthly.

Any chance Guiseppe has delivered that half a dried squid yet? Failing that the stale pomegranates will do.

YET ANOTHER LETTER FROM ABROAD

My dear friend, wrote Cartiledge, how I came to find myself in a brothel in Austerlitz, wearing only a yarmulke and playing the pan-pipes to two hermaphrodites is a story so surprising and startling, especially in its implications for the future of peace in Europe, that this is hardly the time and place to go into details. Suffice to say that after a telephone call to the British Ambassador and the payment of an undisclosed sum by the Earl of Rochester to the Duke of Clunes, I found myself back on the Orient Express.

Word of my adventure had got out and I found myself pampered and feted at every turn and offered the best and most luxurious accommodation. Still I did not forget my sterling travelling companions condemned to languish in the third-class and sent them sandwiches occasionally.

Various celebrities visited me. On one occasion, the world-renowned diva and opera singer, Fanny La Paul came to call. She gave me an interesting demonstration of circular breathing whilst showing me a little of her *Cosi Fan Tutti*. It reminded me of that time Mrs Grace got a little merry on Burns Night and attempted to gut a haggis whilst playing the bagpipes at the same time. Ah, Mrs Grace. She had her good points. I hope the Flaaaghtly woman is also keeping you 'merry'.

Your bundle of mail has reached me, courtesy of the Orient Express Premier Mail Forwarding Service.

I do not think we need double-glazing. It seems to me an excuse for the glazier to sell to his customer twice the volume of glass for no good reason. His argument that it will cut out the throbbing of the engines of invading Zeppelins, begs the question that we are not currently at war with the United Arab Emirates and their affiliated

Belgian-controlled African States, and are not likely ever to be so, thanks to the treaty Neville Chamberlain has negotiated.

Similarly I think a custom-built Conservatory, even with an eleven-year guarantee, would be an unnecessary luxury for a household which does not raise cacti or succulents and whose principal view would be of a multi-story ice-house, and several pens of wild and exotic but faintly noxious creatures.

Thank you for the results of my blood tests, but I can make no sense of them. What are gamma globulins?. Is an index of 560 dangerous or what? Perhaps you could book an appointment with Dr Maserati for me. I know he normally requires six months notice. I should be back by then

I received with pleasure the news that you have been appointed a trustee of the King's Apostle Fund, 10th Division, entitling you to wear resplendent sashes at the Lord Mayor's Show. It is no more than you deserve for a lifetime's service with its affiliated brethren of the East Atherwaite Sad Sailors & Sundry Derelicts Charitable Fund. Wear those robes with pride and always remember to close your fly with a safety pin.

You ask for my recipe for Jolly Jack Tar. I can only assume you are expecting a visit from that terrible Parson Porlock, the only person I ever knew capable of actually eating the muck. Very well, but I warn you Mrs Flaaaghtly may balk at preparing it.

First collect a kedgerie of assorted shellfish. Trim off all the edible bits and discard. You should be left with several kilos of beard, tract, gristle, spume and gills. Pour these into a stout bucket, add two pints of liquorice water and a smattering of coal dust. Heat over a brazier until reduced to

the consistency of crude oil. You will need to obtain a number of sea birds, no matter what species although traditionally fulmars and shearwaters are recommended. Smear the mixture in your bucket over the birds. No need to pluck. Bake in a hot sand oven for four hours minimum. Feathers and skin will melt away. Disassemble the flesh, which should be reminiscent in consistency of a porter's overalls and smell strongly of aniseed. It will be charred and largely inedible (unless you are Parson Porlock). Enjoy with a sturdy Nigerian Chardonnay.

As we make our way across the lowlands of Europe, I'm struck by the staggering low standard of living I see all about me, and at the same time made more aware of my privilege as a member of the finest, most advanced nation in the world.

The Poles, for instance, have absolutely no toilets and have to urinate in large cooking pots which are carried away every week by dirigibles. There is a Polish joke that this is then recycled, bottled and sold as a famous brand of mineral water. There is also a Polish joke however, that the Poles have no sense of humour, so this leaves me completely baffled.

In Bavaria, everything is made of wood, not only cutlery but hypodermic needles and umbrellas. In fact in Bavaria it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between an umbrella and a hypodermic needle. Even the nobility are forced to live in log cabins. I was chagrined to find there is not a lot you can't make out of wood, except perhaps cooking pots. These they import from Poland.

I must go now. A party of Chinese Tourists have asked me to do a reading from *The Dutch Cap-maker's Daughter*. What they will make of it I don't know, especially the part where Johannes Fluck, having being reunited with his daughter has her committed to an asylum, and the Squire arrives to claim paternity of the Wet-Nurses eldest son.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mrs Flaaaghthly tapped on the study door and entered a little nervously.

I'm afraid you'll have to fend for yourself today, sir. I entered a competition in The Lady magazine and I've won first prize. I'm off up the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre to somewhere called Madame George's for a makeover.

This has nothing to do with tunnelling, has it, Mrs Flaaaghthly? I ventured.

No sir, it's fashion. They're going to turn me into something called a Venusian Governess which is apparently a cross between Amy Stock Poynton and Florence Nightingale. They say it's all the look at the moment. Lillie Langtree has adopted the look for her new stage play: How many Orangutans Are My Favourite Fruit?. Coggins' lad has got the tunnelling covered, but I'd be obliged if you would pop in and see that Thatcher is settled and perhaps give her this dish of carrots. Oh and I've made a few of my special Sobranie for you, sir, since you liked them so much the last time.

I thanked her and wished her good luck.

When she had gone I wandered downstairs and said Hello to Coggins' lad who was reading a comic in the kitchen, the very first issue of Beezer with an ingenious 'cracker' free gift. I lit one of the Sobranies off the gas lamp and sat down at the table with him. The weather outside was kind of pasty and nondescript, like mist rising over a Norfolk midden. I suddenly wished I had a flat cap, and a dog so I could walk it and feel miserable.

It's my tea break, sir, he said with a jolly chocolate-smearing grin.

I was pleased to see someone had capped his broken teeth.

Would you like to join me in one of Mrs Flaaaghtly's brownies, he said. I've found they perk you up something smashing.

He indicated a dish of succulent looking chocolate fudge confections. I tried one and found it exceeding more-ish, so I helped myself to another.

I just want to tell you, I told Coggins' lad, puffing on my Sobranie and taking another mouthful of brownie, that Cartiledge and I really appreciate all the work you are putting into this scheme of Mrs Flaaaghtly's to improve our housing conditions.

Mrs Flaaaghtly calls it 'building an infrastructure' sir, and I'm pleased to do it. With her tuition in seismology and geology I'm all set to apply for indentures with the Royal College of Mining. They've had some marvellous alumni. Sir Humphrey Davy for one, and Artenshawe Swain, the first person to dig a perfect annular tunnel, with the break-through points perfectly aligned, although it did take him twenty-three attempts. He used massive curved formwork, you see, sir, to keep an accurate radius and verified it with a theodolite every three metres.

He produced a pocket notebook. See, sir, here are some sketches showing the way these layers of igneous shale underlay this thin covering of clay. Beneath that are alluvial deposits, but more important are these embedded rock nodules locked in glaciers during an ancient ice age, (which Mrs Flaaaghtly refers to as 'The Last Time') and then laid down as the climate warmed and the glaciers melted. They may contain certain rare elements and

prefabricated structures of plastic and metal known as chips which are essential for the final fulfilment of her plan.

I see, I said, looking at the pretty drawings. They were exceedingly pretty drawings, full of pretty colours. I held them upside down and they were just as pretty. One particular colour, a sort of violey blue, was exceptionally pretty. If I held them up close to my face I could see pretty striations of other colours in the middle of the prettiest colours. It was all gorgeous.

I must go back to work, sir, said Coggins' lad. There's lots of levelling to do.

Very well, I said. And I must go and give Thatcher her carrots. I left to the sound of the boy thwacking his cracker.

WALLPAPER

On the way up to Thatcher's room I spent quite some time contemplating the wallpaper. On the first floor landing there was a kind of smoky marble pattern which if you looked at it a certain way seemed to resemble a naked man dancing. I was surprised that I hadn't noticed this before. It really was quite amusing. I found that if I stood with my nose in contact with the wall and alternately closed one eye and then the other, I could make him dance in a very provocative way. I derived a great deal of pleasure from this for about half an hour.

The wallpaper on the second floor landing bore a traditional floral pattern of flowers and leaves with stems intertwining. I gathered the designer, a certain William Morris, was a man of some standing in his field, but I had always found it boring and mundane in every respect. Today, for some reason, I could not help laughing uproariously as soon as I saw it.

It occurred to me in passing that there really was no reason why I should be in such high spirits. I missed Cartiledge's companionship dreadfully, and Mrs Flaaaghtly's behaviour, at least that bearing on subterranean matters, was distinctly out of the ordinary and somewhat worrying. And yet I felt very sprightly and free of care. It was all most puzzling.

Here I was, after all, contentedly on my way to deliver carrots to a pregnant goat.

I knocked on the door of the attic bedroom.

A bleat from within bid me enter. C-u-u-u-u-m-m.

I hadn't been in the room for several years. It had always been used for storage of all those nostalgic nick-nacks that

one cannot quite bear to get rid of. I was pleased to see my old tin-plate train-set was still there, as well my tennis racquets (in their presses) and Cartledge's snow-shoes and his cigarette card collection of Famous Trains of the World.

On the wall were family photographs that brought back poignant moments for me: my mother shovelling snow in Siberia before she met my father; my father sitting regally astride a Fairley & Company of Bolton milk float, before he met my mother. And one of Cartledge in the wicker basket of his balloon on the East Africa Front, smoking a pipe, as always, and with his beret set at a jaunty angle. I wondered where he was now.

I had to admit Mrs Flaaaghtly had done a splendid job of redecorating the room for Thatcher, brightening up the gloomy old place considerably.

Thatcher herself was lounging on a large circular bed in the middle of the room. Bright sunlight shafted in from the attic window and fell across her cream-coloured flanks. She was very, very pregnant.

I approached her nervously.

I've bought these carrots for you, Thatcher.

Thank you, she said.

THATCHERISM

Thank you very much for calling by, said Thatcher. I've been perusing the private parliamentary papers of the last Whig government and can tell you they're very tedious.

Mind where you step. That turd is quite dry, but I can't speak for any others you might find. Mrs Flaaaghthly's a bit short on the cat-litter, mainly because it hasn't been invented yet. Well, you can't expect the poor woman to work miracles. Not every day.

It gets lonely up here, with nothing to occupy me but my deep breathing and pelvic thrust exercises. And of course listening to the rats run in the rafters. Occasionally I fancy I can hear the wind sougning over the lush green pastures of my homeland, but that's largely a fancy, because I was brought up in Walthamstow.

My family were honest goats, some with considerable skills in public speaking and with the potential to become senators; most at least capable of perpetuating lies in furtherance of their careers. One, Benathly Junior III, could even run the hundred metres in less than eight seconds, if chased by a beagle. But you won't find any reference to that on A Question of Sport. It's all Flo Jo and Cliff Richard as far as I can see.

Many of my ancestors were Croatian and not good with their hands, and those that weren't were Italian, and not good with their brains. Take my half godson, Jimmy de Cullio who disappeared in central Honduras, after brokering a deal with the Peruvians for twelve Mig 15s then currently held in possession of the Caracas Free Fighters. Well, Jimmy sold them short; they were death traps - old technology and lack of parts, and no qualified service personnel. It totally blew his credibility. But then I

suppose you can't expect a goat to keep up to speed in the arms market.

I've had some time to scrutinize these photographs of your family and associates, but they are very anthropocentric, and hence quite boring to a goat. We've never been especially strong on Trans-Antarctic exploration, or ballooning. I keep looking for someone with wattles.

I have this imported book, published in plain brown wrappers in Paris if you please, called *What Every Good Christian Woman Should Know About Motherhood*, but it's a bit short on hard advice for quadrupeds. Keeps going on about birthing stools; now I ask you how would I fit in one of those?

The magazines Mrs Flaaaghtly gives me aren't much better; they all seem centred around middle class women with nice hairstyles and access to private gymnasiums. And they're all obsessed with their stretch marks - which I don't see as a problem myself. What I need is something that will take the problems of pregnant goats seriously: how to deal with the cramps and udder-rash, and sudden cravings for fig-roll and barbed wire sandwiches.

A moment's silence passed.

I suppose you can go now, she said. But do come again. You're a very interesting young man, if you could only control your solipsist views.

If you could get hold of a Victrola for me, and some records by The Ventures or the Surfariis, preferably Bambora on the 78rpm ICVNXS 377485, it would help pass the time and remind me of happy days spent at the Ruislip Lido in woollen trunks frolicking with lots of middle class kids from West London. Oh, and if you could let me know when it's Palm Sunday, I'd be much obliged.

I wished Thatcher well and made my way to the door, watching very carefully where I stepped.

I went downstairs. The William Morris wallpaper no longer seemed so hilarious, and try as I might I couldn't make the naked man dance on the first floor landing.

IN TRANSYLVANIA

Today I received another postcard from Cartiledge. I was much aggravated, because there was no stamp on it, and the postage due was two shillings and sixpence.

My God, I told Pobjoy. Two shillings and sixpence. Twenty years ago, that could buy me twenty bread rolls, a galvanized bath, a faux alabaster model of the Venus de Milo for my garden with an incorporated water feature, and ten breeding budgerigars, breeding, mind you.

Pobjoy nodded sagely. Never you mind, sir. Just you save that postage due stamp and in a hundred years it will be worth forty thousand pounds. It's got occluded perforations, you see, and that watermark signifies it was part of a trial batch never intended for release. And you'll notice the King's nose is pointing the wrong way.

I thanked him, without really understanding what the idiot was wittering on about.

I went up to the study to scrutinize Cartiledge's latest missive. I made the mistake of ringing for lunch, forgetting that Mrs Flaaaghthly was in town, and Coggins' lad arrived with two hard frozen muffins, or they might have been examples of igneous shale. I clipped his ear and sent him on his way.

*

My dear fellow, wrote Cartiledge, such adventures have befallen us that you could never imagine. As we made our way across Carpathia, the weather turned unseasonably cold. Snow at this time of the year is almost unheard of in these parts, and yet snow we had, huge blizzards blowing in from every direction imaginable.

Once, whilst we were briefly snowbound, an ice-cream cart arrived. Its proprietor told us a plane had crashed in the mountains and an Englishman had walked out of it, frazzled and cooked to the bone, telling tales of his liaisons with upper class English Governesses, and spouting verses from Ovid, and singing the Wang Wang Blues. He was reported to be currently convalescing at a mountain monastery, where a particularly cherubic nurse had fallen in love with him, despite his grotesque injuries.

We yawned and asked Anthony Mingela, for it was he, for two mixed cornets, a 99 with flake, an oyster and three slush puppies.

We carried on crawling slowly onwards along frozen rails pushing waves of snow before us and watching wakes of the same close in behind.

On many occasions we seemed becalmed in the ice, thrown on our own resources for entertainment and pleasure. To keep us going the waiters served hot steaming tea from giant samovars, laced with Slivovich.

Fanny Adams paraded both first and second classes showing off her trademark ermine muff and regaling tired travellers with her torch songs.

One of our party, a Mister Holmes, who claimed to be a private detective, essayed to play the violin, but did it rather badly. When asked to perform Paganini, he fixed us with his violet-blue eyes and claimed a headache.

Outside in the icy wastes wolves howled and I wished for a moment I had not parted with my Hardly service revolver.

As twilight fell we crawled towards a junction with a narrow country road where we were flagged to a halt by the misshapen driver of a hearse-like four-in-hand.

His master, it turned out, owned an estate some miles away and was in ill health. He begged and pleaded with us for assistance.

We quickly assembled a party of volunteers, myself, Fanny Adams, Holmes, and a peculiar Frenchman called Le Petomaine. I tried to persuade my friend Dewaulder to join us, but he replied that if it wasn't four-coupled with super-heated steam-tubes and a Beyer-Garrett Diesel Injector, he wasn't interested.

We set out in the crude carriage, on a careering passage along ice-slick roads. It was something like the Cresta Run, without the company of mad territorial soldiers out on a spree. The misshapen Devil at the reins whipped the horses into a lather. We passed a stadium, lit up with floodlights, where two teams of ice-hockey players were committing carnage on each other. Niedermeyer was covering on Dee, but could not get to it, even though he had his power game ready. Time out was called. There was a charge on Rabowsky. He was wide open and missed by about fifteen feet, and Niedermeyer took him to the wall, avoiding the bouncing puck. A stick hold was called with a quick drop. A five on four power play settled the matter. Niedermeyer was rattled on the walls and broke three ribs.

We left the happy celebrants of the most obscure game in the world behind, and continued on our climb into the highlands.

After several hours our carriage was reined in before an imposing mansion. We dismounted and entered through the large front doors, which creaked. We closed them behind us, and they creaked again. A man called Creak, who must have been at least eight feet tall, welcomed us and asked if any of us were interested in the latest stats from the National Basketball League.

A shape moved out of the shadows to greet us. It was a woman dressed in a plain linen costume. Her hair was tied in a tight bun on her head.

Thank God you have come, she said. I am Mrs Cuddimore. My master is very ill. He suffers from the delusion that he is the Prince of Darkness, while we know he is merely a dissatisfied civil servant, called John Smith, who was dismissed and cheated over his pension. He tried to find re-employment as an angle-grinder, and went on a training course to build small wooden thingamajigs to stabilize sub-woofers, but all to no avail. I pray you do not antagonize him. He is sleeping at the moment and will not rise until after dusk.

Meanwhile you are welcome to enjoy the various amenities of our mansion, including a hundred metre Olympic standard pool, jacuzzi, and volleyball and badminton courts in a separate block.

I declined Holmes' invitation for a four at Badminton, with Fanny Adams and Mrs Cuddimore and decided instead to inspect the gardens. I had noticed upon my arrival that the rose-beds were a mess. They would let their owner down badly in any local Carpathian Rose Society judging.

Rose bushes roamed all over the beds surrounding the mansion, with some fine rarities among them seldom seen outside specialist garden centres: Silly Fanthorpe, Laser Gestation, Nobby Crockett, Twilight Nodule, Mrs Crampton's Delight and even the exceeding rare Peter Frampton. And most of them were not even espaliered.

I took it upon myself to tidy up the beds.

It seemed to me a few carefully trimmed stakes would be all that would be needed.

I found the woodshed and spent a useful hour, cutting

stakes to espalier the rose bushes. Then I planted them out, until there was a nice tidy array beneath the balconies of the mansion. The wood was poor however, and often fractured into spikes as I hammered the stakes into the ground.

Dusk fell, slowly, like a safety curtain mismanaged by drunken stagehands.

Smith appeared on the stairs to the main hall. He was an imposing figure, not least because of his receding hairline which had already receded all the way down to his neck. He was nevertheless a perfect host, inviting us to drink vast amounts of brandy before we sat down to dinner, and then serving skank of dill before rostage of batter, something which is seldom seen these days outside those hotels served by celebrity chefs such as Nick Nairn and Keith Wetherby.

During dinner he kept us regaled with stories of free-lance angle grinding and thingamajigs, and his youth as an oyster smoker in Whitby, during the era of the famous mass murderer, the Fanged Whitby Slicer.

After a final course of sautéed lobster claws and bellicose whelks, the men retired to the billiards room to play snooker, while the women sat in the parlour gossiping and talking about babies. At least I assumed so.

I was on my way to a hundred break, when there came a blood-curdling scream from the ballroom on the first floor. I looked about me and saw that Smith had at some stage left our company. The scream was undeniably pitched in the mezzo-soprano range favoured by Fanny Adams. I grabbed my white ball instinctively and launched myself upstairs.

The ballroom was deserted but a curtain blew revealingly on one of the balconies. There was a sudden flash of

lightning revealing two figures on the other side of the curtain joined in a wrathful struggle. I pushed through the curtains and found Smith & Fanny grappling on the edge of the balcony. He had ripped off her ermine muff and was attempting to kiss her in a very strange fashion.

I dragged him away and Smith turned to me and fixed me with a baleful glare of frustration. His eyes were hypnotic in their intensity. I felt my blood and the rest of my body literally freeze. He turned again to the victim of his lust, and I watched helplessly.

Just then the white ball I had carried in my hand dislodged itself from my frozen fingers. It rolled towards Smith. As he made a final lunge towards Fanny, he stumbled upon the ball and pitched forward over the balcony's edge.

There came a horrible cry from below.

Fanny and I rushed forward and looked down. Smith had fallen full onto several of the stakes which I had used to espalier his roses. There was no hope for him.

We rushed down, Creak, Mrs Cuddimore and I, in an attempt to save him, but such are the exigencies of the climate in these regions that his blood, flesh and bones had already turned into dust.

Creak drove us back to our train. He seemed to be in a good mood despite the demise of his master, and was happily whistling Moon River from Breakfast at Tiffany's.

Fanny turned to me for warmth in the icy cold winds and I held and comforted her as best I could.

She had retrieved her ermine muff, but it was sorely scuffed, and as I held her close I fancied I saw on her neck two strange puncture marks, as if of a pair or teeth. Or fangs. Or something.

hAIR

I took an Omnibus to Great Portland Street, alighting there to make my way to the British Library where I intended to spend the morning pursuing my research into primitive hair dressing techniques.

As was my custom I paused to exchange greetings with the newsvendor outside the newly opened Metropolitan Line Station. He was a burly red-faced ginger-haired character who had lost a leg and an arm, half a shoulder, and his belly button in the Boer War. People still spat on him in the street, because he had been fighting on the side of the Boers, but his spirit was indomitable and his life as an indolent wretch on the street corner made him a repository of arcane knowledge.

Today, for instance, as he passed me, with some difficulty, a copy of Attercliffe's Weekly Digest of News, Sport and Sensationalism, he winked at me and said, rumour has it, sir, that Lord Glanville's Committee of Enquiry on the Throttling Spectre of Cheapside, will report that the six hundred odd murders were committed by one under-aged male model, or spectre, and not by three nuns and six vergers as was originally suspected.

I thanked him for that and proceeded on my way.

At the British Library I was welcomed by Vossage, one of the many duty-librarians, and shown to my familiar reading station. I was pleased to see that the quirky woman in trousers who normally occupied the adjacent desk, was not in today. She was the garrulous sort, and I had had quite enough of hearing of her dissertation on 'Squid: did

they supply the ink that wrote the Holy Gospels?’

I ordered up several tomes: Vosetsky’s seminal ‘Hair-styles Through the Ages (excluding the Dark Ages)’; Quinsky’s ‘Pomade in Ancient Egypt: Fact Or Fiction?’; and L. Sprague De Camp’s ‘Myth, Fiction and Reinvention - The Developmental Paradigm Remodelled to Explain Mayan Hair Fetishism’ .

This latter was a source of much wonder and education to me, especially regarding the often bloody role of game-playing in hair couture in that particular culture, when a quick ‘bob’ could perhaps mean the difference between life and death, or at least a bad and good hair day.

I made many notes before realizing I had not brought my normal scribbling pads with me. Vossage rose to the occasion and sent out for a quantity of A4 legal pads, which were delivered to me forthwith.

As I worked my way through De Camp’s text, I began to see how important the Mayan link in primeval hairdressing was. Here was a race who treated death with disdain, (hardly surprising since their natural life expectancy was in the region of 25 years) and blood as tasty, who played ball-games with the heads, not only of their enemies, but those who they were mildly displeased with, i.e. those who simply lived next door to them, and possibly had circumspect hair-styles, or had perhaps cheated them out of two tomatoes in the market. Their images, graven into stone, revealed them as a vain race, always favouring one profile over another. Obviously some lacquer or resinous residue was used to keep their characteristic quiffs intact during the long periods that posing for these frescoes and carvings would require. I could only discover it, my future not only as a hair historian but also as a hair stylist would be assured.

THE MAKEOVER

The first indication I had of Mrs Flaaaghtly's return from her makeover, was the high-pitched scream of a young child running away down the street. A mother descending the steps from the church across the road lost her grip on her child in its pram, and rushed after it as it clattered out of control into the roadway, only to be flattened by a passing tank. Then came the distinctive sound of a horse shying and bolting while its driver yelled raucously and attempted to rein it in. Offshore, a mighty dreadnaught fired round after round of shells into the innermost keep of the city. A passing squad of Royal Grenadiers on their way to a training exercise in Battersea Park, broke rank and stampeded across Albert Bridge, threatening to send the whole structure into the murky waters below. Of course it didn't and they re-assembled safely and practised synchronized press-ups and ceremonial cigarette smoking.

I had been working on an arrangement of withering sticks, some sent under plain brown wrapper from the Chris & Fiona Withering Stick Company of Swansea. These I placed in a pocastle (yes, a pocastle) in the corner of the room, next to the useless talking drum, after first of course checking the level of gin.

Then I went down to greet her.

How do you think I look, sir, she asked? She did a twirl for me.

The first things I notice, Mrs Flaaaghtly, are those extraordinary egg-like lumps on your forehead.

They're implants, sir. Saline and guaranteed toxic free. I was two hours under the knife for them. Don't you think they make me look a bit like a pixie?

Indeed, I said. But your breasts, if I may touch upon them, also appear to have... well, swelled.

Now that was totally organic yogic mantra treatment, sir. In fact I'm told if I don't say 'Ommmm' regularly, there's a danger of them shrinking.

Heaven forbid that that should happen, I said. Well, you must just say Ommmm as regularly as you feel necessary. Don't worry about the neighbours. They all appear to be too busy digging to notice what is going on around them in any case.

As she turned to leave, I stopped her.

May I say, I said, at the risk of being a trifle indelicate, that your bustle seems a little on the large size.

Mrs Flaaaghtly coloured slightly. Lord, sir, she said, that ain't my bustle, that's my coccyx extension. Ah'm a fully-fledged Venusian now.

She swept out of the room, and I made a mental note to look up 'coccyx' as soon as possible in my Plattner's Universal Dictionary.

TURKMENISTAN

The sun went down like an American Buffalo/Indianhead nickel disappearing down a courtesan's décolletage.

I placed two logs on the fire and they flared up, but there remained a chill in the room.

The news from Turkmenistan was sombre. Two Englishmen were feared lost in the massive earthquake that had reduced five cities to rubble. One was an Encyclopaedia Britannica Salesman, about whom we need shed no tears. But the other was a fully trained mechanical artificer, sent there on an exchange scheme to convert old London Trams into armoured vehicles for use in the civil war. What a waste.

I put a copy of Morrissey's 'I've always had the hots for the girl in The Human League, She looks so bleeding Northern and looks like she shags constantly' on the Victrola, wound it up, and let it spin. Despite the hearty sentiments of the song, the chill still persisted.

I studied the cover of Blur's Parklife, but even the rage in the black greyhound's eyes and the determination of its supplicant brother easing through on the inside, did not thoroughly comfort me.

It was time, I feared, to take up Mr Hardly's seminal work once more. Yes, indeed, the Dutch Cap Makers Daughter.

I reminded myself of where I was in the book's plot.

Laurence Questeven, the half-brother of Squire Graveney, had returned from the African goldfields, after his mine had collapsed leaving a hundred dead, mostly

black, but including a white reporter from the Durban Times, Chesley Switch, whose family threatened to sue until tomorrow never came. With this hanging over him, he could hardly undertake to care for the welfare of Graveney and his illicit child.

Meanwhile seventeen-year old Minnie Little, the bastard child of Ognar Thong, the local pew-maker, had taken it upon herself to befriend the good Cap maker, Johannes Fluck, even to the extent of baby-sitting for him on alternate Friday nights when his Karate classes fell, and had now essayed a visit with him to Cragdon Heath, where she intended to tell him some important news.

Watch where you step, said Minnie. The heath is not what it was. Everything changes. Once it was solid and dependable. Now it is a quagmire.

I'm beholden to you Minnie Small, said Fluck, extricating his boot from a mighty goat turd.

He turned to look at her, and it was as if it was the first time he had seen her properly.

She wore men's breeches and a carpenter's smock and was tight-corseted in a fashion that made even her magnificent breasts seem small, and yet to Fluck's eyes, she remained the child she was, whom he had once dandled upon his knee, and whom had once played carelessly with his own lost daughter and yet was now come of age in such a fine fruitful fashion.

Oh, Minnie, he said. I've been a blind fool, consorting with courtesans and trollops and every vile scum under the sun, even with Mrs Harding at the Post Office. I've neglected my trade and have been busy making a fool of myself when I should have been making caps. I've been unable to see what a treasure lay under my nose. Please tell me that there might be some small hope for me, that my

affections, however tawdry, will not be entirely spurned and may find lodging in some small corner of your heart?

Oh Johannes, said Minnie, tenderly. Rip off my knickers and roger me senseless.

I could read no more. Once again Hardly's masterly writing had wreaked havoc with my emotions, bringing a lump to my throat and a mist of tears to my eyes. This was truly a man who could wring emotion from the stoniest heart.

And anyway it was time for tea.

FINYARGUS

As I write this, wrote Cartiledge, an icy bitter wind with a Kelvin factor of minus .00032 calories is sweeping down from the Urals, slicing its way eastwards across the frozen tundra like a knife spreading icing sugar on cheesecake. I'm thinking now, of course, of that sublime cheesecake you bought from the Portuguese Delicatessen.

It is a once in a thousand years phenomenon the locals call the Finyargus, which translates literally as 'the deathwind that fell on the anniversary of my ancestor's wedding one thousand years ago.'

It is so called because it kills all in its path, with no sentiment for wedding parties, bar mitzvahs, school reunions, and suchlike.

The good news is that its path is limited by inherent latent thermal vectors to a corridor a mere four hundred yards wide. The bad news is that, if I have calculated the velocity and direction correctly, it should be passing through Kennington at just about the same time you receive this postcard.

I went to the window and looked out anxiously. Gideon's Mobile Fish shop and Bible Dispensary was parked in the street below, and Coggins' lad and sundry other urchins were queuing up for their fish supper at the sign that read: "Cod & God: We Feed The Body & The Spirit, and also the Sole".

It was good to see the hearty message of the gospels, dispensed alongside fish in batter, but I could not believe God would allow such of his lambs to be slaughtered by what, with significant irony, the insurance companies would no doubt call, 'an act of god, or possibly cod'.

The Fabulous Durban Brothers, famous for their summer touring circus incorporating self-mutilating dwarves, High-Flying Trappist Monks, and elephants who had been taught to chew tobacco and spit in copious quantities, were winching in their Famous Sightseeing Balloon in Kennington Park to take on board a new flock of sightseers. I wanted to yell out to them, No!, but that would have been silly because I was at least a quarter of a mile away and they would never have heard me.

I returned to Cartledge's postcard in a fatalistic mood. Nevertheless I made sure to nail my slippers to the floor, and tied myself to my chair with stiff rope.

*

The train has stalled, wrote Cartledge, I gather the fireman, an ex-stoker who used to work on the L.N.E.R finally froze up with ice in his joints and was unable to shovel any more. There were also frozen leaves on the rails.

Wolves cry out from the hinterland over the hills and valleys and the flat expanses of nothingness (apart from sedge and rushes) we have passed through (okay they did include some little tits and warblers).

Fanny Adams visited me once. The sores on her neck seemed almost entirely healed, although she claimed some pain from toothache in the area of her eye-teeth, which after laying latent for some years now appeared to be growing and regenerating. She showed me her tonsils and asked me if there was any evidence of infection.

I expect to arrive in Mongolia in two to three weeks time, early enough to join the preliminary March of Champions Who May Or May Not Have Appeared In Mongolia Before.

I have visited my erstwhile travelling companions: the

effete Portuguese person and the strange Dewaulder. They have both grown beards, and Dewaulder has suddenly developed a passion for the trombone. The Portuguese now wears a balaclava and smokes a pipe. While they thank me for the sandwiches and my other attentions, I feel they may have formed an alliance against me.

COCYX

Passing by my friend, the newsvendor, outside Great Portland Street Station, I stopped to exchange words.

Did you hear about that wind that blew up from the Downs, around Dorking, and cut a swathe across Epping Forest, sir? Like an icy blast from the depths of Hell itself, they do reckon. Shook hundred of squirrels from their trees and carried them off, nuts and all, to deposit them like frozen pistachioed kebabs over parts of the Cumbrian National Park. It's all here in The Bugle, artist's impressions and all, some of them not for those of a nervous disposition, if you get my drift. Fortunately only one man was killed and he was a simpleton who voted for Disraeli, and who ran a pie and mash stand. They found him drowned in his own tub of liquor, and harpooned by a frozen eel. Dreadful happening.

I took a copy of The Bugle from him, although I had no idea what he was wittering about.

Dreadful happening! he yelled to all and sundry passing by. Dreadful happening in Epping Forest! Full pix and story!

Very sorry about that sir, he said to me, lowering his voice. But I does have to keep up appearances.

Never mind, I said, tell me what do you know of the cocyx?

Ah, sir, he said. You're asking the right man, there. While I was in Lady Frogfroth's Invalid Hospital For Wounded Soldiers No Manner What Denomination, the man in the next bed to me had had his cocyx blown off by an Anarchist's Bomb. He'd sat on it, you see, in a London Omnibus. They fought to save it, sir, but there was a limit

to what surgical techniques could achieve in those days, witness my own sad disposition, sir.

Yes, yes, I said, giving him a penny. But go on.

Well, sir, the coccyx has an interesting evolutionary history, if you don't mind me borrowing the language of that heretic Mr Darwin for a moment. He would claim, you see, that man is descended from Simians, which is Apes and Orangutans and such, which don't have tails, but which are themselves descended from smaller monkeys and lemurs and such, which did have tails and found them exceedingly useful for swinging through trees and suchlike. He would say, sir, that somewhere along the line that tail was chopped off, perhaps in a bizarre random accident such as a slate falling from the roof of an ancient midden, believe me sir it can happen, and that, like that old Manx cat, that old stumpy, that persists today and whose ancestors maybe suffered a similar incident, the creature off what it was chopped didn't feel the loss of it, him having become quite used to walking upright and frankly finding it a bit of a bind having to clean the mud off it every night before he went to bed. So instead, we evolved with the coccyx, sir, which is nothing more than the stumpy remnant at the base of the spine of that long forgotten tail. If you look at it in the Gorilla, it's quite prominent, whereas we have learnt to keep it well under control, so it doesn't interfere with our buttocks. Well, so Mr Darwin says, sir. I personally believe we all came from Venus on a rocket ship.

DEWAULDER

Dewaulder accosted me in the corridor of the train. His breath smelt of pear drops and I noticed he hadn't brushed his teeth for some time. I invited him to share sausages with me in the observation coach, where a poker game was in progress with a man claiming to be Howard Hawks, whom I had never heard of before.

Dewaulder seemed upset and angry and not at all amenable towards my offer of breakfast. He was a big man but he was out of condition. I offered him a doughnut, and he hit me in the jaw and then sat on my face. Eventually he let me up to breathe.

Perhaps the offer of a doughnut had been a mistake.

You've forgotten me, haven't you? he said. But I haven't forgotten you. Remember Mrs Crusher's Preparatory School for Young Exemplars? Remember cross-country running, when you, Amos Biggs and Sturgis Bane would run ahead and strategically place cowpats beneath fences and stiles. You tied my shoelaces together and dug out potholes to a depth of three feet; knowing that I would think they were merely puddles and would step in them unwittingly. You shared your cigarettes with me, but not before lacing them with a chemical compound that brought me out in a spectacular rash and caused my genitals to swell up to the size of watermelons.

I fear you have mistaken me for some other gentleman, I said, retrieving my monocle which he had been trying to insert up my nostril. I do assure you that this school and these people you speak of are not known to me.

I suppose you also deny inflating my swimming trunks with helium on that day trip to Todmorden so that as I

threatened to sail away over the Pennines people had to throw pitchforks in an attempt to bring me down?

He pummelled me some more and I did my best to defend myself, but as you know The Manly Art was never my forte. Eventually I managed a chance blow to the bridge of his nose which knocked him back somewhat. Once more I avowed my innocence.

You mocked me, but you will find I will have the last laugh, Dewaulder continued, holding his nose. What are you? A charlatan who professes to have an interest in yurts and yet wouldn't know a tepee from a Tyrolean hut. A fool who did not even suspect Guido of trying to poison us. Thank god I brought my own beef jerky. And your attempts to emulate Hardly's West Country dialect are laughable. I, on the other hand, now hold down a good job as a quality inspector with Netherthwaites Department Store, yes, the Netherthwaites! Never knowingly undersold! I have a wife called Ramona who makes Batik, and is trained as a Counsellor. I have two lovely children called Shirley and Beryl, although I'm not quite sure how that happened. I have had published, in my own name mind you, several illustrated monographs, one on the rack and pinion railways in Switzerland, and one on the Martlett-Thornton Steam Exchanger. I'll have you know, sir, that I have been invited to lecture at the prestigious Thetford & District Narrow Gauge Railway Society's Annual General Meeting. I have even had a poem published in no less an organ than Spitzer's Iron Rail Casting Digest.

And what have you achieved, he finished, apart from a small notoriety following an incident in a brothel in Austerlitz?

He removed his hand from his nose, and blood spurted forth.

He staggered off down the corridor towards the third class compartments but not without hurling back over his shoulder, this matter, sir, is not finished between us.

VOSSAGE

Morning sir, said my newsvendor. Then proceeded to shout: ‘Chauncey De Vaux scores sixth test century in his career. Not bad for a fourteen year old. All the news in the Bugle! South London struck by surfeit of mud, hundreds confused, including the Vicar of St Pelligrews in Brixton, who claims alien invasion imminent. All the news in the Bugle! Darnley Wassiter scores 53 on last hole of the Glen Cauraghtha Open. Still playing at midnight. All the news in the Bugle! Wendover draw in the Liturgical League semi-finals. All the news in the Bugle! Famous Nobel-Prize Winning Goat dies in tragic silage incident. All the News in the Bugle!’

I walked on engrossed in my own thoughts.

I paused on the corner of Southampton Row & Gower Street. A pig lay in the gutter looking at the stars. It appeared to be dead but a drunk was attempting to revive it with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Cartiledge, I thought to myself. Where are you now, with your jolly bon mots and your liberal use of sandpaper?

Vossage showed me to my usual station in the reading room of the British Library. I noticed evidence of dandruff on his frock coat, and recommended ‘Stoker’ Forbes, a barber I regularly visited in Curzon Street. He was a sailor who had trained in the P&O, under the famous Gelato Ponce, and then moved on to the North Atlantic routes to graduate in the Cunard style of hairdressing.

I ordered up some books and commenced making notes. I must confess my heart wasn’t in it. I was only half-concentrating on what I was doing. I was troubled by my recent conversation with Thatcher, or rather the fact that I

had had a conversation with her at all. I also wondered whether there were any planning, or indeed public health, restrictions upon keeping a pregnant goat in the attic.

My heart sank completely when the garrulous woman appeared and sat down opposite me.

She was wearing a leather gabardine and smoking a cigar, despite the museum's restrictions on the use of animal hides. She picked up one of the books I had ordered up and examined it.

I see you have Minscombe's Principles of Goat Breeding. It's one of my favourite works. He's irritating on the reason why goats wear bandanas, inferring some link with the midget goats of the Andes, but spot on about the click-clack sound they make while eating swede

She thrust out her hand and grasped mine vigorously. I am Lady Deborah Swinge (pronounced Swing). It's a pleasure to meet a fellow goat-fancier. They are such wonderful animals. The Himalayan, shrimp-eating goat, for instance has the lowest flesh to bone ratio of any goat in the world whilst there is no goat nimbler at the mazurka than the misleadingly named Peruvian Toad footed goat.

I am president of the East Grinstead & Suburbs Goat Fancier's Society and also write a regular column in Which Goat entitled 'Talking Goats'.

'Talking Goats?' I queried, hardly able to keep the alarm out of my voice.

Yes, she said. And if they only could talk, the dears, what wonderful stories they would have to tell us.

I handed her my card. Lady Swinge, I said, perhaps you care to call on me at your convenience. I have someone I would like you to meet.

TRENCHANT

I strode out of the stuffy confines of the British Library into bright sunlight and decided, since it was such a pleasant day to walk down to Mayfair. I called in at Trumpers where 'Stoker' Forbes trimmed my nasal hairs for me, then went next door to the Heywood Hill Bookshop, where the staff greeted me with a pleasing obsequiousness. I bought a copy of 'Vapid Erosions' a slight book of inconsequential poetry by Lester Celandine, the erstwhile Bard of Nether Avon. I instructed them to have this wrapped and posted for me to a Pickled Onion dealer in Chertsey who had once stolen my cab outside the Gaiety Theatre.

Since it was a fresh afternoon and still quite early I decided to catch D. A. Trenchant's exhibition at the Royal Society. While I was waiting to check my coat into the cloakroom I found myself shoulder to shoulder with an old acquaintance of mine, Colonel Shirley 'Ducks' Pennington of the Foreign Office.

We greeted each other warmly, exchanged pleasantries and wandered off to take in the exhibition. There was no denying Trenchant's masterly use of colour and texture, and his shadow-work was excellent, but I confess I found his line and perspective less satisfying. There was too much crowded into the foreground of his works, and often on too large a scale. A burly half-naked Turk, for instance, bending to minister to and unnecessarily dominate a whey-faced subaltern whose uniform had been virtually ripped away in a skirmish. Shirley seemed more enthusiastic than I, pointing out with glee the lithe muscles and rippling torso of a young urchin diving for coins thrown from a tourist dhow in Cairo.

How is Cartiledge, by the way, Shirley asked after a while?

He's in Mongolia at present. Although I miss him, I'm rather glad he's out of harm's way at the moment.

How so?

Before he left he was getting quite agitated about a delusion of his that an Invasion of the Venusians was imminent.

Shirley blew out his cheeks and made a whooshing noise. If that was the case, Shirley said, I'm sure I'd have heard of it.

That's what I thought, I said. You're sure there's nothing in it then?

The idea's crazy, said Shirley. Why would they come all this way when they could stride over the border and take over Panama, or Peru for that matter?

Who?

Why, the Venezuelans, man.

I corrected him on his misapprehension and he whooshed again.

That's even crazier. Venus is even further away than Venezuela. Isn't it?

It is, as I say, a mere delusion. But I'm worried that upon his return he might make a fool of himself or commit some public indiscretion about the matter. You know how headstrong he is.

Well, I can withdraw his passport, then, said Shirley. Then he'd never get back in the country. He'd have to stay in Mongolia and foist his stupid notions on them. Just say the word.

Nothing so drastic is necessary, I'm sure, I said.

Then I'll put a man on him, just to make sure he doesn't misbehave.

That seems an excellent idea, I said. And I'm very grateful to you.

Not at all. I owe you one for drawing the fire for me on that matter of the immigration visas for the Kandinsky Brothers. Your letter to the Bugle set the hounds running in entirely the wrong direction. We walked on and stopped to consider another canvas.

Now what's this one, said Shirley bending to scrutinize the title of the work. 'Young Men Masturbating on the banks of the Indus'. Excellent!

TOD-IM-WASSER

I am in love, wrote Cartiledge. Not, as you may assume, with the glamorous Fanny De Paul, whose teeth continue to grow at an alarming rate, in an almost disfiguring way; but with the tiny independent principality of Tod-Im-Wasser where we have broken our journey for several nights.

The people here are welcoming but fiercely proud of their gypsy origins and walk about stroking small symbolic violins and flicking each other with gaily-coloured headscarves.

A small select group was invited to a sumptuous feast thrown in our honour at a local hostelry (at the only hostelry, in fact) by no less a personage than the Arch Duke's Third Private Protractor, whose duties consist of developing the tiny state's tourist potential, as well as attempting to control the considerable rat population. Apparently, he was a nephew of the Second Private Protractor.

My only disappointment was the inclusion in the party of the frightful man Holmes, who no sooner had we sat down, continued to bore us with a so-called mystery, in which a man had been found stabbed through the throat in a locked room.

Apparently, Holmes would have us believe, the man had retired for the night and as darkness fell had lighted an oil lamp and placed it on his bedside table, as was his custom. Some villain had secured a thin stiletto to the ceiling with a ball of wax. The concentrated heat ascending from the lamp's chimney had melted the wax, and released the knife which had plunged through the man's neck, killing him.

The Arch Duke's man applauded the denouement as did others of our party and Holmes received his acclaim with an intolerably smug smile.

Your deductions are nonsense, I said. Why would a man take a lamp to his bedside if not for the purposes of reading? If he had been reading by its light he would not be in a position for the knife to strike his throat as it had. If he had not been reading, he would have turned off the oil lamp to sleep and the wax would not have had time to melt. If by some bizarre quirk it were his habit to sleep by the lamp's light, he would certainly have seen his nemesis suspended above him before Morpheus stole upon him.

As always the simplest explanation is the most probable one. The man was obviously attacked outside the room and staggered inside, not realizing the imminently mortal nature of his wound. He had locked his door to prevent further attack, collapsed onto his bed, and expired.

Holmes looked at me as if he wished the dagger had been in my throat.

I seem to be making more enemies than friends on my journey so far, especially since I took the so-called Howard Hughes to the cleaners the previous night.

CORDUROY

Round about twelve thirty I finished my breakfast of omelettes, hash-browns, and hash brownies, although what the difference between the last two items was, escaped me, except that the after eating the latter I was still strangely hungry.

A pantehnicon was honking outside and I grabbed my blunderbuss, but hung it up when I realized a Pantehnicon was a form of transport device rather than a huge rabid leather-skinned creature.

Outside I came upon Mrs Flaaaghtly supervising the unloading of several thousand rolls of corduroy.

They were a job lot, she explained. I thought they might come in handy in case we have to run up some hard-wearing uniforms to equip our army to repel invading troops we might come across.

Is that likely? I asked.

One never knows in the current international climate, sir, she said. Do you know the Arch Duke Ferdinand of Bosnia but not of Herzegovina has accused his bastard brother, Leopold, of being a squirrel in disguise? With those sorts of insult being traded around willy nilly among the crown princes of Europe and their offspring who knows what could happen?

I admit I felt worried upon hearing this, but only for a few seconds. Then I felt overwhelmingly hungry.

After I'd consumed four bags of Harry Oxted's Porcupine flavoured crisps I felt well enough to ask her: But where are we going to store all this Corduroy, Mrs Flaaaghtly?

Oh don't worry sir, she said, there's lots of room underground.

She led me downstairs. And then down more stairs. Vast hewn storerooms opened up off the various landings we passed, some of them already bearing notices reading *'Reserved for the storage of Corduroy'*

We entered an anteroom, festooned with pictures of Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran, and framed icons in small graven alcoves. I'd never realized we had so many stairs in our house. She opened a door and I stepped through to find myself in a dusty, cobwebbed space.

It was our major concern to keep this space intact and entire, sir, she said. Otherwise we would not have qualified for a number of prestigious architectural prizes.

The architects Bang and Cluff were most concerned that access to the underground stream that runs through our basement be maintained, if even only as a possible escape route. Hence the extensive raddling on the portisments, and the canoes you see tethered to the glinches on the side bulwarks. I had Coggins' lad down to grout the area of the main platform, and I'd sure you'll agree he's done a grand job, incorporating the visage of the Egyptian Goddess Isis, in his decorative mosaics.

By the way, she said, you now owe him forty thousand Ishmaelian Dollars, or twenty if we're dealing in Discredited Rands. Oh, don't look so concerned, sir, she said. It only amounts to four shillings and sixpence at the current rate of exchange.

Excellent, I said. Is that a bottle of Coup Vourgain, I see there? It is reported to smell of mouse-tails, but I do believe I could use something like that tonight, with my dried squid.

She passed it to me with a mischievous wink. I could always whip up a little Devil's delight of frog mousse for you sir, if you're desperate.

If I was that desperate, I said, you'd have to whip up more than that for me, Mrs Flaaaghthly. And then again, with more of that on top. And then some. To tell the truth I can't conceive of how much I'd expect you to whip up. Not if it meant that you and I would have access to the same back street lawyer who was keeping a strict account of our expenditure in a little black pocket book. Then it would be every man for himself. I realized then I had fallen prey to myco-toxin induced narcolepsy, having breathed in ten gallons of latent fungal spores that had hitherto lain undisturbed in the cellars. I was talking nonsense and immediately fell asleep. I dreamt that Kate Wilmshaw was helping me renovate my Volvo Cabriolet and knew at last I had found a woman who would appreciate my parsley sauce.

VASELINE

It is our second day in this charming resort, wrote Cartledge. The principality lies huddled on the shores of a massive deep lake, surrounded on all sides by towering cliffs, save for the narrow cleft of a gorge by which it may be accessed by the winding branch line of the railway.

The Arch Duke's palace stands above the lake on a towering crag and can only be reached by way of a funicular Railway. Dewaulder has spent many hours photographing and making notes on this construction, which I believe he intends to work up into yet another of his monographs. At least his activities keep our paths from crossing.

In the afternoon the preposterous Holmes and the humourless Howard Hughes made up a four for a game of croquet with two pig-faced investment bankers from Basle. Ray Murtag, the headwaiter from the Pullman car, offered to act as umpire for them.

Fanny Adams was loath to venture from her compartment, claiming a peculiar aversion to direct sunlight which had come upon her quite recently, but I was able to persuade her to accompany me, heavily cloaked and shrouded, to the famous Tod-Im-Wasser Vaseline pits, which as every schoolboy knows supplies ninety-per-cent of the world's supplies of this valuable commodity and which, along with rat pelts, is the staple of the Tod-Im-Wasser economy.

The crude Vaseline is raised from deep pits by powerful beam engines, and then carried by a bucket-conveyor system (manufactured incidentally by Bentcliffe and Son of Sunderland) to refining plants on the shore of the lake. The darkness of the caves containing the pits was

amenable to her and we spent a happy time discussing the merits of Vaseline from an opera-singers' point of view, and watching bats coupling in the gloom. How they manage to locate each other's genitals using echo sounding alone is a mystery which has always amazed me, especially since random or erroneously perceived reflections must lead to occasions of considerable embarrassment for them. It is little wonder they seek the gloom of the Vaseline pits for their amorous adventures.

I must confess I was a little worried by the pallor which had set into Fanny's features, but she seemed happy enough in herself.

Later that afternoon we visited the picturesque Tod-Im-Wasser graveyard, a cameo picture of which you will find, along with the hostelry, the palace and the Vaseline pits, and the Tod-Im-Wasser Imperial coat-of-arms, on the pictorial side of this postcard.

We wandered among the gravestones, noting the constant reminders of our mortality marked upon the stones, mostly, as it happened, of citizens who had died in the construction of the vaseline mines.

Then we entered the peace and solitude of the church itself, with its twenty-storey mock-gothic bell tower. We sat in a pew, marvelling at the parade of life-size alabaster saints, mostly hideously deformed with goitre and other deficiency diseases, which flanked the main aisle.

I found the rats that thronged about our feet, sprang from the hassocks, and ran hither and thither upon the woodwork chewing the missals, a little unsettling, but Fanny merely picked them up, one by one, and with a gulp, ripped their throats out and cast them aside.

That'll teach them, she said.

We left the church, but not before viewing the plaque

memorialising the incumbent vicars over the ages. One in particular caught my eye, Jesus Paulo Da Venus, a Mexican, who apparently came here after the defeat of the Union armies at the battle of San Jacinto, a historical pivot point which ensured the spread of Mexican and Hispanic domination along the Western Seaboard of that continent we like to call the Disunited States, through California and into Alaska, and of course is the reason why we are now all Roman Catholic and speak Spanish as our first language.

Trading his war annuity for a trip to Europe, Jesus eventually ended up in Tod-Im-Wasser, and besides taking up the post of vicar, introduced the concept of the taco stand to its grateful inhabitants, who until his appearance had been subsisting on rat and bat stew.

We stood outside in the porch, taking in its bulletin board with its plethora of parish and council notices. A Miss Marples was advertising her dog-training sessions, every Sunday, after chapel, at 2.30, Bonio extra, and also offering to solve local murders at reduced rates.

And there was a Drop In Centre, run by a Doctor Shiva Blemish, on Thursday afternoons for Alcoholics with Minor Tooth Problems or Itchy Skin.

Another lay person, Mr Armitage Shanks, offered to give advice on the installation of top of the line toilet systems, while Senor Emilio Wiggins offered counselling for kleptomaniacs, and classes in local bird recognition.

Dusk was settling and Fanny threw back the hood of her cape and, seemingly on an impulse, clasped me in her arms. She kissed and licked my neck and I must confess I found myself a trifle embarrassed since I had not shaved for two days.

Then disaster struck.

The rats, fleeing from the carnage inside the church,

swarmed up the portico and onto its outer abutments, scrambling to reach the gargoyles high above. One of them dislodged a crumbling coping stone from directly above us, which fell and struck Fanny full in the face.

I saw it had chipped one of her prominent eye-teeth. Blood flowed forth in copious amounts. Rats and bats swarmed about us chittering and chirruping in a blood frenzy. There were a few voles and stoats, and a hedgehog or two as well.

I kicked them away and swept her into my arms and carried her back into the town, where she was rushed immediately to the Arch Duke's personal dentist, a mute dwarf who appeared to be called Smgggthryl, although that might have been because it was the only sound his shattered vocal chords could now produce.

Smgggthryl made an initial examination and inexplicably staggered back as if struck with a fit of horror. Only several stiff brandies could revive him to the point where he was once more willing to approach his patient.

Thringghrhty poxergnhsstry vampirfngrousie, he attempted to erxplain, or even explain.

You're mad, I said. You and all your kind, as often people become who have no reliable underground transit system.

He chose to ignore my taunt and working quickly with a hammer and chisel, he extracted all four canines while I and one of the Bankers from Basle held her down.

She fainted away, but I'm pleased to say revived upon our return to the train. Despite the injury to her mouth, a healthy flush soon returned to her features as she recovered, displacing the pallor of old. I sat up that night,

holding her hand until she had fallen into a deep and satisfying sleep

I hummed *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down* to her and was encouraged when she revived twice to slap me in the face, and demanded that I stop humming.

The train started up, whistling a melancholy goodbye as we left this Garden of Eden & Revitalized Socialism, which had served us so well.

Several small boys who had attempted to sell us carpets whilst on board, were unceremoniously ejected by Ray Murtag, as was the woman in peasant's costume who went from carriage to carriage singing out of tune folk songs to us.

As we steamed out of town, Gypsies lined the tracks, laughing with much jollity, and hurling gifts of tomatoes and overripe cabbages at us.

We headed for the border post and a hostess passed down the corridors of our train, offering a range of duty-free goods. I purchased a SonicYouth T-Shirt with an accompanying bottle of Armani embalming fluid and a plaster cast of the Arch Duke Incumbent, and several souvenir jars of vaseline, one in a china jar with a transfer of the Arch-Duke's insignia, one with an infusion of chillies, and one incorporating a pomade guaranteed to revitalise the hair follicles. I hope we can enjoy them together, when I return.

I met Holmes on the way to the observation car. He showed me a Rolex watch he had bought from a market trader. I pointed out that the inscription on the face of the watch actually read 'Relox'.

Oh dear.

THE HAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE

My good friend Parson Porlock came to call quite out of the blue. He had a comfortable living in Rudleigh, near Sunderland, and was down on a trip to attend the Binson Echoplex League Northern Hurling Finals in Battersea Park, where The Sunderland Seacoalers had won through in a rigorous series of heats to face the universal favourites The Steyn of Quorn. Mrs Flaaaghthly was engaged in massaging Coggins' lad who had strained his interruptal tendons lifting a particularly heavy piece of sod, and did not immediately hear the bell.

I was working upon a poem tentatively entitled 'Lobster Rhythms', with a complicated rhyming scheme of iterated diphthongs and parsimonious adverbs on alternate and sub-alternate lines, meant to correspond to the rattling of a lobster's claws moving across the bed of the ocean, and was loath to abandon it to what might otherwise have been a passing onion seller (although we were short of onions) or even a local gang playing 'Knock Down Ginger'.

Despite being kept waiting on the doorstep for an hour and a half Parson Porlock was in remarkably good spirits when Mrs Flaaaghthly finally admitted him.

I sat him down in front of a roaring fire and plied him with slippers. Mrs Flaaaghthly brought us a warming whiskey and some genuine Taylor & Sundry Oatcakes. I immediately enquired about the fate of Sugby. Parson Porlock shook his head, Sugby passed away two winters ago, I'm afraid.

We found him in a snowdrift up on Wendip Hill. He'd attempted to return from the off licence by way of the notorious Gossage Fosse, and of course his boots had been washed away from beneath his feet. I was desolated of course. He had given me years of service.

More than any man could reasonably expect of a Labrador, I said.

We chatted and it emerged through our conversation that Parson Porlock was close to a breakthrough on his Hat Death of the Universe Theory. I fear I may have been looking in the wrong direction, he said, in believing that the Universe's eventual decline towards a null-entropic state in which gases are not only not exchanged, but held for ransom in tiny Colombian villages, is itself a state ultimately dependent on the number of hats amongst the educated class.

Now I realize I have miscalculated the relative velocities between Mexican hats and homburgs, between fedoras and Stetsons. My conclusion: hats will come and go, but the universe will persevere, until it runs out of heat, that is, and that will be the end of all of us.

We can only hope, he said, the Venusians have some kind of answer.

I fondled his cassock as much as I humanly could, and then left him there, gently burbling.

MASERATI

I visited my physician, Dr Maserati, in Harley Street. It was time for my annual check up, and in any event, I was troubled by an irritating itch on the sole of my right foot, which I wanted him to check out. One cannot be too careful. As well as being a world-renowned physician Dr Maserati was a universally respected Debt Analyst.

I entered his reception room and was greeted by his receptionist, Sally Dingle, a charming girl from the Home Counties with a good family background (her grandfather had invented the finger trap, a novelty consisting of a tightly-woven mesh tube which once placed on the finger was impossible to simply pull off. It had proved indispensable in placating, or alternatively, terrifying, young children, and Sally was heir to a fortune built upon its royalties.

I'm here to see Dr Maserati, I said, unnecessarily, of course, but I believe that formality should be observed on certain occasions.

Dr Maserati's not here, Sally said in hushed secretive tones.

But I have an appointment.

I mean, it's not Dr Maserati. It looks like him, acts like him, and talks like him with that same fake Italian accent. But it's not him. The man in that consulting room is a fraud. I know I sound like a silly hysterical girl, but it's true. You have to believe me. Besides, this copy of him knows nothing about Debt Management. Twice he has recommended that I take out a disadvantageous loan to enable me to consolidate all my debts in one monthly payment.

I nodded solicitously. Of course I was aware of the classic syndrome that can arise when the cranium is injured and certain areas of the brain are compressed or damaged, and one believes that close and intimate family members or colleagues are in fact complete strangers.

How are you Sally? No recent major traumatic injuries, I trust?

At that moment, before she could answer, Maserati, ever ebullient, roared into the room, drove three times around the furniture, with his gloved hand raised acknowledging a non-existent crowd, took my hand and pumped it, and led me into the consulting room.

Salve. Buongiorno, he said. *Spero che siete nella buona salute, il mio amico.*

Well, that's for me to know, and you to find out, I said, and we both laughed uproariously.

He proceeded to conduct a series of thorough tests, and took breath, blood, urine, sweat, and semen samples. He removed hair from my nape, my nostrils, my scalp, and my scrotum. He tapped my spine, stroked my testicles, engorged my heart, and examined my Chlorus Cluster with an endoscope. He checked my heart rate, my lung rate, my follicle growth rate, and he even removed a small thorn, which had somehow become embedded in the sole on my right foot.

Then he settled into his chair behind his desk and said, my friend, you are a picture of health. You could survive an Invasion from Venus, if that was on the cards, of course. I don't want to see you again for another year.

Fine, I said. I'll book an appointment with Sally on my way out, then.

Maserati sighed, and shook his head sadly.

Sono molto triste, il mio amico, he said. Alas, that is not Sally. She looks like Sally and acts like her. She has the same engaging, toothy smile, and the same upper class Cheltenham accent, but she is not the Sally I know, the Sally that helped me blow up the helium balloons on the occasion of my son, Marco's sixth birthday. She is certainly not the Sally who would occasionally gratify me in the toilets between appointments, and who stands to inherit millions of pounds, when her father, the Director of the Bank of England dies. He leaned forward and lowered his voice into a secretive hush. There are enemies all about us, my friend.

He gave me a big wink.

May I suggest you consider investing in any company which manufactures earth-moving equipment.

Out on Harley Street it was raining and a cab could not be had for love or money. I walked up to Baker Street, and managed to catch a 52, a 24, a 344, and a W5. and thus I found myself outside Sainsbury's in Haringey at 1.30 in the morning.

I walked back to South London and hit the home stretch in the middle of a thunderstorm. As I walked past the church a fork of lightning struck a gargoyle on its roof and split it from side to side.

Mrs Tiffin's Tea House was closed otherwise I would have popped in there for one of her famous warming Duchy Cakes, as advertised on the sides of the Number 26 omnibuses.

Virtually every establishment upon the high street was also closed, except for Roger Pratt's Discount Mortise Lock Emporium which had never been known to close for the past sixteen years, and of course Coggins' shop, being the only one benefiting from the advantage of electric lighting.

I pulled the door open, immediately setting off a sparking device, which caused a small mortar to explode in a corner of the showroom, and light up a panorama of Alma Cogan. Distinctive aromatic smells of solder and flux emanated from the back room as Coggins emerged with his characteristic screwdriver and cigarette behind his ear.

Why, sir, he said. It's good to see you. I was just experimenting with a vertiginous coil, that's a coil designed to increase the amplitude of vertiginosity, and subdue nausea in those confronted by gigantic cockroach-like beings, or indeed frogs. Mrs Flaaaghtly has ordered seventeen, if I can get the specification right. The problem is they have to be able to operate in trenches waterlogged to a depth of three feet or more, so I'm working on encapsulating them in a form of resin, based on goat's cheese.

I'm sure you're doing your best, Coggins, I said, and will not fail her.

I edged out of the shop, being careful not to dislodge the display of 'AAA' gauge Marklin locomotives in the window and proceeded homewards. As I passed the Morgan-Detweilers at number 42, I noticed they were still pumping cattle effluvia from their basement and marvelled at their determination in the face of adversity.

Mrs Flaaaghtly was at home to welcome me when I arrived at my residence. I'm pleased to announce I never had the slightest doubt as to the integrity of her identity.

But Coggins' lad, now I come to think of it...

CLEAN-O-PLUS

I am puzzled, I said, by the way in which flamenco guitarists in cabaret bands in Spanish cafes do not seem to need to use guitar straps. I went to see one in Wandsworth last night with my good friend, Peter Panayopulous who owns a bespoke tailoring and trouser pressing service in Haringey. We noticed that the guitar can only be gripped by the left hand (assuming the player is right handed) while the right hands strums, which would normally seem to preclude the player changing chords, since this would loosen one's vital grip upon the instrument, and cause it to fly off in the direction of the bar and cause serious damage to the clientele. And yet the songs they play, frequently possess two, and sometimes even three chords. I wonder if they don't train in the occult school of some Indian swamis, which enables the musicians to temporarily levitate their instruments, whilst changing chords.

We left early and only paid half our bill, since the squid was lukewarm and the lamb was served without rosemary. Besides they had a so-called comedian/presenter who picked out my friend Peter, and squirted lemon juice over him. We were the only two people in the cafe, so it could so easily have been me.

The man from Clean-O-Plus, whom Mrs Flaaaghtly had brought in to clean our carpets using their patent 'dry residue/ hot blast' process switched off his machine and lit up a cigarette.

What was that? He asked. I couldn't hear you because of the machine.

It was nothing, I said. I hope your services come with a warranty and with insurance against consequential damage. Some of our carpets and rugs are antiques and priceless

beyond replacement. That prayer mat you are standing on, for instance, comes from the Chen Dynasty in 1200 AD.

Yeah, he said. That would explain the Mastodon dung I had to chisel out. I noticed most of your carpets had some pretty ancient dirt in them. This led me to the conclusion that they were probably old.

Let me tell you, he said, we at Clean-O-Plus aren't scared of old; we're only scared of failure, and not that scared of that, if it comes to it. And I'm not going to fail, because if one person fails, we all fail and I'm not going to let anyone down that way, and neither are my colleagues, or anyone in management, not even the janitor who cleans out our loos in the head office, because those who hadn't failed would beat our heads. You have my word on that. No one in this organisation is going to fail, but if we do, we just fail. We don't say sorry and count heads, because we may just be unlucky, but yet we ain't going to get so complacent that if someone does fail it just means we might have got unlucky. We will look into it. The bottom line is: everybody gets unlucky, except us, because that would damage our sales figures. What I'm saying, I guess, is that Unlucky is no cause for celebration.

I see, I said.

I didn't hear you, he yelled. What it is not?

No cause for Celebration, I answered, very loudly.

No, he said, it's not any cause for celebration. But I'll accept your answer, because you are obviously grammatically challenged. You should come along to one of our Biennial sales drives. Lots of hot nookie there, if nothing else.

At that moment Mrs Flaaaghtly appeared and offered to make him a cup of tea.

Don't mind if I do, he said. He squished out his cigarette with his heel on the Chinese prayer mat, lit up another, and settled himself into Cartledge's Chesterfield.

What is it you do exactly, Squire? he asked.

DR CURFEW

Dr Curfew, PhD, MsC, PrAct, my accountant, called to remind me that I was still eligible for tax relief on half my earnings, after tax, even if I had no earnings and had never paid any tax. I asked him how this was possible and he said that new tax laws, introduced under the present Government, would cover me because any payments would be consolidated, in an international offshore fund, based either on a rock to the south east of the Isle of Man, or on the landing stage of a Channel Island Rand Dealer's waterside residence, which as far as anyone knows, no one had yet laid political or territorial claim to. There they would be subject to a general eschewment tax of 5% as opposed to direct tax, applicable to anyone who had ever worn velvet, which would save me 1 penny in every 5 thousand declared. Also there would be a roll-on scheme where accrued profits, less commission of course, would be used to purchase tracts of woodland in the Outer Hebrides. For every tree they cut down, they would plant two, he explained. Can you envisage what that means in exponential terms? he asked.

I confessed I couldn't but it was all by the way in any event, because Dr Curfew suddenly proclaimed he had to break the connection immediately because he was being tapped.

I was confused, but Mrs Flaaaghtly brought me in a tray of fried calluses, which bucked me up. No one can cook Cajun food like her.

Have you had any experience with financiers? I asked her.

I went on a world cruise once and met a person who was so rich he could afford a toupee. He claimed he was a financier, she said. This was after Mr Flaaaghthly died, of course. Or maybe before, when I was cheating on him; it's hard to think back. Anyway this man swore he would take all my money and recompense me a thousand times over. And if he didn't I could dig his dead children up and spit on them. That counted for something in those days, let me tell you.

He proved to be someone who had set up a waffle franchise scheme, called Mr Waffle. He sold the package to thousands of franchisees, but never could come up with a waffle recipe good enough to make it work.

Did you invest in his scheme, I asked her?

Lord, no, she said. Could you honestly see me as Mr Waffle.

Mrs Flaaaghthly, I asked. What would happen if for every tree someone cut down, two were planted in its place, exponentially speaking, I mean.

Well, allowing ten years as a reasonable period for a tree to establish itself, it's plain that every arable space on the planet would be filled up with trees within ten years and two days. Are you all right sir, she asked, mopping my brow. You haven't been speaking to that nasty Dr Curfew again, have you?

HIGHGATE

I took a Hansom Cab to Highgate Village where I'd been invited to a weekend party at the residence of the Crown Surgeon, Sir Archibald Drabb-Fortesque (pronounced 'Dray Foss-cue'). It was raining and the cab had to be winched up the last stretch of Highgate Hill by a group of prisoners seconded from Holloway Prison, working a windlass. I noted how their scantily clad loins, pecs, and latties heaved in the dismal drizzle. The women prisoners, on the other hand, were not at all attractive being mostly dressed in uniform grey Hessian sackcloth shifts.

Sir Archibald had called me in to ask my opinion on recessive genes and the roles they played in recessive teeth, under the mistaken apprehension that I knew something about the subject. Several of his offspring had distorted molars and in-growing quincelets, which sometimes made them appear quite terrifying, especially when they leapt out at you from a dark closet. He was naturally concerned about their welfare.

I feared he might have mistaken me for Graham C. Cartiledge, who had published several papers on paediatric orthodontics and had even had some experience with children's teeth. I tried to give what guarded advice I could, considering I was an expert in primitive hairdressing techniques and not in dental care. A free lunch, after all, is not to be sneered at.

A small but select company had been invited. The King of Zod was there. Zod was a sub-province of Ethiopia with one hugely successful cobalt mine and not much else to its name, except perhaps the most phenomenally gifted prostitutes in the Universe. I suspected his Highness was only there by virtue of his prowess as a National Hunt

Jockey, and it was rumoured that he had actually been allocated an en suite bathroom. He kept himself much to himself, but made an appearance on Friday night, when he danced the Beguine with Babs Wilcocks, the fashion editor of the *Salford Times*. He didn't begin the Beguine - that honour fell to Lance 'Michigan Trousers' Smith and his partner Pam Zoochie Wells, editor of *Cosmochik*, but he made a creditable performance, for a National Hunt jockey.

Around midnight on Saturday evening, I found myself in the Billiards room, playing a frame with the WWF actor, Quince Wincley otherwise known as the Rambo of the Gumbo, apparently because he was from Louisiana, or The Levitator, apparently because he could levitate. He was appearing in summer panto at the Hackney Empire. His gossip about liposuction and triple hernia by-pass operations was riveting.

On Sunday we split up to form fours for tennis. I found myself teamed with the Hollywood animator, Johnny Aramis, who taught me the art of playing strokes in slow motion, frame by frame, as if against some invisible opponent, before disappearing down a hole, which suddenly opened up beneath his feet, just before an Acme safe was about to fall on him from above. Needless to say, we lost hopelessly against our opponents, King Hussein of Jeremia and his forty offspring who had been cloned from Venus Williams.

After the tennis I walked in the grounds with Sir Archibald's wife, Amelia. She was training for a pilot's licence and intended to open up a mail route to Madagascar, and then fly on by way of way-stations formed from huge inflatable pontoons, all the way across the Pacific to South America. She had applied for Lottery Fund financing. She wore the lightest of skirts, which billowed in the breeze showing off her limbs in varying

degrees of definition.

I watched you playing tennis, she said. I thought you cut by far the finest figure on the court. King Hussein was not bad, but he's too flabby. He needs liposuction.

She sat on a bench. Her skirt rode up around her thighs. I could plainly see she wore no stockings, silk or otherwise, and indeed very little other underwear, apart, perhaps, for a surgical truss to keep her kidneys in place. She lit up a cigarette and offered me one from her silver cigarette case. I took it, although I didn't smoke. I wasn't about to jeopardise my chances this early in the game.

She lit her cigarette, pouted and blew smoke at me. I sucked on my own cigarette, coughed, and expectorated a large amount of sputum over her face. She wiped it off, stood, and suddenly thrust herself into my arms. Our teeth met, and then our lips, and then our tongues. I withdrew my tongue, lips and teeth, in that order, and swallowed a large amount of tobacco.

We're fools, she said. Mad fools to play this game of love. If Archie found out he'd send you for root canal treatment at the London Medical Hospital.

I could stand that, I said. In fact I have an occlusion on the second molar left which could use some attention.

And then, she said, once you were under the anaesthetic, he'd have your testicles removed. Like all the others.

I gulped. Once. Then twice. Fortunately she didn't notice the consistency or regularity of my gulping. And hopefully she failed to link it to any anxiety on my part on the subject of testicle removal.

I kissed her goodnight and escorted her back to the house, where Tom Cruise, Nicholas Cage, and Russell Crowe were on hand to escort her back upstairs to her bedroom.

The wet wenches on the windlass lowered me back downhill, where, despite the lateness of the hour I had no trouble picking up a Hansom to carry me back to South London. I considered myself lucky to have had the chance to see how the other half live.

And at least not one of them had mentioned an Invasion from Venus.

MONGOLIA

Here we are, at last, wrote Cartledge. In the land of the yurt!

Mongolia is not at all how I imagined. Ulan Bator is a thriving metropolis with a well-ordered society. When darkness falls, the streets are emblazoned with flashing and coruscating lights. Some are even fashioned into scripts which glow with a fluorescent intensity like fire-flies amplified many times over. Trams and buses move with eerie silence upon the streets, without the blasting of steam or the throbbing of petroleum engines, causing even Dewaulder to scratch his head in wonder. Our guide, Ratchet Khan, explained that their source of power, only recently discovered by Mongolian scientists, has no simple direct translation in to our language, the closest being 'The fire that glows forever'.

A significant proportion of the population are addicted to a drug derived from a plant called *kabush*, a member of the cactus family which thrives in desert environments.

The drug, known popularly as *kab*, induces a pleasant sense of euphoric exhaustion, not unlike that a navy may feel after digging sixteen miles of canal in one day and then retiring to a warm bath with a two-pint jug of Nagelson's 'Old Sherpa' stout.

Unfortunately (not unlike 'Old Sherpa' in fact) it also has the side effect of promoting progressive liver failure.

Efforts have been made by the government to curb its use, but these have been somewhat undermined by a report written by the foremost specialist, Philip Morris, which advocated the free and unlicensed use of the product. The report pointed out that the marginal cost of providing care

for these habitual users, during their short but happy lives, was certainly less of a drain on the country's health and pension's budgets than the prospect of them surviving into a largely miserable and decrepit old age. We checked in at one of the city's most prestigious hotels where we stood in awe of the amenities. An integrated system of heating and ventilation ensures that, without any visible source of heat, the rooms are warm even in the hardest Siberian winter, and yet, despite having sealed windows, are cool and airy in the hottest summer. There is even free underground parking for those with their personal auto-powered rickshaws.

I checked with Post-Restante at the head post office and received your welcome letter.

It's hard to believe that Cackminder has passed away, and in the same year as Eggsucker, whom I believe was his fag at Eton. It just shows there is no particular virtue in being bizarrely named.

I am pleased my calculations about the Finyargus proved incorrect. I must have overlooked the decimal point.

I was disturbed to hear the news that Mrs Grace is taking us to an Industrial Tribunal over the matter of her sacking. I hope to be back before the date of the hearing and assure you I will fight side by side with you to contest it. But if we lose I will deny all responsibility.

You say you miss my special recipe for Welsh rarebit, well here it is: Take one hare (it doesn't have to be Welsh - this is one of the misconceptions I hope to scotch in the second edition of my book, 'Famous Misconceptions about Cooking Scotched') and juggle with it for at least three days. Put it in a pot and forget about it for a further three days. By now the hare should be al dente. Skipper it and jacket it, using a lathe if necessary. Stuff a biscuit tin with

straw and place the hare inside. Build a fire pit and stoke it well. After the coals have died down spread a few dried roots of sarsaparilla on them and a few Hockney seeds if desired. Place the tin containing the hare on the coals, cover with quicklime and leave for several weeks (the longer the better). When you at last uncover the hare it should be friable and gritty, the hair, bone and flesh having melted together. Batter it with filchard seeds ground in a pestle and mortar. Do not add salt. Serve spread on toast or crackers or mix with bone meal to make a fine all-purpose garden fertilizer.

You do not say who won the Binson Echoplex League Northern Hurling Final. I had five pounds on Redditch Rovers and am desperate to know.

I was rather hurt to receive your notice of rent due. I had rather hoped, since my trip to Mongolia was saving you considerably on food and general upkeep (and you could even have sublet my room), you would forego the rent for the term I was absent. Nevertheless I'm sure this is a matter we can discuss amicably upon my return.

I must close now. Time for a work-out in the hotel's excellently appointed health spa, and then perhaps supper in the cabaret bar where a Mongolian Harmonica Orchestra promises to entertain us with hits from Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage musicals: Bats, Dominoes, The Orient Express, and Hey! Vita Sackville West!

PINKING SHEARS

A warehouse has opened up in Walworth, offering to rush its customers in its fastest horse drays, at no extra carriage charge, a wide range of innovative products such as an automatic foreskin retractor, a pappadum press, vaporizing staples, kitchen plastic shredder and stainless steel nose scourer.

Their catalogue arrived on my doormat this morning, along with a circular offering cheap-rate dirigible flights across the Atlantic to New Amsterdam. Watch the dolphins and whales sport, it said, from a safe height of three hundred feet. Reach out and touch icebergs as we sail imperiously past. Breakfast served all day. Wine and dine in the Manhattan Bar (outward trip only) where Lotte Scholes will captivate you with her songs from the Kaiser's Imperial Bierkeller. Includes two free tickets for the Mets opening season match.

Mrs Flaaaghtly brought the mail to me, and said, I could use a pair of their automated pinking shears. There's an awful lot of corduroy to tackle, after all.

Remind me, Mrs Flaaaghtly, I asked, what is all that corduroy for?

You mean, for what is all that corduroy, surely? I believe I've already told you this, but you may have been hypoglaecemic at the time, so I'll repeat it. Well, sir, it's for uniforms and I'll have you know it was bought as a job lot at a specially reduced price direct from the factory in Bolton. It's hardwearing, stylish, and colourful. It drapes very well on both the male and female form. It might not hold its shape too well, but when you're crawling through the trenches, that is hardly an issue, is it?

Very well, I said. I don't understand a thing you have just said. But, you shall have your automated pinking shears, whatever they are.

She left and I settled down to browse through the catalogue. A single shaft of sunlight broke through the heavy cloud cover and speared through the bay window, spreading a patch of honey-coloured luminescence on my lap. I thought of Cartledge and wished he could be with me to share it. I also wished I could put down a knob of butter, and wished I had a cat that would lick it all up, and then sit on my lap and purr and wash its whiskers, leaving me with a genuine feeling of well-being and homeliness. But I knew such things were hardly likely to happen. I couldn't afford a cat; a skinny budget rat was probably at the upper limit of my available funds. Maybe, I thought, I could buy a rat and somehow transform it into cat?

I turned the pages of the catalogue.

Tired with your pet? I read. Try our Home Pet Plastic Surgery Kit. All the tools and chemicals you need to turn your boring pet rat into a pedigree long-haired Norwegian Forest Cat, or possibly a cockatoo. Need a change from your Jack Russell: turn him into a gerbil overnight. Three scalpels included plus full instruction manual in five languages. Anaesthetics available at extra cost.

I turned another page.

The Everlasting Pencil! They said it could never be done. Our special composite material formed from graphite, China Clay and Titanium (patent Pending) ensures a point that will never wear out and never needs sharpening. Special Offer: Buy five for less than the price of a single celluloid collar.

I turned another page.

The Everlasting Celluloid Collar! Guaranteed non-flammable. (Flammable versions Available at half regular cost - see page 137). Enjoy that midnight cigar with no more anxieties about being reduced to a charred lump of charcoal in a blazing inferno. Order as Plain or Motif (tasteful picture of Jesus on the cross at Calvary). Buy ten at special discount price (Plain only).

I turned another page.

Terrified by possible Invasion from Venus?! The Swami Gusharamasala gives comforting wisdom to troubled souls from his hunting lodge in Simla. Don't look to the stars. Look within you. And without you, if you have contact lenses. Look especially in your gardens, beneath the gooseberry bushes and the rhubarb beds where the groundhogs root. Look beneath the gardens to where the roots thrust through. Ask yourself: would I rather be a Venusian and if not, why not? They have a better standard of living and create more wealth per capita of the population than two thirds of humans, and certainly compare favourably with starfish and anemones. Wouldn't you rather be an amphibious brainless drone conscripted into a hive mentality than a member of today's society constantly bombarded by adverts for Everlasting Celluloid Collars? Trial offer: Breed Venusians in your bathtub. Dehydrated spawn available for only 2/- a packet. See them magically come alive within hours. Tap into Venusian Consciousness now. No lasting after effects.

I took up a pen and turned to the index to look up 'pinking shears'

OBITUARIES

Sad news. Dame Sarah Brightman, the Nightingale from Llandudno, famed for her coloratura rendition of Mussorgsky's *Pearl Diver's Lament* and her colourful racist jokes ("My mother-in-law's black. I keep her in the coal cellar.") has died, crushed to death when the electric motor on her Xelcior automatic adjusting recliner short-circuited.

A.J. Ayers, celebrated author of *That Pipe Is Not My Wife*, has gone too. I remember once when I was working for Julian Julius Ipswich, he came into our celebrated Hatton Garden establishment and was introduced to us by his wife. She was seeking a diamante-encrusted ear trumpet to celebrate their eightieth wedding anniversary. We offered them a small Cloisonné trinket box adapted to house rare mouse-droppings, but it didn't fill the bill and they left disappointed. It was left to me, after their departure, to clear up the small stain he had left.

I also read a minor mention in *The Stage* recording the death of Gladys, Duchess of Marlborough, renowned for her famous production at the Adelphi of Ken Campbell's *Illuminati* masterpiece, *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz*.

Gone, too, is Seymour Quince, who played Tarzan of the Apes in the first five silent movie versions. He was only forty-two but died of a surfeit of mangoes, a taste he had acquired whilst filming in St Lucia. It was an excess of this fruit, which apparently produces a rogue vitamin, F.12, causing the muscles of the throat and windpipe to constrict, that did for him. His last words were "Rrrrrr..." It was especially sad since his first exhibition of self-portraits, rendered in charcoal, was due to open next month at the Guggenheim.

And of course we all mourn the passing of ‘Papa’ Ernest Hemingway, who recently blew his brains out in his family home in Montana after having to make a tortuous decision between using Artex or polystyrene panels on the ceiling of his hunting lodge. The world of Interior Designing will never know his like again.

I also see in the quarterly journal, *The Annals of the Barry Scrapyard*, a claim that the final entrails of Group Captain Biggles, who had previously been reported missing in action in Glossop, have been discovered in a munitions case secreted in the tender of an 0-4-0 Beesley tank engine detailed to serve the Cardiff Docks. This story smacks of disinformation. Beesleys were never seen in the vicinity of Cardiff, and in any case were not fitted with tenders. I fear the mythical remains of Biggles remain just that, especially since the skull described in Von Daniken’s book, *Biggles on Venus*, was recently discredited and revealed as being that of an otter and an orang-utan crudely cobbled together with Poly-fix and furnished with the teeth of a Portuguese sailor who died in the battle of Molto Colombo.

Worst of all, today, was the news of a personal friend of mine, Curly McBain, who had been on death’s row in Huntsville Penitentiary in Texas and who had now met his end by a lethal injection of a mixture of chilli oils with a Scoville level of 3,000,000. Apparently they had to peel tiny shreds of him from the walls of the death chamber.

It had been many years since I’d seen Curly, but I still remembered his irrepressible grin, and the way his snaggle-teeth gleamed in the moonlight, hinting at a degree of madness behind that calm, placid soul.

Curly had been convicted of the infamous hair-dresser murders in Plympton, Illinois, and I had given expert

testimony at his trial, proving in one of the alleged murders, at least, that the so-called 'golden forelock' cut could not have been achieved with the scissors produced in evidence. The jury, on which not one hairdresser was allowed to sit, dismissed my evidence out of hand.

I'd toured the hair-dressing salons of Plympton and come to the conclusion that the type of scissors involved in the murder (a two-handed Taiwanese 'swipe' model, with plastic rather than mother-of-pearl handles) was in use in only one establishment, namely Andre (of Conduit Street) Swade's 'You're Nicked, Bob' unisex salon. Andre himself had died in a bizarre sledding accident some years before the first murder, so we could not pin it on him, but I had a strong suspicion his partner, Luigi Frisco, had a hand in the matter, especially since he had confessed on several occasions to wearing a false moustache.

Curly's last telegram to me had read: I'm standing on No Hope Bridge, Old Buddy. It's the Big Chair Tomorrow. I only wish you could be here to share it with me.

I telegraphed him back recommending a classic Pyrenean reverse brush cut for his Final Haircut. It's everyone's right to die with good hair, after all, even in Texas, as long as it doesn't cost more than ten dollars.

WEATHER

It was a bleak day. I read the Radio Times and became even more depressed.

Coggins came round to deliver seventeen vertiginous coils to Mrs Flaaaghthly. He was wearing oven mittens and explained he had only just finished curing the coils in his gas cooker. Mrs Flaaaghthly took them and placed them on a baking tray to cool. Then she cuffed Coggins' lad, who was just standing around gawping, and not even picking his nose.

I instructed Mrs Flaaaghthly to give the boy a ginger ale and I invited Coggins Senior into the drawing room for a cigar and a brandy. He agreed, a trifle diffidently, clasping his cloth cap, and rubbing his hobnail boots against his trousers before entering. I sat him down in Cartiledge's Chesterfield, and lit his cigar for him, and poured his drink. Fortunately a fire was already roaring in the grate, distancing us from the bleak greyness of the afternoon that lay beyond the bay window.

Have you heard from Mr Cartiledge recently, sir, asked Coggins?

Indeed. He is through to the finals in the medium-to-large yurt category, although he was penalized two points for a false start, and what the judges described as over-enthusiastic flensing of the reindeer carcasses. He is also entered in the mixed doubles with a partner called Simon Blensky, who comes from the old-style of yurt building, in believing that every yurt should tend toward the condition of the ultimate bagel. That may hold him back, and in any case, he has strong competition from the Kochinski/Yerbils who are hard to beat on finishing.

That's very interesting, sir, said Coggins. He arose, and took a tour around the room, marvelling at my showcase of carved ivory tusks and expressing special interest in my alabaster model of the ancient Egyptian Queen, entitled Nefertiti in Flight. He admired the walnut-inlaid case, which contained Cartledge's collection of early solenoids. Then he farted very loudly and returned to his seat.

What do you think of the weather we're having? I asked him.

Well, as I see it, sir, there's a low-pressure region over the Azores.

And what exactly does that mean? I asked.

Damned if I know sir. As far as I know the Azores might as well be on Venus, though I don't see if that were the case how it would affect our own weather system.

Quite, I said. I prefer to leave such matters of speculation in the hands of professionals, such as Sian Lewis and Anna Willcox. Not Heather Young, unfortunately, not since her sad accident.

Coggins produced a scrap of paper from the pocket of his leather overalls, and read from it.

By the by, he said, I have recently been following the career of that young and upcoming weather-forecaster Joanna Lewington, and she suggests that due to a long-term depression over Minsk, or possibly the Southern Urals, we can expect a continuous degradation of our weather front. She has offered to unbutton her vest by one button for each isobar. This means we should soon be viewing her warm front.

I smacked him and reset the button on the side of his head which would cause him to revert to a typical stereotypical character in a weird science fiction novel. It

must have worked because there was no accompanying bang! and odour of burnt hair.

He continued: In recent weeks, though, we have been having quite a lot of cumuli-nimbus passing through.

A trace of enthusiasm entered his voice.

And that can affect reception, he continued. The radio waves bounce off the clouds and into the ionosphere and can end up anywhere. Only yesterday I had a freak contact with a radio amateur on the island of Yama-Pitangu which is somewhere in the Pacific.

Really, I said. And what was the weather like there?

It was raining, said Coggins.

SHENANIGANS

I was awoken in the night by the faint sound of bleating. I drifted back to sleep and to the comfort of dream in which my beloved Helen Young was calmly waving her hand over East Anglia, spiriting up a few wispy shreds of cumulo-stratus. Her teeth glowed like the perfect white diamonds they were. Then Sarah Wilmshurst who wore a classical two-button jacket over a taupe silk shirt joined her. It would be largely sunny, she said, with occasional outbursts of a light oily drizzle perfumed with patchouli.

The sound of bleating became more insistent and dragged me back to wakefulness once more. There was a shriek and the sound of doors banging and of glass shattering. I rolled over and went back to sleep.

The next thing I knew Mrs Flaaaghthly was shaking me awake. She was in her nightdress and the twin palps on her forehead were throbbing visibly. It's Thatcher, she said. Come quickly, sir.

I put on my dressing gown, some carpet slippers, a cardigan, and a polo helmet to be on the safe side. Hot water, I said. We must have hot water. And towels.

Oh, sir, said Mrs Flaaaghthly, tears welling up in her eyes. She's not giving birth. She's gone.

That's fine, then, I said, removing my cardigan and polo helmet. I shall miss her in a way. I hope she'll keep in touch. Perhaps we could invite her round for the occasional afternoon tea.

Oh, you don't understand, sir. She's been stolen. Kidnapped.

This puts an entirely different complexion on the matter,

Mrs Flaaaghtly, I said. Criminals have invaded our house and violated our privacy whilst we slept, and probably even eaten some of your you estimable scones without leaving a thank-you note. Have you checked if there is anything else missing? I'm not worried about comestibles, as such, but I know Cartledge is very attached to his Talking Drum, and I wouldn't like to see my Withering Stick Collection vandalized.

Mrs Flaaaghtly started sobbing uncontrollably. I rang Coggins, and asked him to send his lad round to console her. There was nothing we could do until the morning. I had the private telephone number of Inspector Glassco-Cutting who was in charge of the Spitalfields Phantom investigation, but I knew he was a heavy sleeper.

*

Eventually Glassco-Cutting arrived. He put his dripping umbrella in our elephant's foot umbrella stand, which surprised me not only because it wasn't raining but I hadn't realized we possessed an Elephant's foot umbrella stand, since such things were surely banned by the latest CITES convention. I poured a martini for Glassco-Cutting, shaking and stirring it to be on the safe side. He took it and looked at me piercingly, with his flint-grey eyes and aquiline nose.

What's so special about this goat, he asked, that you drag me out of my bed at 11 o'clock in the morning?

She's a pedigree breeding Armenian, I said. She is worth thousands of pounds on the black market, but probably less if already skinned. Furthermore she was wearing a collar in which was mounted the famous Lazenby diamond. She could speak three languages and was an expert in

cryptography. She had the ear of the Prime Minister and the mouth of the Lord Chancellor.

This pack of lies (apart from her skill in languages) seemed to placate the Inspector.

I'd put my best man on it, he said, but he was struck down with a stroke soon after the wedding. You'll have to settle for my second best man. May I introduce Dirk Beauregard (pronounced Bo-regard).

At that very moment Dirk entered the room.

How they managed that remains a mystery to me to this day. I suppose it is all a part of classified police methods which will only be revealed possibly at the same time Joanna Southcott's, box is opened.

I've been searching the premises, said Dirk, and apart from a rather contentious paper on Vivisection written by a fourteen-year-old schoolboy, the only thing of interest I've found, is this.

He extended his hand and, there, nestling in the palm, was the unmistakable shape of a false moustache.

ULAN BATOR

I feel fulfilled, wrote Cartledge, to be finally among men of my own kind, yurt-men, bold and true. We spent two days sightseeing in Ulan Bator, taking in such wonders as the everlasting monolith of Tovndr and the famous glass stables built by Prince Balshuk of Ogduran, with their magnificent subterranean viewing chamber.

Fanny Adams was invited as a guest to sing the role of the mute yak-tender, Galeskyn, in the Opera, Krovnar of the Steppes at the National Opera Hall. She has never sounded better.

And Dewaulder was far more cheerful than vengeful, having been invited to give a talk on GWR Points and Switching at the State Mechanics Institute.

Leaving the rest of the party to abandon themselves to the delights of the city, Paulo and I travelled a hundred miles to the neighbouring city of Bats limber where the Yurt exposition was being staged, I felt a kinship with the young man that I had not experience before on our journey, since most of that time he has spent sticking twigs into me and sneering at my interpretation of Thomas Hardly. We talked together in urgent undertones of our hopes and fears, our dreams and aspirations, regarding yurts. Guido told me of his childish attempts to construct scale-model yurts from balsa wood, and of his attempt to build a full size yurt in the family garden, only to have it destroyed by his wrathful father, accusing him of neglecting his studies in Sardine Husbandry. And you will recall, my friend, for how long I have laboured over my own misshapen designs, constantly consigning them to the waste-paper-bin in my frustration at not being able to glimpse the true elements of their design. How fruitful now, to find myself amongst men who spoke

the same language as I, the language of the yurt!

And what wonders awaited us, when we finally arrived at Batslimber. Here we would finally experience the wonders of the yurt in its true environment, a nomadic dwelling on the windswept arid plains of the tundra, ancient beyond belief, and yet begging resurgence in the new Mongolia we saw being rebuilt around us. Here were secrets of quick, cheap, prefabricated housing structures I could take back to the West.

But first I had to prove myself, and to prove myself before the Yang, the Secret Masters of the Yurt, an arcane guild which acted as the repository of all yurt knowledge as passed down from generation to generation, through the male line.

Beside Paulo and myself there were disciples from all over the world, including a reformed lap-dancer called Zizi Tizzi from Atlantic City, and an Australian Bush-Balloonist called Bruce Bruceworth who dreamt of establishing a Christian network of yurt-based townships through the outback and bringing some kind of civilization to that desolate country.

We spent our first night in a vast communal dormitory, in a yurt, of course, specifically designed for that purpose. We had been warned not to snore, at least not in harmony, in case it set up vibrational waves, which would bring the yurt down upon us. This, apparently, is one of the first rules of yurt building.

CHEEK CHEEK CHEEK

It was a grey dismal day, halfway between spring and summer, and almost two thirds of the way between autumn and winter.

The birds were singing outside my window, especially that irritating one that goes, cheek cheek cheek every fifteen seconds. What is it? It's not a blue-tit. That goes tisset tisset tisset. It's not a collared dove. That imitates a Kawasaki 50cc motorcycle starting up: brupppyyy...brrooom...brooop...brump

Mrs Flaaaghtly had washed my braces and left them out overnight on the line. They were frozen solid by the time I awoke, due to a cold snap, and I wasted precious minutes thawing them out over a kitchen gas ring.

Mrs Flaaaghtly had become unbearable since the abduction of Thatcher, almost as if she took it personally. Coggins' lad did a marvellous job in calming her down, but I sensed that even he was nearing the end of his tether. He had let his appearance go, for one thing; his hair was no longer neatly slicked with Brylcreem, and he no longer combed his eyebrows. His usual jaunty whistle had decayed into a monotonous burble.

I intended to put in a morning's work at the British Library and so, took an omnibus to Great Portland Street. Grinning Jack Bobble, the Merry Folk singing Bus Conductor greeted me with familiarity although I admit I was somewhat short with him. As well as being two pence short on my fare, I was much preoccupied with an article I had read in that morning's Head & Shoulders Monthly, the only Legitimate Newsletter for the Tonsurists of this Nation. Although I was by no means an accomplished tonsurist, I had maintained my subscription, just because

there were occasions when tantalizing tit-bits cropped up in the news and review pages.

The article had hinted, for instance, that the hairdressers of the ancient Etruscan civilization had had access to some kind of gel or lacquer, possibly based on the resin of the Kumfamolo tree. I was eager to get to the Library and check out the sources in Winstanley's 'Etruscan hairstyles: Stiff or not' and Le Boisier's: "La Quiffe Enorme, Un Histoire Substantiale."

Outside Great Portland Street Station, I exchanged brief pleasantries with the newsvendor, and bought a copy of the Daily Bugle.

Rare goat missing in South London! Read all about it in the Bugle! he shouted. Plus nude pictures of the Prime Minister's mistress. I went on my way.

Vossage didn't seem quite himself, for some reason. In fact, I strongly doubted that it was Vossage. His smile, and his greasy avuncular attempts at charm were the same, but something was missing. Perhaps it was his dandruff.

I ordered up the books I wanted, despite a sinking feeling that this sham simulacra would not be able to supply the requisite tomes.

I opened the Bugle. There was no mention of Thatcher's goat napping. Glassco-Cutting had insisted on keeping the details out of the press. One mention, he'd explained, and we'd be deluged by ransom letters from every crank goat-owner under the sun.

I read an article entitled 'Spiffing: Is it Acceptable In Our City?', which frankly baffled me, seeming to be maintained only by the repetition of a fairly obvious typographical error.

A squib under the heading ‘ Lozenge Manufacturer Invents Universal Panacea’ amused me for a few minutes, as did a report on the sports pages on the psychic abilities of greyhounds, and their apparent ability to predict the outcome of their own races, which hardly struck me as news, or in the least bit surprising.

I normally glossed over the International News Pages, being largely uninterested in the goings on of disenchanting colonials in third world countries, but my eye was caught by a report headed: ‘Manufacturers of Weird Device wiped out by Explosion in Flatlands. Ohio. August Arbillaly & Son perish in suspicious circumstances.’ It rang a bell with me, but I couldn’t quite pin it down. In desperation I turned to the Personal Columns.

Lottie Barraclough seeks man with GSOH. Must be eight feet tall and know how to park a car.

Greengage Recipes sent free on receipt of £10.00.

Obese woman, deemed desirable by US Government Survey, seeks poodle with own arboretum.

Charming single lady, Kathleen Kettle, OBD, OME, POKE, offers Counselling and Enemas for North Sea Rig Workers.

Timeshare in Alvin, Texas, offered at reduced rates to man with withered arm.

Unwanted Christmas Present. Earthquake Detector, 50,000-kilohertz sensitivity, will not function outside a radius of five miles from centre of Cheltenham. Cost £60.

Then from amongst the broken hearts and garage sale advertisements, it leapt out at me:

I GOT YOUR GOAT. MEET ME TONIGHT UNDER HUNGERFORD BRIDGE.

UNDER HUNGERFORD BRIDGE

The crescent moon was like a curl of wood thrown up by a spokeshave. Clouds raced across its face, and fog swirled up from the river. Underneath Hungerford Bridge there was a complex network of roads, pathways and alleyways, stinking of the smoke from the constant traffic of railway trains rattling above. The calls of colliers and stokers echoed down the dark tunnels and rattled off the tiled walls. A poster of Helen Willetts peeled from the wall; some vandal had drawn a moustache onto her face. It couldn't hide her divine beauty.

A man in a tall hat and carrying a wooden cane, tipped on one end with ivory and on the other with gold, approached me. His face was masked in the shadows.

You, I said, accosting him. Have you got my goat?

I have indeed, he said. I could hardly make out his features in the gloom, but his teeth sparkled and there was a decidedly oily glint in his eye. He raised his hat to me, disclosing a distinct bald spot.

Now I have made your acquaintance, he said, perhaps you would like to accompany me to a local hostelry down by the river, where over a brown ale or two, we can chat and extend the boundaries of our friendship.

You fiend, I said. I have no interest in drinking with you. I demand the return of my goat. Have you no heart, man? She is pregnant. She could give birth at any moment. Without the proper medical attention both she and her kid could die.

I confess I lost all sense of decorum at that point, and launched myself at him beating at his chest.

The stranger pushed me away, and looked confused and nonplussed.

At that moment Glassco-Cutting stepped out of the shadows and accosted him.

I'm Glassco-Cutting of the Yard, he said. You may have heard of me in connection with the Spectre of Spitalfields Investigation, and the mystery of the Youth Theatre of Austria when an old woman of Szchetchuan was accidentally decapitated on stage.

Are you the man who placed the advertisement in the Bugle, acknowledging that you had this man's goat?

Yes, said the man. But surely you can't be so naïve as to believe there were real goats involved? It was simply a coded message.

Meaning what, demanded Glassco-Cutting?

The man bent and whispered discreetly to Glassco-Cutting. The inspector blanched, reddened and then blanched again. He half raised his truncheon as if to beat the man, then railed at him: Be off, you vile scum, back to the sewers where you belong.

Once the man had gone, Glassco-Cutting turned to me and said, I fear you have been the victim of a vile deception, perhaps not entirely intentional but the act of a blaggard nevertheless.

What do you mean? I asked.

At that moment two men stepped out of the swirling fog to confront us. They were gayly dressed in red and yellow striped waistcoats with purple cummerbunds and yellow spats. They had chalked wigs and powdered faces. They

winked at us saucily and asked: Would either of you nice gentlemen be interested in seeing our goat?

*

I went home, by way of a 34, a 102 and a mobility Bus passing through Peckham Rye, which stopped when I flagged it down. My mind was seething with information. Obviously I knew I had been duped in the matter of the kidnapping of Thatcher. The perpetrators were still at large and I could not hope for any early outcome of this problem.

I arrived home and lay awake for many hours that night, with something nagging at the back of my mind. I went over the events of the days, again and again, before it finally came to me. How had the news vendor known about Thatcher's disappearance when there had been no mention of in the press?

YENGIS KHAN

This morning, wrote Cartiledge, after a cold shower and a light breakfast of sautéed yak tripe and coffee grounds, the head Yengi, or the Yengis Khan, as he's known, welcomed us to the exposition and gave us an introductory lecture on the history of the yurt.

He painted a picture of a savage people living in a savage environment seeking food and protection in a landscape where resources were few. Little wonder, eh, he said, that you poor souls should come to our beautiful and bountiful country to learn the skills that might help you survive and prosper.

The yurt, he said, was first invented in the year 413BCC. That is, before the world had even heard of Charlie Chaplin. Its original purpose was to provide emergency overflow housing for the less privileged members of society thronging our rich and burgeoning cities, the stockbrokers and the paediatricians and such. In those times, before the advent of moulded aluminium extrusions and long-lasting waterproof fibre covering, designs nevertheless incorporated the basic principles of lightness and portability that typify the modern yurt.

He inserted a slide into the overhead projector and showed us the sepia image of a typical vernacular yurt in the early stages of construction. Its builders had paused in their work to form a group and pose, smiling, for the photograph. One of them, amusingly, held his fingers behind a colleague's head in a V-sign.

This in fact shows one of my own ancestors, said the Khan. He is the one fondling the yak. In those days yurt building was very much a communal event. People would come from far and wide from neighbouring towns and

villages for days and nights of endless feasting, debauchery, and free sex, which would culminate in the ultimate ceremony of raising the yurt. It was surprising, in fact, that after so many hours of excess and indulgence, any of the men could manage to raise anything, let alone their yurt.

He paused to acknowledge the resounding silence. A Mongolian sitting next to me leaned over to whisper that this was a famous Mongolian joke, based upon the phonetic similarity of the Mongolian words for 'temporary housing' and 'pizzle'.

I laughed and applauded loudly, a cue, which the rest of the audience immediately took up. The Khan looked upon me benignly.

Now, he said, you will all form groups for your first practical workshop. Each group will be assigned a Yengi master. Under his guidance you will tackle the initial stage of the construction of your first yurt. Classes will be conducted in strict accordance with classical and traditional principles, except of course there will be no sex, since it is not the yak breeding season.

Again I guffawed and thwacked my thighs with merriment. This time the Khan looked at me with a complete lack of comprehension.

THURROCK

It was a week or so before I again found myself in Great Portland Street. A plump red-haired man who seemed to have no interest in anything except the racing results had replaced my regular newsvendor.

Result of the 2.30 at Plumpton, sir. Priest's Hole by a small nose over Holdstock Hedge with Big Girl Sarah coming in third. 2.45 at Dunmow: Two horse race. Creditable Lodger three lengths ahead of Labour Peer. 3.00 at Thurrock: Venusian Import (20-1 outsider), Foulness Dredger, and Sparkling Run, photo for fourth.

Where is the regular man, I asked him?

You mean Justin Van De Lopez, the ex-chess champion, Nobel Prize winning novelist, and Crimean veteran? It was a tragic accident, sir. A tram hit him, barely fifty yards from this pitch. It severed his remaining leg. He was so distraught by this twist of fate, that as soon as he came out of the Richmond, he set things up to hang himself. Just as he had hoisted himself up onto a chair in his sad lodging in Hounslow, he realized that if a man with no legs and only one arm could contrive to hang himself, then that man could achieve anything in the world. Unfortunately at that moment he lost his balance and the chair gave way.

Then he took his secret to the grave, I said.

As it happened, the news-vendor said, he did leave a note addressed for the attention of Chief Inspector Glassco-Cutting of the Yard.

I called a cab and rushed to Scotland Yard.

New Upset in Embassy Snooker, the vendor called behind me. Joe Swail ends up on the wrong side of the

blue, with a fine contact needed on the final black. What odds against him making best break?

*

A young superintendent wearing fishnet tights showed me into Glassco-Cutting's office.

He instructed her to bring us tea and biscuits. When she had gone Glassco-Cutting avoided my eye, and fidgeted uncomfortably as if he knew what I was there to ask him.

Out with it, man, I said. I know about the newsvendor's suicide note. What did it say? How did he of all people know of Thatcher's kidnapping?

Glassco-Cutting stood up and strode about his desk several times. Then he sat down, lit up a cigarette, and immediately snuffed it out.

At that moment the superintendent brought in the tea and a plate of biscuits, and we sat discussing the merits of Hardly's new novel for five minutes.

Then Glassco-Cutting finally drained his tea, and said, God, man, I'm sorry. I can't tell you anything except that this investigation has now been taken out of my hands. The file has been passed to the Foreign Office and I am sworn to secrecy by the vows of my office. The matter is now in the hands of Colonel Shirley 'Ducks' Pennington.

*

I called a cab and rushed to Pennington's club, the Old Hundredth in Pall Mall. I was ushered into the Readers Room by an old retainer who farted very loudly with every

step he took. Shirley rose to greet me warmly, and ordered up a bottle of Pouleefonke Nigerian Red from his special reserve.

I wasted no time on preliminaries. I've spoken to Glassco-Cutting, I said, and I believe you have information about the kidnapping of the goat, Thatcher.

Shirley coughed in embarrassed discomfort. My dear fellow, this is a very delicate matter. In fact it's become a matter of National Security. I'd like to tell you more, but the Official Secrecy Act forbids it. I'm sure you'll understand my position. More Pouleefonke?

National Security, I queried? It's only a goat, for god's sake.

Shirley looked at me with an almost unbearable sense of pity, and then his eyes narrowed into canny slits.

Come now, he said. I think we both know that's not true.

OVERTIME

It was a bright, sunny day, uncommonly warm for March. Mrs Flaaaghthly and Coggins' lad were moping in the kitchen. They'd been moping a lot lately, ever since Thatcher had been taken, even spurning my frequent invitations to share roast chestnuts and cider with me whilst I read from Thomas Hardy.

(With the return of Rifleman Gusset (pronounced Goosey) from the Napoleonic wars, bearing a forged letter claiming Minnie Small was beholden to marry him, Johannes Fluck had reached the point where he had to make an important decision as to his choice of cast-iron cookware for their wedding present, and which poison he should choose to dose Gusset's wedding toast).

I was determined to cheer them up.

Surely you've not forgotten, I reminded them. There is a free festival and concert in Kennington Park today in aid of The Antarctica Refugee Fund. The Ted Dossiter Dance Orchestra are headlining. I insist we all go.

Grudgingly, Coggins' lad spat on his boots and polished them, whilst Mrs Flaaaghthly picked out her best bustle.

An atmosphere of manufactured merriment surrounded us as we approached Kennington Park. Clowns gambolled about us. A man on stilts lay groaning in the gutter, having fallen over and broken his pelvis. Two policemen were kicking him whilst they waited for the ambulance.

An earnest young man who'd had his eyebrows shaved and a roof felting nail inserted in his lower lip approached us and handed us a leaflet. Apparently there were more than ten thousand refugees, mostly of Welsh origin, stranded in Antarctica by unseasonable ice floes. They

were employed by the iniquitous Stanley Gibbons Flensing Company and paid a pittance in edible roots.

We bought peanuts from a female peanut vendor who claimed her husband had been killed by a lizard bite in the Hispano-American war. A taffy salesman, who claimed his ancestors had sold taffy to King George III, gave us free samples of taffy. None of us ever found out what it tasted like because it went straight in the bin.

The Cash Brothers, specially imported from Nebraska, mounted the main stage and played their soft mix of melancholy Country music to a background of hisses and boos.

We made our way to the central tent, where face painters rendered Coggins' lad with a leopard's face, myself with an eerie replica of Napoleon Bonaparte's visage, and Mrs Flaaaghthly looking something like an alien from Venus. Oh how we laughed when we saw ourselves in the hall of mirrors.

By this time Ted Dossiter was on stage and his lead vocalist Ronnie Seldom was halfway through his whistling solo in Shepherd of the Hills.

Mrs Flaaaghthly and I danced together. We shimmied and shaked and strutted our stuff together and she hitched up her skirts as she span me around. Coggins' lad did an impromptu clog dance. Oh what days, Oh what nights.

In the morning, when I woke up, it seemed as if the whole experience had been a dream. Mrs Flaaaghthly served me my morning muffins with curlers in her hair, and presented me with three starched shirts.

I was up all night ironing them, sir, she said. But I won't charge you overtime.

SUMP

Just to warn you, sir, Mrs Flaaaghtly said, the New Malden and Ditchling Beacon Cave Rescue Team are coming round today to examine a sump I've found in sector B52. I'm not saying it's bottomless, but when I threw a penny into it, compound interest had turned it into 2/6d, before it hit the bottom. She giggled in a quite inane way, and fluttered her eyelashes. That was a joke, sir. Coggins' lad thought of it. He said it might take your mind off the fact that beneath your house is a system of underground caves and potholes, linking into vast caverns dating from the years of the first invasion. It's really rather good, isn't it?

Indeed it is, Mrs Flaaaghtly, I said, but do you think I have nothing better to do than entertain Coggins' lad's fantasies, considering my concerns over the disappearance of Thatcher and the fact I have not heard from Cartledge in two weeks? Anyway give the lad an extra toffee, from me.

I settled down to take in another chapter of the *Dutch Cap Maker's Daughter*. Minnie Small had married rifleman Gusset, only to divorce him two weeks later after an unconsummated honeymoon in Eastbourne, when it emerged that the rifleman, due to a military accident, was no longer a whole man, but only approximately 87% entire.

Johannes Fluck took her back into his household, but could not help feeling a deep restlessness in his soul.

“Johannes Fluck sat, in the inglenook, warm in the glow of the fire, watching Minnie Small work at embroidering a sampler. Outside a crow bellowed in raucous after-dinner delight, having ripped the heart out of a stoat on its way to

Mortenstone. A Barn Owl swept down in swift and silent descent to pluck up the stoat's companion, an itinerant weasel, before swooping upwards into the rich dark sky with a triumphant whoop.

Perhaps, Fluck thought, in the future some writer might take up his pen and attempt to describe just such a scene in the context of a novel about native indigenous wildlife, perhaps even from the point of view of the creatures themselves; if so he would surely make his fortune.

The warm light glowing on Minnie's white skin, and the lightness of her simple cotton shift, lit fires of yearning in his soul which he knew could no more be consummated, than the more earthly longings of Rifleman Gusset. He missed his institutionalised daughter even more now. Her simple and direct intimacy with him, the earnestness of her well-formed advice, her Christian grasp of womanly virtues and her honest way of communicating them which would immediately foreclose any developing argument between them and simultaneously resolve it in an atmosphere of smiles and good nature - these were all things he missed more than anything in his life, even more than the direct communion of flesh with flesh. Possibly

He watched Minnie for a few minutes more and then pulled out his journal, primed his pen and settled down to write another chapter of what he hoped might be considered his masterwork: 'Pardon Me For Living: A History of Taxation'."

I put the book down with a feeling of satisfaction, and silently thanked Hardly for giving me so much pleasure. And I was only on page 47.

Mrs Flaaaghtly tapped on the door.

The Cave Rescue Team has expressed a desire to meet and greet, Mrs Flaaaghtly said. Their leader 'Stiffy' Bob

Bloxham is quite proud of his immaculate DA, and has read your works on the subject of Peruvian quiffs in National Geographic Magazine.

The Cave Rescue team, in the form of six very sticky men, entered and I offered them port and several layers of newspaper. I invited their leader, Bob Bloxham, to sit beside me and offered him a cigar. He was a large man, with huge bushy eyebrows, very masculine and hardly the sort of chap, I reckoned, to feel comfortable in a tight passage. Nevertheless his pompadour was very slick, which must have counted for something. We exchanged anecdotes of shellac, and double-refined engine-grease and soon I began to recognize a fellow soul. He knew more about the use of fly agaric and its more luminous compounds, than I knew myself. Towards midnight when we had just about finished our anecdotes, and our disputation about the relative qualities of Natural honeybee wax and processed tarmac had been settled, he brought out a crude sackcloth bag.

I found this in the deepest recesses of the sump, which lies under your house, he said. Bear in mind we are going back 50 million years. There were no end of organic fossil remains, some of a most horribly frightening aspect, which I'm sure Mr Darwin will nevertheless be able to work into his broad scheme of things. But amongst them we found this most significant artefact.

He handed me the thing he had dredged up from 50 million years ago. It was a small irregularly shaped piece of shiny metal. Someone had arduously etched the following message upon it with a blunt instrument: "We know what becomes of the broken-hearted"

NEWS FROM PORLOCK

I received a letter from Parson Porlock. My dear friend, he wrote, I write to thank you for your hospitality on my recent visit, and for forwarding my false teeth. I don't know how I could have mislaid them. You say you found them clenched to the dado rail. Well, I never.

I am sorry for not writing sooner but I have been greatly absorbed in my ideas about the universe as a hat, and believe I may be on the verge of proving a startling theory. My current research is concerned not so much with the physical shape of the universe, which I think we can all now agree is a cross between a fedora and a trilby, with certain elements of a collapsible opera hat, but with its temporal qualities.

Imagine the universe as such a hat moving slowly and steadily along a more or less straight, narrow and unwavering temporal axis. I assume that we eke out our existence somewhere on the brim, to which gravity would inexorably drag us, rather than the inhospitable gradients of the crown. The present hat is of course one of many preceding hats and one of many pre-ordained hats to come.

If we could find a way to snap the brim, we would be dislodged from our current temporal site to one either in the hat's future or in its past. You may of course posit that the snapping of the brim would require some sort of force external to the hat, a cosmic 'hand of god' for instance which could patently not exist let alone be relied upon to suffer the direction of us mere mortals. Fortunately

Groening's recent development of the bi-metallic self-snapping bowler goes a long way to settling this problem and I am currently working closely with him on the prototype of a Universal Hat Brim Snapping Mechanism.

However, while we are making progress in overcoming practical complications I am well aware that there are a number of theoretical considerations to bear in mind.

Firstly the universe, being a hat, may well have a propensity to spin around a vertical temporal axis, almost as surely as it does in space. If the area of the brim we inhabit were snapped while it was out of alignment with the MTA (main temporal axis), we would not travel in time, but to a different location at more or less the same time, depending on the number of degrees of our misalignment. This is not such a drawback as it could of course provide us with a cheap and instantaneous form of interstellar travel. Groening and I must be sure we make our Time Axis Alignment Regulator reliably accurate, so that we can be sure of the outcome of our ‘snapping’.

If this were the only consideration things would not be too bad, but there is always the possibility that the universe, being a hat, is rotating, or tumbling about a third temporal axis. One way to picture this would be to imagine an enthusiastic crowd on Derby Day launching their hats into the air en masse as the winner passes the post. If one were to arrange to snap the brim of one’s own hat at this point as it ‘tumbled’, one might well be dislodged onto another hat (or universe) altogether, possibly much like one’s own, or possibly radically different and not at all to one’s own taste, perhaps even bearing a different maker’s label. If simple time travel is to be our goal we must obviously incorporate some sort of Temporal Compensating Mechanism, analogous to the gimbals that hold a ship’s compass steady no matter how the ship twists and turns upon the waves.

So, my friend, this is how we stand at the moment. I have renovated a barn on my estate in Bent Crutcher, where Groening and I work, often through the night, on the

various aspects of our device, taking time out only for the occasional relaxing game of Monopoly. Groening is the Shoe and I, of course, am the Hat. Do visit us if you find yourself in this neck of the woods. Meanwhile, if we have any success at all, I assure you that you will be the first to know. One way or another.

CAPTAIN ANTIFER

I stood, sheltering beneath the ornate columned portico of the British Library, with its frieze of Greek dryads stolen by the famous adventurer and plunderer, Sir Clarkson Ghysinglyfold (pronounced Grrrr). It was a miserable evening, typical of late autumn in London and typically gloomy. A chill fog was adrift in the streets, wispy and floating, not yet settled. The grunts and neighing of the horses from passing hansoms, carts and drays sounded like the cries of lost souls echoing out of the mists of hell, or at least of Gower Street.

Vossage, discharged from his curatorial duties for the evening, paused to bid me goodnight before setting forth down the steps and into the gloom with the determined stride of a man who at least knew where he was going, and that his destination was not that far away. I envied him his certainty.

Quite honestly I did not feel like going home.

It seemed all the people I thought I could rely on as allies had deserted me. Glassco-Cutting and Shirley ‘Ducks’ Pennington had closed their investigations to me. Even my favourite news vendor had deserted me in a very terminal way, and I still owed Grinning Jack Bobble two pennies for an unpaid fare.

I thought I might make my way down to the river and seek some kind of solace in the curdling chill grey waters.

Thus I ended up on the foreshore beneath the new footbridge designed by Isambert Knockholt Burnel as part of the celebrations for the newly crowned King Edward the Fourteenth (or the Sunny Delight King, as he was known to our French allies).

As I was contemplating whether or not I should undress and mail my grandfather's watch to Cartiledge, before casting myself in a final act of desperation into the waters, a skiff approached through the mist. It was propelled by a one-eyed sailor whose face bore a mass of battle scars. In the prow of the boat stood a figure smothered up in layers of coarse grey cloaking and with his head and face hidden beneath a hooded monk-like cowl.

As the seaman beached the craft, the figure disembarked.

Who are you, I asked?

I am Captain Antifer, the figure replied, in a gruff voice. I travel the world without rest, for years ago I was inoculated with the juice of the Himalayan Rhubarb Tree, which makes it impossible for me to sleep. You can't believe how irritating that is. I have fought with Zulus and zombies and other, unnameable creatures whose names if we knew them might begin with 'z'. Oh, and zebras, too. I have sailed in Clippers, in Barques, in Dhows, and ancient galley-ships on the spice route out of Nineveh. And on old Colliers carrying coal and steel across the North Sea, wherever that is, but not yet in coracles or those loathsome small kayaks. I have sailed beneath the sea in the fabled Nautilus, and fought Turks and Greeks alike, without taking either side. I have fought the giant squid and served it to Captain Nemo with a delicate garlic sauce and a cranberry coulis. I have traded in tobacco, betel juice, quat, miscellaneous spores and fungi, and cinema foyer lobby cards. Furthermore, I have read the complete works of Jules Verne.

What do you want with me? I asked.

I bear a message from your friend Cartiledge, the wraith said.

What is it? Has he somehow intuited my despair?

Perhaps in his travels in the heathen lands he has discovered some arcane knowledge which I can use to settle my dilemma.

He says: just persevere.

That's it? Just persevere?

That's it. Would you like me to write it down for you?

That won't be necessary, I said.

Antifer retreated down the foreshore, climbed back into the skiff and raised his hand to me in a final benediction as his one-eyed oarsmen sculled the vessel backwards into the mist.

I remained by the water's edge, amazed and perplexed. Was this a message of encouragement from Cartledge at the very moment that I stood on the edge of despair, ready to give the whole game up? And if so, how had he known? How had his messenger found me just in time to drag me back from the brink? And just who was the mysterious Captain Antifer? It was all too puzzling.

I stumbled away and found myself on the embankment, flagging down a hansom cab to take me home.

I'm sorry, guv, said the driver. I don't go south of the river.

FOLK SONG

My Dear Friend, wrote Cartledge, tonight, whilst fireworks blister the skies of Batslimber in the exposition's Grand Finale Closing Ceremony, we dance the sacred dance known as the Boke and I raise a glass of fermented yak milk to you as an absent friend, warmly remembered.

There have been wonderful times; and I have great news. Paulo and I have both had significant successes. Paulo achieved second best in Exhibition in the 20' solo category with a special mention for the sturdiness of his belly-bands which he hand-wove from shredded bark, and I - you will hardly believe this - am bringing home the silver medal in the Overall Championship, second only to the Mongolian Triple Gold Champion Glaktor Selberer.

It was Selberer himself who took me aside after the award ceremony and reminded me that, notwithstanding my great success, I had yet only scratched the surface of yurt-construction, that I had in fact only barely dipped my toe in the whole culture of the yurt. It was as if I had mastered the basic drumbeats, but had yet to venture into the territory of the paradiddle and the triple flam. Then he requested permission to scratch my left buttock, which is apparently a sign of great respect and affection in Mongolian circles. I can tell you, I felt at once very proud and yet very humble.

I have made many great friends here and will be sad to leave them no matter how much the joy and anticipation of my eventual triumphant return touches me. Who could forget Geezer Clarkson, for instance, the octogenarian midget from Bradford who took everybody's breath away with his one-man lift of a sixteen metre Yurt?

And, of course, not forgetting Sitar Berkowitz, my own

personal mentor and one of the few Jewish Mongolians. His forefathers founded the popular chain of Berk-U-Want discount stores (Nothing over 3,000 klutons).

And there was also the wonderful female champion, Olga Olgaronkov, from St Petersburg, whose innovatory feather-lined yurt-within-a yurt with its art deco detailing stunned the judges.

I write this swift note in the solitude of a communal latrine, whilst I rehearse the verses of a folk song taught to me by Ishtar, which I am scheduled to perform tonight before the Yengis Khan himself.

It concerns, as most Mongolian folk songs do, the plight of a young and comely female Mongolian yak-handler. In this particular song, her yak strays into the courtyard of a rich merchant and eats the olives from his favourite olive tree and the figs from his favourite fig tree, and then, overcome by their combined carminative effects, shits in his swimming pool. She offers him her body in recompense, but he is homosexual. She offers to install a satellite dish for him, and they settle on this, providing it does not transgress local planning restrictions. At the last moment he asks her if she wouldn't mind double-waxing his 4 x 4. She refuses. For a moment we are unsure whether the whole episode will not end in tragedy, death and destruction, but then he offers her a piece of dried bean curd in reconciliation.

Tomorrow we will return, champions all, to Ulan Bator to rejoin the Orient Express for our triumphant journey home.

SPIT

It was a damp, rainy evening with hammerhead clouds on the horizon. Joanna Lewington had adjusted her blouse accordingly, thus rendering hoards of sixteen year olds unable to go out that night, for fear of casting priapic shadows.

The barometer had dropped five inches, which I put down to subsidence due to Mrs Flaaaghthly's obsessive tunnelling. I hammered a nail into the architrave and re-positioned it.

I'd heard that there were squalls, apparently a small type of carnivorous dolphin about six inches long, in the sea about Fastnet, Dover and Little Hampton.

Somebody, somewhere, in the vicinity of Surbiton, according to a report from the long-discredited Michael Fish, had reported a rain of frogs, a hail of termites, and a slight drizzle of red ants.

Such were the mysteries of weather.

In view of all the inclemency I abandoned my plans to see Dempsey and Makepeace who were advertised to perform selections from Aida at the Kennington Drill Hall, and settled down instead to another chapter of Thomas Hardy. There is nothing so comforting as the promise of a good book, a well-stocked fire and sturdy chenille curtains to draw against the harshness of the night. Unless it is the warm flipper of a cuddling porpoise.

All that remained, realistically, was to read another episode from the works of Thomas Hardy. I opened the book at page 163.

THE STORY SO FAR

A little background for new readers: Johannes Fluck, the Dutch Cap maker, star of Thomas Hardley's novel of the same name, was beginning to regret offering to intervene between the angry miners of Barraton Slag and their employer, Arthur Cleggstanley. Cleggstanley had threatened to revoke the time-honoured privilege by which the men were allowed one minute spitting time for every hour worked.

He claimed some workers had been taking advantage of this by saving up their spitting time and taking it as unauthorized holiday, or for unscheduled trips to the bookmakers, thus threatening the orderly management of the mine.

Fluck could see both sides of the situation and argued that it was hardly fair to favour the regular spitter over those who were perhaps constitutionally unable to spit, or who chose not to spit, or even spat in their own time.

"These sons of toil, steeped in the vinegar of hardship, might seem to be rough, Hardly men to you," Fluck said, *"but I believe there are still some who would prefer not to spit in public."*

Cleggstanley had instantly countered this by offering to install private spitting booths. "It's not the spitting I object to," said Cleggstanley, "It's the blatant manipulation by the workforce of their own working conditions to their own ends which I will not and will never tolerate. The next thing you know they'll be asking for a fair wage."

And with that Cleggstanley ejected him from his house with a venomous spit which would have accounted for five hours worth of any miners' working time.

“Fluck descended the steps of Cleggstanley Hall,” wrote Hardy, “feeling as weary and dispirited as the rain-sodden miners who now confronted him, expecting an answer. The injustice of their situation bristled in him and yet he had been powerless to make his voice felt.

What had possessed him to think that the words of a humble Dutch cap maker would carry any weight with the tyrannical granite-hearted Arthur Cleggstanley?

His voice, when he spoke, was cracked and barely audible..

‘Men...’ he said.

‘Speak up,’ said someone at the back.

‘Men...’ he tried again, ‘It’s hard to give bad news in a loud fulsome voice...’

‘We still can’t hear.’ shouted someone else. “Can’t you speak up?’

‘If you all moved a little closer,’ said Fluck, ‘I wouldn’t have to shout.’

‘If we all did what?’ queried another voice from the crowd.

‘Never mind,’ said Fluck, raising his voice as best he could.

‘Men, he said, ‘Return to your wives and homes. Cleggstanley is adamant and will not waver. Ours is a lost cause, I fear.

One of the workers, Todd Hodd, a large bare-chested man with a fiery complexion and a huge moustache, climbed the steps to confront Fluck face to face and spat at his feet. The huge blob of phlegm held its accusatory shape, amoeba-like and refused to be dispersed by the rain.

'We were wrong to put our trust in a Dutch Cap-Maker, Fluck. We might as well have sent little Myron Bucket down there to plead our cause... 'he indicated one of the crowd who flinched and coloured and shrunk back even as the gaze of the rest of the crowd fell upon him, '...wasted, dwarfish and hermaphrodite as he is.'

Hodd turned to rally the crowd.

"Yes, men, return to your wives and families, except for Myron Bucket of course. But this battle is not over. If Cleggstanley will not allow us time off for spitting, we will spit as we work, until the mines are awash and unworkable with our phlegm."

A meagre cheer arose from the crowd and they began to drift away most of them keenly discussing their plans for the forthcoming three week long bank holiday, all except for Myron Bucket who stood by looking a little confused by events. It was left to Hodd to put his strong comforting arm around the little chap and lead him back to the hovel he occupied on the barren edge of the heath.

When the crowd had dispersed, one figure was left, diminished and wilted in her rain-soaked white shift, but still proud and protective of the man she loved. Minnie Little climbed the steps, linked her frail arm through that of Johannes Fluck, and led him slowly away.

Arthur Cleggstanley watched all this unfold from the balcony of his mansion and launched a huge ball of spit into a gold-plated spittoon.

"I think that went well," he said, to anyone who would hear.

VERY, VERY GREASY

I am back on the Orient Express, wrote Cartledge. After the freedom and space of the Mongolian plains where every day seemed to bring the scent of a new voluptuous spice on the wind, the train seems enclosed and oppressive, and yet I cannot deny there is certain intoxication to the odour of smoke, recycled steam, hot metal, and burnt oil.

For the first day I stayed in my compartment writing up diary notes. I am keen to get back to England and work up the designs for yurts from my various field sketchbooks. As well as prepare for the odd Alpaca Weekend.

Fanny Adams called, keen to show me how her gums, and the lesions on her throat and tonsils inflicted by the mad dentist Smgggthryl had healed, and how she could now eat and chew normally, even through the thickest Salami.

I confess I put her off, claiming I had to stay in and wash my hair. It was only partially an untruth, if there can be any such thing, since I had not availed myself of bathing facilities since first disembarking in Ulan Bator, and my hair, subject to the sweat and strain of my Yurt-building activities and close contact with yak fur, had become very, very greasy.

I called in Ray Murtag, the Head Waiter, sat him down, opened a bottle of schnapps, gave him a twenty-year old Cuban Habanera and asked him to fill me in on the gossip.

Holmes, apparently, had had a bad time. First of all he had been arrested whilst wandering around in a renowned red-light district seeking something called a 7% solution. He had been invited into a gambling den where, after foolishly attempting to play selections from Bronsky's

‘Abstinence’ Suite, some local thugs had thoughtfully broken his Stradivarius over his head. The downside of this was that he had since bought an authentic three-stringed Mongolian Oud and had been heard practising the theme from ‘Deer Hunter’ late into the night.

Then a Bavarian Archduke had attempted to board the train at Ulan Bator but had been denounced by Holmes as a fake. Holmes had attempted to tear off the man’s moustache, which had proved, needless to say, to be the genuine article. The Archduke had challenged Holmes to a pistol duel at the next opportunity, which I gathered would be when we next stopped to view the picturesque Reichenbach Falls.

I had also observed, as he pushed past me in the corridor in a surly fashion, that Dewaulder had acquired a ripe black eye and a noticeable limp. This was the result, Murtag explained, of an argument, which had developed at the Institute of Mechanics when a Mongolian Railway Inspector had questioned the gear-tooth ratio on Dewaulder’s plans of the Tod-Im-Wasser funicular railway. Dewaulder had accused the man of being an old school confederate determined to ruin his reputation and a scuffle had ensued.

Howard Hughes, apart from losing colossal amounts of money in all night poker games to the two dog-faced financiers from Basle, had apparently been pestering Fanny Adams, ostensibly to take her measurements so he could design a cantilevered brassiere specifically for her.

Murtag laughed as he told me this anecdote and then said, “I believe the expression is, ‘Tell That to the Marines’

I laughed, and thought about Ray Murtag’s aphorism for a long time and although it seemed incredibly apposite, I couldn’t help thinking, who or what were the ‘marines’ in question.

THE FALLS

Tragedy has befallen us, my old friend, wrote Cartiledge, from somewhere in Europe.

My dear fellow, he went on, remember when we went to see Rodyard Baverstoke play Goneril in King Lear by that awful Francis Drake fellow. What a bravura performance it was, in spite of the dreadful wig. When he put out his father's eyes with the kebab skewers, we winced, and several people in the audience regurgitated their dinner, even though we all knew it was a special effect achieved with contact lenses and plastic fake blood sacs. (Wasn't it?)

That was tragic, but got us nowhere, and I remember the smell of stale vomit hanging around my clothes for months afterwards.

To be in the presence of true tragedy can be an ennobling experience, (providing no vomit is involved) in that it fixes the resolution to endure life, whatever its vicissitudes, in one's soul.

But the tragedy that befell us all when Holmes went up against the Bavarian Archduke, in a quiet glade, within sight of the famous Reichenbach Falls, goes beyond this.

For Holmes survived!

We'd been travelling for several weeks across the heartland of Middle-Europe. The faces of all those pasty-faced peasants and money-dealers, when we slowed to buy their various offerings, the baklava-like Kitschler and the stripped-meat, Ballonograd and cheesy cabbage, or Strausskrauss, are still etched in my memory.

For Ray Murtag, the Head Waiter, the experience involved little more than changing the spirit bottles in the bar on a day-to-day basis, but for the rest of us it was a tortuous journey in and out of dipsomania and gastric enteritis and their attendant psychotic states.

But at last we arrived at the Reichenbach Falls.

This spectacular sequence of waterfalls is characterised by the narrowness of the gorge in which it is set. There is no access from above, unless it is a suicidal one and you wish to break your ankles. It is a feature which must always be ascended to, involving arduous climbing and a judicious use of the alpenstock.

The disproportional erosion in the various alternate layers of shale and chalk result in a spectacular cascading fall over many ridges and extrusions into a largely insignificant river. All around the fall, on every level it passes through, are glades and clearings, combined with twisting tortuous paths which lead to magnificent views of the falls themselves. On the lower slopes families sit and eat picnics in idyllic surroundings, their children playing Frisbee and the insidiously awful game of Boule.

At a higher level, only the foolhardy or the brave attempted the narrow precipitous paths.

It was in a clearing just off one such path that Holmes determined to meet the nameless Bavarian Archduke in their joust of honour. The faceless dogs of Basle had offered to act as the Archduke's seconds, upon payment of a substantial deposit and the balance to follow within fourteen days into one of their nominated Swiss Accounts, while it was left to Ray Murtag, by default, to support Holmes himself.

They set about to perform their preliminaries, inspecting each others guns, and so forth, even testing the crotches

and gussets of each other's clothing to ensure there was no inappropriate bracing, or in fact reflexive relief, and that everything conformed to the published schedules of construction.

I wandered away. I confess I had no taste for all this. A man was about to die, at least I hoped he was, but the attention to the minutiae of it all struck me as seedy and unnecessary.

I chose one of the steepest paths to the Reichenbach falls and started to ascend it. I wore my sturdy leather climbing boots made by Haikim and Shamilia of Saville Row so I knew I was in good hands, or at least in good feet.

It wasn't too long before I heard a tread behind my own on the shingle and scrub of the path.

It was Dewaulder. I turned to face him. His face was a mask of anger and retribution. He looked very out of shape, like a pizza delivery driver whose moped had shed its chain. It was obvious he intended to do me harm, but I was prepared to give him a go.

You will not escape me now, he said. I know you for what you are. A shapechanger set on my trail since I was a schoolboy. Who can guess at your true identity: Lawrence Gimlet of the L.M.S? Stan Frankier of the L.N.E.R? Geoffrey Gurgeon of the loathsome Southern Region, whose depot at Eastleigh was renowned as a den of depravity and unlicensed wheel-tapping. Whoever you are, you will suffer now. Your time has come. Be prepared, you foul incubus, to acknowledge my divine knowledge of the schedules of the General Electric Deltic on the LMS in the fifties, on the line out of Euston. I should have killed you when we were train-spotters together on the Iron Bridge outside Wembley Station when you wore the polio callipers and I had the chance.

He rushed at me, and I grappled with him. I was closer to the edge of the falls than I had realized. My foot became twisted in some heather, cropped on a rock, and I balanced teetering over a deathly fall of some four hundred metres.

The shock of a gun report echoed up to us. Listen, I said, frankly trying to distract him more than anything else, the first shot of the duel has been fired.

If anything Dewaulder wrestled me with renewed vigour.

This is for the time you poisoned my tobacco with liquorice, he said, banging me on the jaw. And this is for sitting on my frozen Jubblies to melt them. And for not playing table tennis with me.

He stood above me, a huge wobbling mass, and gripped the boot on my left leg, determined to twist it free and propel me into the jagged teeth of the falls themselves.

At that moment a second shot rang out.

Dewaulder clutched at his chest and then looked down in disbelief at the rose red stain which slowly spread outwards from his sternum.

I am shot, he said, a trifle redundantly, I thought. It is a 9mm unrifled bullet made in Prague by the Uvonknik General Munitions and Locomotive Casting Company, if I'm not mistaken.

Then his eyes filmed over with a glaze before fixing mine. Somehow he had got hold of two white doves, which he released into the air even as he spoke: You would not believe the things I have seen, he said. I've seen double-headed 4-4-0s working the Shap Incline in the morning mist and Beyer-Garretts attacking the approach to Table Mountain. I've seen the Duchess of Buccleuch thundering through Watford Junction on her first and only trip south of the border, in 1954. I have seen small diesel 0-4-0s, barely

bigger than fork-lift trucks, moving sand-bags on Fishguard pier. Oh, the futility of it all. Now who will now speak for the small people, he said. The O and the OO gauge people, the Triple A gauge people, the much vaunted but never realized Universal European Micro Gauge. Who will keep the dream alive of all these small people, and their even smaller train

And then he fell, toppling over me into the cavernous wastes of rock and water that lay beneath him.

I retraced my steps to the glade below where Holmes and the Archduke had met and matched each other.

I had heard two shots and as to what had been their outcome, I soon learned the truth.

Holmes had fired first. His shot had caught the Archduke square in the shoulder. Holmes had abjectly dropped his gun, and awaited his certain death. The Archduke, his aim unsettled by the shot to his shoulder, fired. The shot had ricocheted off Holmes' Relox watch, and had penetrated Dewaulder at the exact moment he intended to precipitate me into the waters of the falls.

Who says there is no God?

BLUES

I went out to buy a sugar dredge from Mrs Martin's Quainte Cookery Device Shoppe at 34 Floxham Street, just next to the canal bridge. I speak of course, of the newly constructed South Link canal which runs from The Limehouse Cut to Shoreham along the line of the old river Dever, and mostly carries imported pecans, cyanide concentrate, Italian marble, freeze-dried diced squid and Pannini Stickers, from the London docks to our prime south coast port.

Mrs Flaaaghthly's puddings had seemed sorely in need of a touch of sugar of late, and I was intending to present the dredge to her as a gift, hoping she might take the hint.

As I passed the steep flight of steps beside Mrs Martin's Shoppe, leading down to the canal, I thought I glimpsed a hooded figure watching me. It frightened me, to tell the truth, and I gave up any thought of my previous mission and determined to make my way home.

A smart, biting, itching wind propelled me along Floxham Street, into the Highway and down Pagham Street, past the Church of Moira the Antichrist and into St Salmon's Square. The wind seemed to push at the rear and yet, simultaneously, to tug at the front. It was as if it not only propelled me, but also directed me, twisting me at this corner and again at the next towards a destination I had not yet fixed in my mind.

I suddenly found myself in a secluded and private garden dumped like a rag doll by the wind. I collapsed on a bench to take my breath. The trees were full of throstles, singing with great articulation and full lungs, so that their melodic inventions easily translated themselves in my confused mind into more human voices:

I hope you're taking notice of this.

I assure you I'm Swiss.

My assurance is your bean.

Your beard needs a twiddle,

When you've finished, turn off the gas

Master Boffo is a queen.

Then I heard a squealing of horse carriage brakes in the road, which bordered the park, and the clamorous stentorian snorting of a horse, which had recently been very rapidly drawn to a halt.

The birds said:

Damien Hirst - sizzle twit not normal.

Trip trip trip oops you've tripped up

Brain (---a considerable pause---) brain

I was surprised, to say the least, to be suddenly confronted by Dr Maserati and Sally Dingle.

My word, I said, what are you doing here?

Mrs Flaaaghthly rang us, Dr Maserati said. His voice had an Australian twang to it. She said you'd been hearing voices.

Don't we all, I said. And by the way, what is that atrocious accent you've assumed?

I suddenly noticed he had a hypodermic needle in his hand

This is for your own good, he said, offering the needle up to my forearm. His accent had now taken on an obscure Irish timbre practised only by peat diggers working their trade around Dingle Bay.

Dingle Dingle Dingle, the birds said.

Sally's warm and ample breast suddenly offered it up to my cheek.

What's going on? I asked her.

She leant towards my ear as the needle went in, and whispered. They're stitching you up, sir. It's a conspiracy. But don't worry; you can rely on me, and possibly Cartledge, if he ever returns. Just remember not to eat any more of Mrs Flaaaghtly's muffins.

A large black Labrador dog came up and licked me on the shins and I lost consciousness.

GREENS

After two days in a padded cell at Pinkerton's Gentle Home for Mad Folk advertised locally, and particularly heavily in Balham and West Norwood as the 'Closest Lunatic Asylum to Charing Cross - Trams daily every five minutes' I was visited by Messrs Collard and Kale, who introduced themselves as Private Investigators to the Gentry. Collard was tall, urbane and witty and well dressed if one overlooked his Arsenal away team kit. Kale was a little Negro, dressed in a bizarre tuxedo, floral waistcoat, and full spats. They were shown into my cell by Nurse Rocket, a woman addicted to senna pods and whose hobby was deconstructing owl pellets. She was not a qualified nurse, but a long-term resident of the establishment who had been given trustee privileges. Her strangest feature was her nose, which was so lacking in definition it seemed to disappear completely at all but the closest range apart from the gaping holes of her nostrils which appeared to have been blobbed onto a flat mask with greasepaint.

The two men sat down opposite me at the beech table in the austere reception room. Kale lit up a small cheroot, despite a sign on the wall that read: Small Cheroots Absolutely Forbidden. I was still in chains, but I'd managed to pick up a bit of grit, which I was busily rubbing against the haft of the padlock that kept them closed.

Kale pointed at me with his forbidden cheroot. You think you're better than us just 'cos you're crazy, but you better believe we're crazy too. I went swimming off Sharksfyn Beach when I was barely seven, and I didn't wear no swimming costume or nothing. I wrote poems for a small magazine funded by a local priest who had

unhealthy tendencies, if you catch my drift. I was Barmitzvared and I wasn't even Jewish. I was given a job as a hospital orderly, but sacked because I couldn't tell blood from spit. Now what does all that tell you about me, white stringy evil smelling boy?

Collard took over, and not before time.

Don't worry about Mr Kale, he said. He tends to compensate for his towering majestic intellect by overindulging in patois and colloquialisms. The point we have to address, he continued, is that a man in your circumstances cannot be enjoying himself in an establishment like this.

I don't know, I said. The muffins aren't that bad, and I'm confident that Cartledge will sort the whole matter out upon his return.

That just might be too late for Thatcher, said Kale.

I was so startled by the mention of Thatcher's name that I dropped my piece of grit.

Let me explain how it is, said Collard. We are sent here on the instructions of a Mr Gary Sinese. You will not have heard of him for despite being one of the richest and most powerful men in the world, excepting Mongolia of course, he abhors publicity and lives an exceedingly private life. His influence, however, is far reaching. Word has reached him that Thatcher's life is in danger. This is a matter of great concern to him. God knows why but he feels that you are probably the only person who can save her. He is able to intercede with the authorities on your behalf and get your Section Order lifted, on condition you join him in his endeavour and sign this paper.

He handed over a document to me.

It is an agreement, he said, not to profit or gain by the

publication in any media, including electronic, of any account of your personal involvement in this matter.

Will you sign? I don't see that I have any choice in the matter, I said.

You bet your sweet ass you ain't, said Kale

REDS

It was a dry night with a high tide. The mating calls of the shags and cormorants rose up to us from the Thames, where they roosted on the moored barges and lighters and the pilings of abandoned piers. The hooves of the horse that sullenly drove our hansom cab, cracked upon the cobblestones of Wapping Wall like gunshots, only to be echoed by the whip cracks of the driver, which also sounded like gunshots. To the left of us depositories rose up like deranged giants; to the right wharves ranged themselves like scuttling dwarves. We passed Macready's Bonded Warehouse for Surgical Requisites, and Taylor Love-Taylor's Quay where exotic Sampans bobbed at their moorings, each alive with the light of glowing lanterns.

Suddenly we turned a corner and found ourselves on a quay-side confronted by a mob, convened so it seemed for no other object than to block our way.

It's a flash mob, said our driver. They are intent on malmerokkering. I suggest we ignore them and pretend we don't know what malmerokkering means, although, and I vouchsafe this to you in a spirit of secrecy, it's a term applied to inhabitant sof the far north who spend their time carousing, during the dark frozen months of winter.

A woman detached herself from the crowd of malmerokkerers, pulled open the door of the cab and climbed inside. She took the seat next to me and removed her veil.

Lady Deborah Swinge, I exclaimed. Are you in this venture with us?

When Gary Sinese calls, she said, few refuse his command. And, as you see, I was successful in calling in a

malmerokkering flash-mob just in time to intercept you.

The driver whipped up his horse and we continued on our way.

The night grew darker, the streets more deserted. The few hostleries we passed seemed to have locked their doors and put out their lights against further trade. Whatever scoundrels inhabited this place chose to keep themselves judiciously behind locked doors.

We approached a darkened wharf and the cab drew to a halt. Three cranes stood rusted and derelict upon the waterfront, and beside each of them lay a freighter that looked hardly more sound.

Silence prevailed except for the hesitant scraping of our footsteps.

Collard and Kale held between them a couple of lanterns which cast a glimmering fitful light upon the scene. They swept the hulks with their dim washes of light. The names barely visible on their rusted plates were Freesia, Annapolis, and Quench.

There is no sign of life here, I said, but I spoke too soon, for no sooner were the words out of my mouth than a terrible baying screech rent the air.

It came from the ship called Quench, said Lady Swinge. That has to be Thatcher. I'd know the sound of a pregnant goat anywhere.

We hurried towards the vessel. There was no gangway, but we shinned up a stout hawser rope, except for Kale, who claimed a pathological inability to shin up hawsers, or any other kind of ropes, and volunteered to hold the fort on the dockside. As we clambered onto the deck the screech sounded again and Lady Swinge pointed to the bridge where the dim glow of a light could just about be made

out. We wasted no time but as we hurled ourselves against the hatchway to the bridge we heard the fateful boom of a shot come from within. We burst through.

Image the terrible sight that befell us. Thatcher lay sprawled in a heap, a dull crimson spread of blood crawling across her flank to pool on the floor. We heard footsteps escaping down the ladderways to the main decks. Collard and I gave pursuit leaving Lady Swinge to tend to Thatcher.

The figure we chased was dim and indistinct. It made its way to the prow of the boat, and then, as we closed upon it, uttered a terrible cry of its own and flung itself into the river.

The tide had peaked and the waters were ebbing with a strong undertow. The figure appeared and disappeared several times in the clutch of the tides. And then I saw a skiff scull swiftly out to intercept it. Quickly and efficiently the escapee was pulled from the water. His rescuer stood, looked back, and appeared to hail me, and despite his wraith-like nondescript clothing, I recognized him: Captain Antifer.

We made our way back to the bridge. Lady Swinge sat cradling Thatcher's shaggy head in her arms. One look from her was enough to tell us it was all up for the goat, but we glimpsed that she also held a small bundle of wet and ragged fur.

This is Thatcher's kid, Lady Deborah explained. Alive, but barely. The small goat opened its peculiar eyes and looked at us.

Poop, it said

THE ARRIVAL

Fulham Palace Road had been closed due to a gas leak. Oswald Norton dismounted from his Acme Racer and walked around the site which several burly workmen were excavating. You couldn't be too careful. A single spark from his gear chain and he and his Acme Racer could be launched into heaven. He remounted some way down the road after thoroughly regreasing his inner thighs and changing his brake blocks.

He was annoyed that Cartledge and his dreadful housemate had invited several pillars of the community for a tasting of their select collection of single malt whiskies, but had omitted Oswald from their guest list. It was especially galling since they were rumoured to have a bottle of Rory McLeavy's 80-year old single malt from the Island of Drumfeddin, matured in hand-built tri-laminated casks constructed from rosewood, resinous matilda, and bristle-cone pine. It was only one of eleven bottles distilled since McLeavy and his shack had both been washed out into the Atlantic during a freak summer storm.

Theirs was a peculiar household which he had largely watched from afar. Cartledge had always been friendly enough when meeting him in the street, although he had noticed the man had a tendency to suck his teeth in time with a peculiar facial tic, which Norton put down to nervousness. When Norton had purchased his mechanized bar-billiards table, made by Ascop and Sons of Delaware, Cartledge had expressed an interest in visiting one day to play the machine although this, as it happened, had amounted to nothing. A pity, because Norton had even prepared scones.

And what was one to think of Mrs Flaaaghtly, their

housekeeper. He had once thought her attractive, in a sluttish kind of way, and had even considered asking her to join him on a cycling holiday, but now she awakened no emotion in him except one of extreme vertiginosity.

He had consulted the Universal Pharmacopoeia, of course, for drugs to treat vertiginosity, but it did not seem to recognize the symptom.

When he got back to his surgery he washed down his bicycle, regreased it, and then polished it up with Cyclo-buff. He went to the window and looked across at Cartledge's residence. He thought he glimpsed Cartledge himself standing in the window, but the curtains had rapidly been drawn shut. He had an idea that Cartledge had been watching him. Or maybe his Acme Racer.

*

Arthur the Lunatic sat in his single rented room in Daisy Biggelow's Boarding House picking the bones out of the portion of pike she had supplied for his evening supper. It was marginally less earthy tasting, he thought, although possibly smaller than the portion she had cooked for him the day before.

When he had finished he settled down in his armchair and wound up the Victrola. He swung the arm on to the 78 rpm 10" disc and listened contentedly as Abraham's Lullaby in b flat started up. When the needle had reached the end of the record he removed it and turned it over to play the other side. He only had one record, having never felt the need for another, so when that side was over, he repeated the process, and so on into the small hours of the morning until eventually he fell happily asleep. With no one to turn over the disc, the needle hissed on in the final groove until the machine's clockwork mechanism had run down. Then all was silence.

I'm going to bed now, dear, said Mrs Pobjoy.

I'll be up directly, said Pobjoy. He poured a little more hot water from the kettle into the basin in which his feet were soaking and opened the leather bound journal on the writing table before him. He selected one of the freshly sharpened 3 hb pencils, licked the tip to prime it and rounded it off with a quick scrawl on a scrap of Banks' fine laid vellum notepaper. He settled down to update his journal:

Postcard (1) to the Detweilers. From a cousin in Herefordshire. Picture of Brahmin bull with comical 'You Are Here' arrow pointing to animal's pizzle.

Bills (2) to Oswald Norton. Water and gas.

Catalogue and price list (1) to Oswald Norton. From Acme Imperial Bicycle Company, Risinghurst.

Magazine (1) to Parson Vemity. Something to do with roses.

Circular (1) to Parson Vemity. From Harry Joyce, Joiner, Plasterer and Renderer.

Bills (10) to Coggins' Electrical Emporium. Various.

Small packet (1) to Coggins' Electrical Emporium. From Hawaii Electric Broom Company. Customs label discloses contents as rubber ring with small condenser.

Letter (1) to Mr Cartledge. From the Industrial Tribunal.

Letter in scented envelope (1) to Dandle the Baker. Usual.

Letter in scented envelope (1) to Nessie Bottle. Usual.

Circular (1) to Dr Hornby. From Erotic Print Company.

Letter (1) to Dr Hornby. Postmarked Harley Street.

Letter (1) to Maggie Murphy. From 'Your Heart' Dating Agency.

Pobjoy, called Mrs Pobjoy from upstairs.

Coming my dear, said Pobjoy. He picked up an eraser and amended '*Bills (10) to Coggins' Electrical Emporium*' to '*Bills (11)*'

He closed the journal, stepped out of the basin and dried his feet with a towel. He snuffed out the candles and went upstairs.

*

Parson Vemity completed his final inspection of the pews, the high alter, and the integrity of the charity contribution box. He was disappointed to see that no one had yet stolen the ten-dollar bill. He went into the vestry to study his mail. The latest issue of 'Which Rose' offered '2000 new roses since our last issue' He circled an advertisement headed 'Adopt-A-Rose' which offered 'Your name on the rose of your choice'. Vemity wondered what colour his personalised rose should be, and finally decided on a very pale shade of Violet in the tips, shading into coral pink in its heart. He opened the circular from Harry Joyce, 'Joiner, Plasterer and Renderer', and studied it with interest. He had been considering pebble-dashing the church's exterior for some time now.

*

Mrs Flaaaghtly and Coggins' lad were together in the kitchen. Coggins' lad held a core sample tube with pride. Mrs Flaaaghtly poured two glasses of pommaine and they toasted each other.

It's done, she said. The network is completed. The future belongs to us.

To Venus, she said.

To Venus, echoed Coggins' lad.

*

Maggie Murphy sat at her dressing table, gazing out at the night sky and slowly combing the luxuriant fall of her rich red hair. The letter from 'Your Heart' was open beside her.

'Do you dare to wish upon a star?' asked its provocative headline.

Yes, I do, Maggie whispered.

The night was full of stars. Maggie fixed on one, pointed her long finger at it, and made a wish.

The star began to fall from the sky. Maggie watched, hardly able to believe her eyes. The star brightened and glowed as it fell through the night, giving out a coruscating display of sparks like a huge firework. It fell far away, behind a line of landscape which she recognized as following the Thames. She thought she heard the sizzle and steam as it plummeted into the water, but that could easily have been her imagination.

THE WANDERER RETURNS

It was a greasy day with much pollen and a south-westerly wind and many flies brought thereupon from the direction of the vinegar factory.

Parson Vemity passed by in the street below clad in full Franciscan regalia, waving a censor, and chanting from Callus Pottage's seminal text, *'The Behemoth Cometh'*.

I believe the cleric has entirely lost his mind and I will not be attending his scheduled harvest festival celebrations, characterized last year by an oddly shaped turnip and a rather derisory cabbage. That same year Mrs Detweiler had attempted to bring some colour and spectacle to the church but her arrangement of knotweed and dandelions left a lot to be desired.

Mrs Flaaaghtly brought me up a bowl of Midgeley's Balsamic Expectorant Mixture and after an hour or so spent bent over it breathing in its succulent vapours I almost felt able to face the day.

The first intimation of Cartledge's imminent return was the arrival of several Army & Navy gas-powered drays, along with an attendant foreman, who proceeded to supervise the unloading of some twenty or so assorted packing cases, ten travelling trunks and a whole host of assorted hand-baggage. This of course precipitated the gathering of a small crowd of sightseers on the pavement outside our residence, in which needless to say Arthur the Lunatic was very much in the forefront, along with Pobjoy, having being released from his morning shift, and even Nessie Bottle, who had taken an early lunch break from her job as Assistant IT Consultant at the Viridian Garden Centre in Walworth.

In the midst of all this a carriage arrived and Cartledge disembarked, with a flourish and wave of acknowledgement to the crowd, who screamed their approval, almost as if they understood the enormity of his achievement as a son of England who had gained distinction in a peculiar craft in a land overseas.

Once inside and as soon as the crowd had dispersed, and Cartledge and I had settled in our familiar environment, I welcomed him the only way I knew how - by filling his Meerschaum with old shag and presenting him with his favourite slippers.

I told him of all the events that had befallen me since his departure and he listened attentively, sucking on his shag in the way only a man who has returned home from foreign climes can do.

I described in specific detail the evening that his messenger, Captain Antifer, had saved me from despair and a cold watery death. I repeated the man's self-description as an adventurer and, furthermore, someone who had read the entire works of Jules Verne.

Cartledge shook his head.

I sent no messenger, he said. How could I, engaged as I was in a foreign continent, thousands of miles away and with no knowledge of your predicament? I would have to be a conjurer, a magician, for god's sake. I do however, coincidentally, possess the complete works of Jules Verne in a fine hand-tooled leather set of editions presented to me by the Whackaday College on the occasion of my obtaining my D.Lit. I shall study them to see if they give me any clues.

Don't you remember, I said? You donated those particular volumes to a thrift shop long ago.

He looked at me as if I was mad, and we passed on to talk in more general areas. Cartledge regaled me again with various anecdotes concerning the highlights of his journey. There was the time a yak had tried to nibble the buckles on his belt. And his excitement at sharing a standing toilet with Chief Habbi Ben Yar. There was the time his laundry bills had come under question from the Ulan Bator Hilton and he had refused to pay because he had found strange socks in his laundry basket.

The night passed with these and many similar anecdotes. Eventually Cartledge fell asleep and I carried him to his room.

TRIVIAL PURSUIT

A fabulous new game has been invented, called Trivial Pursuit. It consists in the main of answering general knowledge questions, and is played with an optimal party of six. Cartiledge and I, and Mrs Flaaaghthly, of course, invited Coggins' lad to join us. Since he was a youngster we felt he might contribute greatly to questions of sport and modern culture, both areas in which Cartiledge and I feel decidedly rusty. Which left us with two hands to find. We considered the Morgan Detweilers at number 42, but felt their recent traumas might well make them unstable in a social gathering. Mr Morgan Detweiler had already been glimpsed wandering about in the high street in a state of dishabille muttering, "Where's the wrench? I can't turn it off without the bloody wrench."

Coggins' lad put in a strong plea for Arthur the Lunatic to join the group, but Mrs Flaaaghthly vetoed the suggestion, claiming the stench of vinegar about the boy's clothing made her nauseous.

I suggested, more in an air of desperation than anything else, Guiseppe de Navarre, the owner of the local Portuguese delicatessen and was surprised when Cartiledge took up his nomination. "A true vulgarian," said Cartiledge. "Every team should have one. Besides we might prevail upon him to supply empanadas or tapas for the event."

Which left us with one more to make up our soiree. Arguments raged backwards and forwards. I suggested Glassco-Cutting, with no real enthusiasm, and Cartiledge countered with Coggins himself. I argued that Coggins, while a very fine fellow, seemed to be bogged down in areas of radio-communication, and the development of

very small intricate devices, which would not serve him well if there was a question about the correct sauce to go with grilled lobster and moule mariniere.

I finally suggested Maggie Murphy. She owned a curio shop down by the harbour, selling aquariums festooned with confections of shells, set in baroque palaces of rocks, inhabited by tweedles, sea-urchins, magical vester fish, and dillops. I'd been to school with her, in Lord Ramptons First Primary, where we'd seemed magically attracted. In the final year we had even gone so far to have danced the whelk dance with its intricate patterns of pseudo-penetration.

Everyone finally agreed on our final selection and so we met, one warm Friday evening, when high level cumulo nimbus prevailed in the skies above. A nifty breeze, scented with rosemary and lavender, swept through our living area and swirled about the thighs of those who had chosen to wear loose-fitting skirts, which included Cartledge and I.

We sat in a circle thus: Me, Mrs Flaaaghthly, Guiseppe, Maggie Murphy, Cartledge and Coggins' lad.

Guiseppe had come through with a fine arrangement of edible asides, involving prawns and sardines in a mixture of many splendid sauces. His roasted squid in a tomato coulis was especially worthy of mention. I added several bottles of spiced wine to the gathering, and thus refreshed, we set about questioning each other.

QUESTIONS

Deferring to Mrs Flaaaghtly's sex and status we handed the trivia deck to her so she could ask the first question to Guiseppe on her immediate left.

This is Natural History, she said. What is a Slinth?

Guiseppe mulled over the question. He spat a wad of chewing tobacco into a spittoon and then mulled some more. He ate a strange tapenada of his own devising. His piercing blue eyes, although heavily hooded were direct and penetrating, fixing each of us in turn, and seeming to burn into our souls. Time seemed to stand still. A bell chimed from the church across the road. Our own grandfather clock greeted it in mid-chime as did Cartledge's fancy chiming pocket watch, and then all the bells fell quiet, and as everything decayed into silence, Guiseppe swivelled in his seat and took a deep breath as he had a final mull. Then he delivered his answer.

Is a small relative of the sardine, he said. Halfway between a sild and a snith.

We stood and applauded his answer, even though it was wrong (*a Slinth is, in fact, a small plastic device, produced as an off-shoot of the Korean mass die-moulding industry, and of no known practical use.)

Guiseppe took the questions and addressed Maggie Murphy.

Is Religion, he said. Which ancient sex manual details Vedic sexual positions such as the Double Carp, the Engorged Throstle and Trap of Three Fists.

That would be the Kama Sutra, said Maggie. Her eyes met mine and she coloured slightly, cast her eyes down

cooly and looked hurriedly away.

My God, yes, said Cartledge, taking the card and turning it over to study the answer. How, in heavens name, did you know that?

It was Maggie's turn now to ask Cartledge a geography question. What is the capital of Mongolia?

Cartledge smirked and a groan went up from around the table. Coggins' lad muttered an audible cry of "fix".

Mrs Flaaaghtly scowled at him. It's just the luck of the draw, she said.

Ulan Bator, answered Cartledge, with a slight degree of confidence. He went on: would you like to know the current population? 600,000, 12% of which are, surprisingly, Plymouth Brethren. Or perhaps you would care to know the exact address of the Alien Displacement Agency? It's 321 Avenue De Gevinchy. The mayor of the tenth arrondissement, Alain Prost, gave me a guided tour of the place, although I never really comprehended what its function was. Something to do with displaced aliens, apparently. I remember it smelt dank and rotten like a disused aquarium that had succumbed to blue-green algae. In fact the premises did contain rack upon rack of shadowy glass tanks. Slurping sounds came from them as aquatic or amphibian residents golloped and snurtled.

Cartledge took the box to ask the next question of Coggins' lad. Who played the role of Veronica in the hit West End musical: The Scent of a Bishop?

Coggins' lad was silent.

Come on, boy, said Cartledge smugly. It's easy. He addressed us all. If I answer it myself can I have his points?

We all agreed this was out of order.

Well, it was Deirdre Von Okarbucki, known as the Vietnamese Ptarmigan.

I was just about to say that, said Coggins' lad, sullenly.

Coggins' lad then addressed me. This is Natural History. Is the sardine a fish, a mammal, or a poltergeist?

Again a groan went round the table.

I'd hazard it's a fish, I said.

Correct, said Coggins' lad, but Guiseppe immediately interjected in his characteristic thick accent: No. Is a Poltergeist. I speak of the legendary Rodriguez La Sardine, he said. This hero is born to awaken fellow sardines to the iniquity of the Roman Catholic Inquisition and to rise up against it. He dies a horrible death, spatched on a barbeque in a holiday resort on the coast fifty miles south of Lisbon. His vital organs, they are swallowed by an infante, possibly by mistake, because she thinks he is a lobster, but he comes back as a spirit, moving items around in the capital's many museums, art galleries, and bordellos. Henceforth he was known as El Grandioso Spirituo Sardino. You want to see him? I have signed photograph in my restaurant.

I think we can't gainsay you on that one, said Maggie, and the rest of us nodded our sober assent.

You'll have to forfeit your piece of pie, old fellow, said Cartledge.

This I happily did. It was only a game after all, and one should always bow before superior knowledge.

Only Coggins' lad spoke up. How can you have a signed photograph when photography wasn't invented at the time of the Spanish Inquisition?

Mrs Flaaaghtly cuffed him soundly round the ear. There

are things, young Coggins, you don't yet understand, was all she said.

It was my turn to ask the question, this time to Mrs Flaaaghthly. This is a multiple choice, I said. What are the inhabitants of the planet Venus called: Venians, Vesuvians, or Venusians.

Venusians, said Mrs Flaaaghthly, without hesitation. And a charming and much misunderstood race they are.

I knew that, said Coggins' lad.

Yes, said Mrs Flaaaghthly, cuffing him once more. But he didn't ask you, did he?

Coggins' lad, and sulked for the rest of the evening and refused to take part in any further rounds which passed pleasantly enough without him.

Maggie Murphy, perhaps surprisingly, was the first one to fill her pie with portions, and was handed the victor's laurel garland, metaphorically speaking, as Cartiledge led us in a round of hurrahs. The party relaxed with a bottle of Premiere Cote De Bordeaux, and then we finally took our leave of each other, with even Coggins' lad quitting his grumbling. Maggie squeezed my arm as we said goodbye and placed the lightest brush of a kiss upon my cheek.

It awaked desires I had long thought buried within me.

What was I to think?

FUNERAL

It was a gloomy, resentful day with dark hammerhead clouds sprinting across the sky as if driven by tornadoes. My tear-off thought-for-a-day Block Calendar reminded me of the ancient aphorism: "A Greek fishwife should never take dried plums to the attic of a millionaire if she values her virginity and especially if she is bow-legged". It also pointed out that this was International Dolly Farquharson Day. Dolly was apparently a famous country and western singer of the last century renowned for her yodelling abilities and her services to the Alabama iron smelting industry.

It did not mention that at precisely 11.30 am we were all required to convene at Nunhead Cemetery to bury one of our own, Thatcher the goat.

Michaelcliffe and Son of Dulwich, Undertakers of Renown, handled the affair magnificently, with five carriages provided as a cortege, to follow the hearse bearing the body of the goat, each drawn by four black horses, their cockaignes twirling in the light breeze. Especially touching was the display of flowers resting on the coffin, placed there on behalf of her kid, formed into the simple sentiment: "MAAA".

The first of the accompanying carriages bore Cartledge and I, and Mrs Flaaaghthly, of course, with Coggins' lad beside her, both with their faces concealed beneath black veils.

Then came Collard and Kale, together with Lady Devingne. Arthur the Lunatic had hitched a ride with them. Arthur whistled Abraham's Lullaby in B Flat inanely between his teeth which eventually caused Kale to whip out a switchblade and hold it against the boy's neck,

demanding he cease under threat of immediate death.

In the third carriage sat the Detweilers, Dr Hornby and Maggie Murphy.

In the fourth, Guiseppe, his son, Paulo, Lady Devingne and Pobjoy.

Glassco-Cutting, Shirley 'Ducks' Cunningham and Dirk Beauregarde, travelling with the good Parson Vemity for company, brought up the rear.

The cortege set off promptly, with Oswald Norton pedalling fast behind on his Acme Racer.

We arrived at Nunhead Cemetery and moved quickly to the plot allocated us on a hitherto undeveloped rise to the west side of the cemetery, not far from the monumental wall which commemorated the fall of soldiers in the Ninth African Campaign.

We all dismounted and gathered round the gravesite, a fresh plot opened up beneath a mature yew tree. Soon the undertakers produced the coffin, the finest Cartledge and I could afford, made of seasoned and waterproofed oak and lined with lead.

The ceremony began.

I drifted, I must confess. The hypnotically dull liturgical pronouncements slowed my brain. Dust to Dust. Yes. Ashes to ashes. Yes.

Suddenly something caught my attention on the periphery of my vision.

A short distance away, alongside a wall forming the bounds of the cemetery on the North side, large laburnums and dwarfish yews vied to provide a stretch of dense foliage cover.

Suddenly a man stepped out from this cover. He moved

swiftly as if it half intended to approach the site of the burial itself, but then veered away to conceal himself yet again behind a large and sprawling nearby buddleia, but not before I had recognized him as Captain Antifer.

I watched discreetly, while the ceremony of burying Thatcher went on.

Imagine my surprise to see the process almost instantaneously repeated.

Another Antifer appeared, this time heading directly to join its first manifestation.

And bizarrely, yet again, I saw a third Antifer repeat this process.

This profusion of Antifers was more than could be tolerated. I set out with a firm stride towards their hiding place, determined to confront them, but as they saw me coming, they broke from cover, sprinted towards the cemetery walls and unceremoniously scrambled over to make their getaway.

I returned to the funeral party, where Thatcher's grave was closed with due dignity. Shirley 'Ducks' Cunningham stepped forward to cast a single red rose upon her coffin on behalf of the Home Office.

We would never see her like again.

The party retired to a wake convened at Parson Vemity's church hall. Mrs Flaaaghthly provided plate upon plate of her special brownies and I must admit, for me at last, perhaps more touched by grief than I cared to admit, the occasion passed in a blur.

SORENCILIUM

After his triumphant return from Mongolia, Cartledge had been hard at work preparing designs and plans for a number of illustrious clients. The property tycoon Sir Morris Morris had just purchased Lincoln's Inn Fields and was keen to replace it with a complex of seven-storey yurts. Lady Gladys Divingne required a purpose-built yurt to house her collection of Frazerborough Lifeboats and her famous library of goat literature. Ricky Spoon, the comedian famous for his catch-phrase 'yurt yurt' had promised his ex-wife one as part of their divorce settlement, and the government were interested in a colossal design to provide facilities for a tourist exposition on a site in Greenwich, which had once housed a gas-rendering station.

He was taking a break from activities, over Turkish coffee and fig rolls, and again regaling me with the story of how Dewaulder had fallen to his death from the Reichenbach Falls, when Mrs Flaaaghtly entered.

I'm sorry to disturb you gentlemen, but I was repotting one of the aspidistras in the hall and I found this.

She held in her hand the device I had concealed in the pot long ago.

Cartledge took it from her with a cry of delight.

It's a Sorensen Coil he cried gleefully. They haven't been made since the factory in the Ukraine that held the world's only stocks of Sorencilium was destroyed in a munitions explosion. However did it come to be contained in an aspidistra pot? Never mind. I must waste no time in modifying the Aetherial Device. This could make all the difference.

With that he rushed upstairs to his workroom.

Mrs Flaaaghtly fixed me with a strange stare.

I wonder what it was doing in the aspidistra pot, sir, she said.

With that she rushed downstairs.

I rushed to the window. Grey clouds were swirling in from the east driven by strong winds. I was reminded that the Eskimos had a thousand words for snow, but none for drizzle and only one for scallops, which was, in fact, 'scallops'. Winter would soon be upon us and we would be able to stock the icehouse with provisions, which meant I would soon be able to cancel my contract on the refrigerator I had hired from Coggins.

At that moment Cartledge returned. His shoulders were slumped and he looked grim.

What news? I asked.

It's worse than I could have imagined, old chap. The Venusians appear to have infiltrated even such stalwarts of the establishment as the Ted Dossiter Dance Orchestra, with vocal accompaniment by the 'Liberty Boys' close harmony group broadcasting live from the Locarno Ballroom, Prestatyn. When their featured vocalist Ronnie Seldom, essayed a whistling solo in the middle of 'Shepherd of the Hills', my blood ran cold, for I realized I was listening to a rallying call to the entire Venusian nation, while Buddy Seagram's clarinet solo was just a soulless reprise of Art Cranshaw's original.

I fear we must batten down the hatches, my friend.

He left and I took a seat before the fire, wondering just exactly what hatches he had in mind.

STAIR-RODS

It was raining stair-rods. Literally. Where they had come from I don't know. I imagined that in some area of this, or perhaps a foreign, country, many houses had been stripped of their carpet-securing rods by localized high-pressure whirlpools or mini-tornadoes of such intensity they had been capable of carrying their freight up into the higher levels of the atmosphere and then releasing it as pressure variables came into play. I'd heard of it happening with frogs, fish, and even second-hand books, invariably the Communist Manifesto, but never with domestic ironware. And if stair-rods, why not stair-carpeting, or even stairs themselves, or miscellaneous items left laying on stairs, such as roller-skates, dead mice left by the cat, children's building blocks, or copies of Tappet's Universal Register?

Apart from that, it was a fine day, with azaleas swooning in the East. It was in fact a flying ant day - that one day in the year when, obeying some obscure circadian rhythm, flying ants take to the skies and the streets and promptly get decimated by passing pedestrians. I'm sure this is all part of God's Glorious Plan, but I must confess, I don't comprehend it at all.

Cartledge was in the drawing room, rehearsing his acceptance speech for the honorarium that had been offered him by the University of Des Moines for his dedicated efforts towards propagating the culture of the yurt. (The University of Desmoines, for some bizarre reason surrounding a trust fund set up by an old Mongolian scholar, funded a scholarship in Yurt Design & Maintenance).

I decided to go down to The Wandering Jew on the corner of Kennington Lane and St. Toffold's Drive for a

lunchtime pint and quite possibly one of the landlord's special organic vegetarian savalloys (guaranteed formed from a rice-based non-gluten base, in synthetic skin, with artificially-coloured wasabe and bulked with natural oats, with artificial roast beef flavouring and a little bit of quorn.)

Dandle the Baker was there, holding court because it was his forty-fifth birthday, and his consort Nessie Bottle of course, touchingly holding his hand even as he vomited into a bucket after his forty-third pint.

Ashley Biles, a stranger who had only recently come into town on a mini-moke sat in a corner cradling in his hand a crystal glass containing a shot of Glenkasketlivetsat. He wore a scuffed and dusty ankle-length leather great-coat. He was smoking a small cheroot and watching the proceedings with slitted eyes. Occasionally his hand would move, as if motivated automatically, towards an imaginary gun at his hip.

I sidled up to him, sat down, and engaged him in conversation. It turned out he was a Traffic Progress Evaluation Officer working for the council, compiling surveys on traffic flow in the Hackney Wick area, but with a rich imaginary life, involving dwarves, registered child geniuses, and the latest trends in mouse genetic research, none of which I felt compelled to pursue.

YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS

Thought for the day from my calendar block: “Never attempt to gargle and spit at the same time.”

Almost as strange is the weather, with a peculiarly translucent, almost gelid, mackerel sky. The waters of the Thames seem preternaturally thick and sluggish. The various craft on the river cut through them, their bows barely leaving a wake. The shags and cormorants which regularly roost on the pilings of the Kennington Docks are all facing northeast despite a strong south westerly breeze, which ruffles their tail-feathers and gives them a distinctly picaresque look. Moreover, they have been joined by a veritable host of herons, egrets and pelicans normally found in warmer climes, who regularly dive-bomb the slow-moving waters as if they contained some hitherto unobtainable gourmet morsels.

There was also a cold nip in the air and a peculiarly dense ground mist which meant, disconcertingly, that you could not see your feet, or what they were stepping on, as you walked. I watched the Detweilers moving their herd of Friesians down to the common to graze. The cows seemed to float magically upon the surface of the mist like swans upon a lake.

Cartiledge entered the room. His brows were beetled but he shook the insects off and stamped them into submission.

I’ve been down into the garden, he said, surveying it with the prospect of building, as a design exercise, a small yurt out of teak, mahogany, maple, ragpole and other exotic woods, with wall-panels featuring intricate marquetry inlays – a sort of up-market bachelor-yurt.

Whilst engaged in this I inspected the so-called icehouse

and noticed a singular peculiarity.

His dramatic pause demanded an enquiry.

Which was? I said.

It has no entrance, no doorway, and no visible means of access to its interior.

Obviously a design flaw on Mrs Flaaaghtly's part, I said.

Indeed, and one which renders it useless as regards its original specification. I think we need to investigate, old friend, and as it happens Mrs Flaaaghtly and Coggins' lad are at present in a breaker's yard in south London, seeking to purchase and commission an ex-London Ambulance Service vehicle for whatever undisclosed purpose.

Are you suggesting we take advantage of their absence by exploring that kingdom they have hitherto closed off from us?

As always, you have a colourful way of expressing it, said Cartledge, but yes, that is exactly what I mean.

We went down through the kitchen and the steep steps that led via the basement wine cellar, into the network of tunnels that Mrs Flaaaghtly and Coggins' lad had built underneath our residence.

Had I been naive in believing that their excavations were simply exercises with the sole idea of preparing Coggins' lad in his application for a scholarship at the Royal College of Mining?

We came to the central canal, a full two metres wide and half as deep. It seemed clogged with a mucilaginous discharge. Cartledge dipped a hand into it and identified it as the amphibian spawn, the size of golf balls, of some unknown creature.

We found a passage leading off the central canal and followed it some fifty metres until it debouched into a large rotunda-shaped building which I recognized from its shape and dimensions as the icehouse. A walkway surrounded a central tank. Glowing coils suspended at ceiling level bestowed a warm climate on the waters below, in which the spawn happily appeared to be growing into the size of oranges or even melons. I leaned over the tank and saw, in the green heart of one of them, the formative stages of something growing towards a misshapen terrible alien adulthood, a thing with tentacles instead of arms, each replete with suction pads like a squid. It also possessed four hugely muscled legs and a skin glistening with slime. I knew full well what they were, and I realized now how they had been nurtured under Mrs Flaaaghthly's supervision to become the spearhead of a widespread invasion.

You know what this means, said Cartledge.

I nodded.

I shall have to recomission Coggins' refrigerator at the earliest opportunity.

SARAH WILMSHURST

I took down the poster of Sarah Wilmshurst that hung in the toilet, Never again would her soothing tones speak to us of cyclones and anticyclones moving up from the Azores, or going down on them for that matter. Never again would her soft tones lull us to sleep as a gentle rain rattled the panes as it settled in from the southeast. It seemed like the end of an era. But I immediately replaced it with a poster of Joanna Lewington, How easily are the weather girls of yesteryear replaced by those of today, I thought, but not for long.

You know what this means, said Cartiledge.

We had returned to our rooms and stiffened ourselves with a stiff drink, namely Manley's Extra-Stiff Special Dry Bombay Gin, with added ginseng and taurine. After two of these we were so stiff we could barely sit down. Not that we wanted to. Both of us were buzzing with a sense of hyper-activity, swapping ideas about how the predicament we found ourselves in could be resolved.

We could call the police, I suggested.

What? Glassco-Cutting, and his vain cocky assistant, Dirk Beauregarde? sneered Cartiledge. They let us down badly in the matter of Thatcher. I can never forgive them for that. Nor Shirley 'Ducks' Cunningham who quite obviously knew more than he was prepared to disclose.

How about Gary Sinese?

He might help, said Cartiledge, but he is probably quite tied up with his CSI work at the moment, and going through his intermediaries, Kale and Collard, is not only risky because we are not sure where their loyalties lie, but because they seem totally psychotic. Which leaves...

The newspaper salesman outside Great Portland Street Station, I ventured? Or Vossage? Or Lady Devingne? But I can't imagine any of them could help us. I think Ashley Biles, the leather-clad aquiline-featured stranger in town, is better suited to assist us. At least he seems like a man who can handle himself in an emergency.

And yet his motives too must remain suspect, said Cartiledge, turning up as he did at the last minute, and declaring himself to be investigating traffic control problems in Hackney Wick, a borough which is renowned for the high standard of its public services.

At that moment a horn sounded from the road outside, followed by the screech of brakes. From the window we watched as an ancient ambulance pulled up. It was painted in camouflage green and bearing the peeling insignia of the discredited Red Cross, whose principal trustee, Lord Bowman, you will remember, was arraigned for massive fraud and dismissed from the second chamber.

Mrs Flaaaghthly and Coggins' lad, clambered out, dusted themselves down, and waved up at us, before entering the house.

We turned away. Cartiledge's face was set in a grim scowl. Old friend, he said, I can foresee only one outcome to the dire straits in which we find ourselves.

Which is?

We must flee. I know it goes against the grain, but do you suppose Mrs Flaaaghthly is the only caretaker and husbander of this alien hoard? She must have enmired and enmeshed all manner of people in our local community. Coggins, for instance, produced those vertiginous coils for her. Do you think he didn't know their main application would be to reduce our disgust at the physical aspects of our invaders and thus render us more susceptible to their

policies and persuasions?

Do you suppose we can intervene and save the day single- or even double-handedly in the face of what is obviously a cunningly organised mass invasion? No, my friend. I fear I am not the renowned vaudeville entertainer Bruce Willis who can instantaneously conjure up a resolution for any world-threatening predicament under the sun.

We must accept that we are beaten already. It is time to cut and run.

I suggest that without delay, lest their suspicions be aroused, we steal their ambulance and head North, taking only what is necessary for our survival, plus a few personal effects, family photographs, and perhaps that hand-built guitar of yours, and possibly my talking-drum, which may have some retail value as an interesting African curio. Maybe we can find a small pocket of the deserted country where we can live undetected and build and train a community dedicated to one day overthrowing the alien fiend through guerrilla warfare, or perhaps by decimating them through the distribution of e-coli contaminated algae.

For a plan totally conjured off the top of his head, it sounded good to me.

MRS WAGNER PIES

The weather was nibous with much twittering. The aroma of rotting fruit arose from the chestnuts and plane trees planted in the street outside (presumably because some vandal had launched baskets and bags full of rotting fruit into their uppermost branches.) Anyway the overriding scent was brought to us on an ironic wind, rattling the branches of said trees until they seemed to say: "Chitlin, chitlin, swash, and chitlin twice."

Today's bon mot: "My mother was a virgin; that makes me Jesus Christ." Courtesy of some fellow called Jim Morrison whose claim to fame as a popular entertainer has somehow escaped me.

There was of course, the famous Arthur Morrison, a lifelong member of the Socialist Communist Coalition who developed an act juggling coal and mummified sparrows, but while he provided splendid entertainment, I doubt if he was any relation.

I woke up early because today was to be the day of our flight.

Cartiledge had told me to set my alarm for five o'clock in the morning, and so I did, only to learn he had allowed himself an extra hour for a lay-in.

In somewhat of a sulk I filled in the time collecting what I felt might be valuable artifacts into small baskets or trusses.

I came across a small green and gold enamel prefect's badge that had followed me from the shores of my old alma mater. I threw it out of the window. It landed pin-up in the garden and I was rewarded with a distinctly amphibian howl of pain.

Mrs Flaaaghtly's recently acquired ambulance still stood at our kerb in the gloom of the dusk, and the snoring of Coggins' lad from behind her kitchen door led me to believe they would not be awake for a considerable time.

I went upstairs and prodded Cartledge.

He snorted with a garrumph and somewhat hazily came awake

Time we all went to sleep, old friend, he said.

No, I said, shaking him by his cravat, time to wake up. The time to go is now.

Cartledge leapt out of bed like a man inspired. At least he kept his pants on. Come with me both of you, he said, the world will be our oyster, if not our abalone. I slapped him until he became sensible. We gathered our rudiments about us and crept downstairs.

At this hour of the morning the streets were deserted apart from a gang of council workmen working busily at forming piles of horse dung on the pavement to trap unwary pedestrians. Several miles away a milkman with a grudge was breaking an immense pile of milk bottles one by one.

I confess I faltered.

How can we leave all this behind? I asked Cartledge. These pallid streets are our life. Frog-ridden they may one day prove to be, but who can forget the dramas and tragedies acted out here. The day Mrs. Morgan Detweiler ran down the road naked apart from a pair of strategically placed chamois leathers and a frozen haddock. The day Parson Vemity set his smocks on fire during Sunday morning bible classes and had to be saved by a Saint Bernard Rescue Dog. The day Frogmore Stewart, the wealthy financier, had an apotheosis on the corner of

Dingle Square and gave each passer-by a promissory note for 1/9d. And the day a shunting engine ran through the buffers in the Maggot's Lane marshalling yard and demolished Waxford's Plinth Museum. And if we do flee what's to become of those of our friends we leave behind, Maggie Murphy, La Diva, even perhaps the unjustly maligned Mrs. Grace.

Happy memories, indeed, said Cartledge, but I fear we must put them all behind us. The greatest adventure, old friend, has yet to begin.

At that moment Captain Antifer stepped from behind the van to confront us. He was swathed and concealed as usual in his distinctive costume which resembled that of the day-to-day dress of a nomadic Berber Arab. His face was hidden under swathes of muslin.

Hail, he said, raising a placating hand. I understand your predicament and the plight you find yourselves in, or, to be strictly grammatical, in which you find yourselves. You are about to embark upon a momentous adventure, but you cannot go alone.

We are not alone, I pointed out. There are two of us. You know what I mean, said Antifer, somewhat witheringly. Now if I may continue?

I appear only to introduce you to those who must accompany you on your final journey. He beckoned and out from behind the ambulance stepped Mrs. Grace, Fanny Adams, and the lovely Maggie Murphy. They were all slightly befuddled and bore the demeanor of people who had been awoken too early from an hypnosis induced sleep. At that moment a scream of terror, as at a deception uncovered, echoed from inside the house and was taken up almost immediately by hundreds of sibilant voices from surrounding properties in a mighty alien ululation.

Cartiledge leapt into the ambulance and gathered the others about him. I was about to join them when Antifer approached, stayed my arm, and led me aside.

Do you still not recognize me, he said from beneath his hooded cowl?

It's never Ricky Spoon, is it? I asked.

Never mind, I see I am condemned to roam the world unrecognized until I achieve my destiny. But first I must ask you for the loan of one of your moustaches.

But how do you know about the moustaches? I asked, then, realizing it was a rhetorical question, I became resigned to the truth that I would probably never know how he knew, so I reached into my waistcoat pocket and took out the case in which I carried the two moustaches which had so far come my way.

I gave him one and, with a swirl of his cloak, he disappeared, fading into the shadows as enigmatically as he had arrived.

I leapt into the ambulance and Cartiledge twisted the key which had been left in the ignition. As hoards of Venusians emerged from every doorway, blinking myopically in the dawn light and holding their floppy fingers to their eyes, we sped away.

Beside me on the bench seat, as we crossed the Albert Bridge, heading for Hendon and the road to the North, Mrs. Grace opened her carpet bag, and distributed, to those who would have them, a selection of Mrs. Wagner Pies.

Thus we all went to look for England, even though it didn't scan.

UNDER A GREEN SKY

We drove across a desolate landscape under a fluorescent green sky, which reminded me of the covers of many science-fiction magazines I had read as a child. It had been raining cats and dogs since we left, not literally of course, and now it was raining frogs, small embryonic creatures which bounced off our bonnet and splattered against our windscreen like half-sucked wine-gums.

We made it as far as Chipping Norton heading west before realizing we should have been heading north and turning around. Chipping Norton was a dead village, with no evidence of habitation, and no lights or movement from its houses and cottages. We passed the village pub, called The Frog and Biscuit. Its door was hanging open and its windows broken. The sign was hanging by one hinge and creaking noisily as it swung in the breeze. Pools of green slime formed puddles in the road outside. The village pond was a pond no more but a vast heaving jellied mass where alien spawn was germinating.

By some miracle of happenstance we came across a lady wandering the streets dressed in her nightclothes and took her on board. Her name was Cecily Doughton and she had been the village post-mistress for fifteen years. More interestingly, she was also a black belt in judo.

Mrs Grace offered more pies but we turned them down. Cartiledge remarked, rather unkindly, I thought, that he had seen more appetizing sweetmeats formed from yak's brains on his visit to Mongolia. Surprisingly Mrs Grace laughed at this, but I saw her making secretive notes in a small black notebook she carried in her handbag.

Several hours later we found what we had been looking for, the great North Road, which the Greeks had created

during their occupation of this island two thousand years ago after their vast mass-evacuation armada had made its flight from their earthquake-torn and volcano-ridden homeland and had made the mistake of turning right at the Straits of Gibraltar.

Our plan was for Cartledge and I to share the driving chores between us. Whilst I drove he slept a deep refreshing sleep on the bench seat beside me. He was a bit disconcerted upon awakening to find we had not moved from our last position, until I explained to him it was because I couldn't drive.

Thereafter Cartledge drove throughout the day and we made regular stops at sites we considered safe, usually upon the tops of high hills where we might at least be able to see our foe coming.

When night fell (although it was sometimes difficult to tell when this was, due to the constant cover of green glowing clouds) Cartledge would supervise us in the assembly of a crude but functional yurt, where we would take our shelter, huddled together round a fire of smoking birch bark and used condoms.

It was on one such occasion, in an encampment high on a Pennine ridge somewhere outside Hebden Bridge, that I read to the assembled gathering the final chapter of Hardly's wonderful 'Dutch Cap Maker's Daughter'

Johannes Fluck had made a pact, as if with the Devil. He would leave the country for a free life, unpursued by the demons that littered his past. He would say goodbye to the small, stunted world of Cragdon Heath and would forsake every claim he may have held against any other party, either financially or emotionally. Except, possibly, for Mrs Harding at the Post Office. He would go beyond the reach of such as Squire Radney-Tooley who currently arbitrated

in the disputed matter of his sheep-grazing rights. True, he had no sheep, but it was a point of principle.

He was tired and could see no way out. He had to accept that the tide had literally turned against him. He was suspected in the surrounding villages of dog peddling, rope trading and molly-coddling. Even his beloved Minnie Little had left him.

He arrived on the dock at Bristol on a bright Spring morning, looking out for the Brigantine Bucephalus on which he had booked his transatlantic voyage to a new world, which he hoped would be America. The journey to Bristol on a lumbering stagecoach driven by a drunken knave whose crotch stank of pustulating buboes, had left him exhausted. He carried but one leather holdall which contained all his worldly effects, including the very first issue of Beezer magazine, complete with its 'crackerjack' free gift, and a rag-monkey his long-dead parents had given him as a child.

He thought about his first-born whose disappearance and subsequent return had been such a vexatious issue. She had grown into fulsome adulthood as the director of an international bank and had married an IT consultant. She now lived in Staines and no longer even sent him Christmas cards.

It had all been so pointless.

Thadeus O'Toole, the flamboyant Irish misogynist and martial arts expert had appeared at the last moment to steal the affections of his beloved Minnie Little, offering her a cottage in Notting Hill and an allowance of two tons of lard every year. This was an offer she had been unable to refuse and she had not left her bed for the last five years. Even his faithful babysitter and her pigs had proved inconstant. She had moved to a village in Cornwall where

she sold over-priced cream teas to tourists. The pigs waited on the tables.

In the later years of his life he had attempted to find happiness with a masseuse from Hamburg called Lotte Function. She had promised him sole use of her affections, but then let him down by changing her name to Frankie Coronary and running off with a Belgian sailor whose sole attraction seemed to be that he dressed in a skimpy regional kirtle.

God, he had made a mess of his life.

He boarded the Bucephalus, stowed his kit and hung in the rigging for a while as the ship sailed out of the harbour upon a phosphorescent tide, composed mostly of krill, with occasional krull and krall.

All of his life, his memories, hopes, dreams and aspirations, including the one night he had almost achieved an orgasm, flashed before him. It would be easy, he thought, to loosen his grip and fling himself into the brine below.

But, he realized, as if in a flash, or at least a slightly downward pointing symbol for lightning, that would be a disavowal of life, and if he had learnt nothing since his wanderings in and around and beyond the blasted heath of his birth, it was that life and suffering persist and must be endured. Or else we are all whelks cast up upon God's eternal foreshore.

He went down to his cabin, unpacked his holdall and snuggled up to his rag monkey with his thumb in his mouth.

Locked in happy dreams of his childhood, he slept soundly. Forever. Something like that kid in that terrible film by Stephen Spielberg.

I closed the book, and a meditative silence descended on the party.

Does he mean that awful film ‘AI’? asked Mrs Grace.

I fear so, I said.

Then Cartledge, his emotions perhaps stirred by the poignancy of the ending, turned to Mrs Grace.

I don’t know Mrs Grace, he said, how we came to misjudge you so over the matter of the false moustache. I humbly apologize and of course, if we ever get out of this situation, you may be assured considerable financial recompense will be due to you.

That’s noble of you, sir, she said. I’m sure the matter of the baby took you two gentlemen aback. I could have handled it more delicately.

Whatever happened to the baby, by the way? I asked.

Ah, sir, it proved to be nothing but a fake baby, constructed for the purposes of training young women in the practices of motherhood. I’m ashamed that it took me so long to find out, given I’ve raised five children of my own.

Astonishing, I said. It smelt, and sounded, so lifelike.

That’s IKEA, for you, said Mrs Grace.

What still puzzles me is the matter of the moustaches, Cartledge said. You remember that ‘Get Out Of Jail’ card we received and which I foolishly threw into the fire putting it down to the work of Arthur the Lunatic. Can you recall exactly what it said?

It was something along the lines of “The false moustaches are the key, collect and then replace all three.” I said.

Enigma upon enigma, said Cartledge. For I only recall two coming our way so far. And what, by the way, has become of them?

Aware that I had given one of them to Captain Antifer before our flight, it was with some trepidation that I took out the silver-plated case from my breast pocket. It was engraved, “Cope, Norris, Kemp & Co, Suppliers of False Moustache cases to the Nobility”, and it carried the cartouche of the Third Lord of Dunlaughtoure, pronounced Dunleerie.

I snapped it open, expecting to see but one remaining moustache. Imagine my surprise to see the second had somehow been magically replaced. How I could not imagine, unless someone had stolen upon me to perform the act whilst I slept. In any event, now the two false moustaches lay couched on their bed of cotton wool like a mating pair of exotic tropical moths. Mrs Grace turned away and reddened at the explicitness of it, whilst Fanny Adams gave a sharp intake of breath and flared her nostrils. I quickly closed the case so as not to cause further inadvertent offence. Only Maggie Murphy stayed my hand and said, softly, with a fluttering of her own moth-like eyelashes, “But they look so beautiful...”

We slept huddled together that night whilst the redoubtable Cecily Doughton stood watch. At some hour in the night, Maggie Murphy’s tender hand found my own. I kept it, clasped gently but safely to my chest, round about the region of my third nipple.

THE DAY AFTER THE NIGHT BEFORE

At dawn I awoke and went outside to join Cecily Doughton in the last minutes of her watch. The sky, which had been green, was now smeared with a smoky rose colour, and the dawn, as it progressed, gradually released the details of the landscape like a photograph in a darkroom slowly developing into clarity.

Cecily pointed out the swathes of fire and smoke arising from nearly every point on the horizon.

There lies Todmorden, she said, where I was born and partly raised. And hence, Bradford and Huddersfield, where I hung out with a motorcycle gang in my mis-spent youth.

Are these fires lit by the invader, I asked, or could they possibly signify counter strikes by beleaguered partisans?

I wouldn't hold your breath, said Cecily, tightening her black belt.

When we were all awake, we disassembled the yurt, singing, at Cartledge's suggestion, a ceremonial yurt-dismantling song, which consisted of the repeated refrain: "The yurt goes up, the yurt comes down," etc, sung as a round. We stowed it in the ambulance.

Maggie found some blackberries in a hedgerow, and for breakfast Mrs Grace whipped up a flambéed torte surprise with cuckoo-spit custard and a pastry case made of desiccated mealworms.

After we had all regurgitated the meal we set off, heading north as always.

We stopped at a deserted hamlet near Prodstow in Derbyshire.

Whilst scavenging in the derelict cottages, Cartledge came across a war-issue Dredger & DeWhitt portable radio receiver. We gathered round it, whilst he rotated the tuning dial, but all that emerged was the random howl and whine generated by the oscillator coils whilst searching for non-existent broadcasts.

Cartledge was just about to turn it off when a burst of static issued from the speaker and then the clear dit-dit-dash of a Morse code call sign. I recognized it immediately. It's the letter 'P' repeated again and again, I said. It can only be Parson Porlock.

He must be calling from Bent Crutcher, the site of his laboratory near Sunderland.

We paused only to safely dispose of our rubbish by burying it in a neat trench, and then jumped into the ambulance to head ever northwards.

*

Dawn and a steady rain greeted us as we reached the village of Bent Crutcher, turned left at the local pub, The Dodge The Bullet, and took the single-track road towards Porlock's estate. Slaughtered moles hung from the hawthorn bushes that we passed on either side of us, each spiked on an individual thorn. We were obviously entering the domain of a spiritual leader used to dealing with evil.

Occasionally we drove over a bible or hymnal. They had apparently been scattered along the road, God only knows in what response to what perceived threat. They squeaked in a high-pitched tone but that might just have been the

effect of our Michelin tyres passing over them.

The Parson's modest five-storey cottage 'Dun Preaching' lay in darkness. A sole rotweiler sat by the front door, on guard. Its eyes glared balefully at us as we passed by.

We stopped and Cartledge turned off the engine. A quarter of a mile away, across the open fields, the Parson's barn lay dark and grim.

Cartledge marshalled us out of the ambulance and we set out for the barn.

This is so exciting, said Cicely Doughton. Reminds me of when I was a Girl Guide.

THE FAMOUS FINAL SCENE

The sky had darkened considerably and was shot through with green luminosity. From afar, as we headed into the unknown, came the ominous rumbling of thunder as if a great and final storm was preparing itself.

Fortunately I had brought my block calendar with me, and was not short of a bon mot to comfort us in our potentially precarious situation. Today's message read: "Today is a good day to fry: Try sautéing small shrimps in garlic butter, sizzling dried sild on a barbeque, and New Zealand Hoki in a waffle pan."

(*Hoki, a cod-like fish, is apparently Maori for 'to return' although I can assure you not one that I ever ate had the slightest chance of returning).

We entered Parson Porlock's barn.

It was dimly lit with oil lamps, and we moved as slowly and as silently as we could.

As our eyes slowly became accustomed to the gloom we saw that the central area was occupied by, of all things, a huge hat upturned and tilted onto its wide brim, so that one could climb up and into the central well of the device.

Inside this well, in a space perhaps five feet deep and twelve feet across, were seats arranged as if stripped from a charabanc, and a control area full of brass chronometers, and Lucite-faced adjusting dials with rotary brass setting controls. There was also a considerable number of bimetallic bars, zinc versus zirconium, silver versus gold, copper versus iron, each linked to a separate input in what seemed to be a vast central telephone exchange occupying the forepart of the machine. Two leather-upholstered chairs with fully adjustable vertical rack mounts represented what

I took to be the two pilot chairs and on a panel facing them were a host of spring-loaded controls with adjustment handles gauged against quadrant dials.

In the centre of the hat was a pylon, which supported a huge copper globe. Just a foot or so above this suspended by a stout cable from a hatchway in the roof of the barn hung a smaller, flatter, inverted hat-shaped device.

In a corner of the barn, seated at a card table, Parson Porlock and his assistant, Groening, were absorbed in a game of Monopoly. Parson Porlock had just been sent direct to jail. Groening, a spotty and unassuming youth, had a 'Get Out Of Jail Free' card and was haggling with the good Parson over its selling price.

Our party moved forward out of the gloom. Porlock and Groening saw us for the first time, and recognizing us, rushed to embrace us.

Thank God, you received my message, said Porlock. We have been without any contact for weeks, while suffering this insidious rain of green gelid spawn. Every day we have been out scattering salt, which seems to halt the progress of these grim organisms, but our salt supplies are running low.

Our only hope for escape, said Porlock, would appear to be the hat. We have tested all the systems and await only a significant lightning storm, so that we can tap its energy, and fully power up the device. Then, who knows, we may well escape, all of us.

We sat down together and Parson Porlock served us a comforting but rather salty rice and blowfish gruel while Cartiledge and I recounted our adventures and misadventures.

Meanwhile outside the thunder grew louder resolving itself from a background rumble to a series of loud and heavy cracks, accompanied by nearly immediate flashes of lightning, the light stabbing through the roof hatch

highlighting the bare details of the barn and the hat, like the magnesium discharge of a photographer's flashgun.

Porlock arose and approached the hat. This could be it, he said softly, and we joined him, all sharing a growing sense of anticipation. Another crack of thunder, another sizzling flash of lightning. A huge spark seemed to explode between the smaller conductor and the large copper globe. It was followed by a series of increasingly incandescent eruptions, the ferocity of which caused us to stagger back.

Suddenly the hat trembled and lights started to glow and flash amongst its crystalline constituents.

It's alive, said Groening in a hallowed tone.

The spell, which had held us all in thrall, was suddenly broken, as the doors of the barn seemed to burst apart and a horde of misshapen creatures rushed in, screaming and shrieking with alien vengeance.

At their forefront, a stalwart Amazon, was Mrs Flaaaghthly. She raised her arms, forestalling their progress and their war cries sank to a background gibbering. Coggins' lad, her faithful second in command stood at her right hand.

She looked at us, transformed from the cuddly pixie we had known, into an alien war-goddess. Her palps visibly trembled, her coccyx extension swayed from side to side and rattled ominously like a rattlesnake's tail. On her upper lip, bushy and resplendent, sat a huge false moustache.

'Did you think you could escape me,' she asked? 'Did you think you pathetic humans could hold out against a Venusian invasion? We have won and you have lost. In time your planet will be no more than a ball of green slime, which we will spread throughout the universe.'

While the rest of us were subdued into silence, Cartledge stepped forward.

I understand now, he said calmly. I understand everything.

He bowed and went on his knee before her. I salute you and capitulate abjectly.

Cartledge, I groaned. How could you?

He turned to me and winked.

Mrs Flaaaghtly smiled smugly and gestured benignly to her troops.

Then Cartledge was on his feet again. With a lunge he leapt and ripped off her false moustache. She screamed against this outrage to her person, or at least her upper lip, then Cicely Doughton jumped forward and delivered a drop kick, which momentarily floored her.

Cartledge grabbed the 'Get Out of Jail Free' card, took out his pen, and hurriedly scribbled upon it: 'The false moustaches are the key, gather and replace all three.' He pocketed it and held out his hand to me.

Quickly man, give me the two other false moustaches. They are the key to the game. Stupid though it may sound they define the world of possibility and pre-determination. It is ordained that I must replace all three. Haven't I just written myself a message telling me exactly that?

Quite bemused, I passed the moustache case over to him.

He scrambled into the hat and gestured to Porlock and Groening to join him. We must act quickly, he said to them. I think you know what we must do.

I say, Cartledge, I called out. What about us, old chap?

He's right, Porlock said. You cannot abandon them.

We are not abandoning them, Cartiledge said. Far from it. If we do our work properly, they will be saved. Do you not see? Quickly, good Parson, adjust the settings.

Porlock bowed to his bidding and feverishly made adjustments to his controls, and the hat began to spin upon its crown.

As the copper globe glowed with an increased intensity, Cartiledge shouted to me, don't worry, old friend. I am not leaving you, simply going exploring.

The hat shook and a final lightning bolt sparked.

The hat slowly ceased its spinning.

Its pilots, Cartiledge, Porlock and Groening had disappeared, as if they had never existed.

Mrs Flaaaghthly scrambled to her feet with a groan of pain. Her nostrils flared and her eyes glowed, quite literally, with a barely repressed anger. She stretched out her arms, both of them, and waved them over the assembled gathering of her troops if to call down vengeance and havoc on all.

Then someone stepped from the unconsidered shadows.

It was Captain Antifer.

He walked into our midst with a slow measured calmness. His hand was raised in a universal gesture of peace, at least one recognized south of the Tyne, and it mesmerized us and seemed to disarm even Mrs Flaaaghthly.

He removed the swathes of muslin, hessian and sackcloth from around his shoulders, then threw back his hood and stepped out of cloak with the aplomb of a Las Vegas stripper.

We all, to a man, and several women, gasped.

Cartledge, I said. It's you. You are Captain Antifer?

And always was. At your service, my old friend, he said. We embraced.

Now, he said, I have little time to explain my appearance amongst you, let alone my overall role in the context of this ill-thought-out novel, which I suspect one of you will one day write for the prospect of quick and ready cash.

If you don't already get it, the simple fact that I am here now is proof that my plan with the hat and Porlock and Groening worked, although I must admit there was a spell when things got a little out of hand. The three Antifers at the funeral, for instance, was a serial duplication caused when a bug, quite literally, crawled into one of the hat's temporal capacitors. We have taken care of the two unnecessary Antifers.

He saw my expression of distaste and continued, Don't worry, they have been safely despatched to warmer climes, namely the Virgin Islands, and the Costa Brava, as I remember, to live out their lives with abundant funds infinitely recycled with interest through an offshore investment trust, meaning they will not only be rich for life, but for several other lives to come.

Oh, and it was no fun living across the road at the loathsome Stubbs Cottage whilst Porlock, Groening and I kept tabs on you, knowing we could never reveal ourselves. But we did get exceedingly good at crossword puzzles, and jigsaws. And occasionally I at least managed to steal into your house to intercept postcards from myself in Mongolia describing what a good time I had already had.

Now, he concluded, might I end this exegesis by suggesting we all retreat to the hat without further delay. For I fear the wrath of the Venusians is about to descend

upon us, and while we may appear protected by the rules of pre-ordination, there is certainly no cure for the terminal killing blow of a sharp claw through the jugular.

At this point Mrs Flaaaghtly seemed to recover her composure and uttered a scream, which was taken up by her hordes, except for Coggins' lad who merely coughed politely.

She lunged forward and cast what was intended to be a killing blow from a sharp claw. Of course she missed and was overrun by her minions.

We needed no further bidding to clamber on board the hat. Cicely Doughton was the last to join us after delivering several precious time-earning pole-axing blows.

The lightning from above delivered an incessant stream of sparks to the copper globe, and Cartledge quickly made adjustments.

The hat began to spin. Several of the aliens tried to scramble aboard but were flung off by the increasing momentum of the hat. Many of them went Splat.

I say, old chap, do you know what you're doing, I asked.

You forget, said Cartledge, or perhaps don't even remember, that I had good teachers in Parson Porlock and Groening, and a long time to learn.

Your idea I take it is to return once more the past? I asked.

Not to the past, for Porlock, Groening and I are already there, rest assured, to nip Mrs Flaaaghtly's dreams of empire in the bud.

No, I've had enough of the past. As Porlock would put it, the leading horse has just passed the winning-post and it is now time, I think, for all of us to toss our hats into the air.

Cartledge closed a large brass bus-bar with a flourish.

Then came an ultimate snapping sound, and a final flash washed throughout the barn which eclipsed all consciousness as we tumbled, Cartledge and I, Cicely Doughton, Mrs Grace, Fanny Adams, and my beloved Maggie Murphy, through infinite time and space.

The last sound to reach our ears was the final decaying scream of Mrs Flaaaghthly and her thwarted hordes.

What could be more poignantly cruel than the ultimate irony of a conquering army left with the prospect of no foe to defeat?

RABBIT REDUX

I was in the garden laying out some bedding plants, for spring would soon be upon us.

There was a rustling in the foliage and I glimpsed the warm beady eye of a magpie as it rooted in the crusted earth, beneath the gooseberry bushes, for the remains of a worm. A heron swooped down, snagged a green and wriggling morsel from the garden pond and lifted it up into the sky to fly away with its prey.

Mrs Grace announced that tea and muffins were served, so I dusted off my knees and elbows, parked my garden kneeling pad (made from recycled materials), hung up my dibber, and went inside.

Maggie was sitting in her favourite chair. I stooped to kiss her forehead.

Dear Heart, I said, what have you been up to this morning.

Nothing, she said, with a hint of coyness, just going through the new IKEA catalogue with Mrs Grace, picking out a few household essentials. They have a lovely fake baby, so adorably lifelike.

Tenderly I placed my hand upon her swelling stomach.

If things go as planned, dear wife, we shall have no use of fake babies.

She coloured slightly and then turned her head aside, a picture of contented relaxation in the face of incipient motherhood.

Where's your sweet Fanny Adams, I asked Cartiledge.

Cecily has taken her off for a fitting at Brides-R-Us, said Cartiledge, snatching a moment to stoke his pipe.

Cartiledge was halfway through his second muffin and was standing at the window, staring reflectively at the view. He was dressed in his wine-red smoking jacket and discreet grey trousers, and looked the very epitome of a cultured gentleman.

You seem uncharacteristically pensive, I said. Not regretting your decision to forsake bachelorhood?

No, no. Merely marvelling at the world and its ways, he said. There's Pobjoy, resplendent in his Head Postmaster's uniform. And see, Coggins' lad playing conkers with Arthur the Lunatic from the vinegar distillery, who has recently been promoted to Chief Swiller Out.

I understand Coggins' lad is very soon to take up a scholarship at the Royal College of Mining. Meanwhile that pillar of our community, Oswald Norton, the famed chiropractor, has just had a brand new bicycle delivered, an Acme Racer, I believe. Dandle the Baker just passed by. His acne shows promising signs of clearing up; He was carrying a fine spray of mixed flowers. Those will be for his new sweetheart, Nessie Bottle, the undertaker's daughter.

Oh, and here's Parson Vemity. I hear his roses have won 'Best of the Show' at the Annual Kennington Garden Gala (Patroness, the Duchess of Smethwick). And there's Dr Hornby, celebrating signing the deeds on his very own practice by showing the Morgan-Detweilers at number 42 his new speculum.

He turned away from the window.

I often wonder how we have arrived at this, my friend, he said. How did you and I fetch up in this place in this universe at this moment of time? I say, you're making a bit

of a fist of that muffin; Mrs Grace will damn you if you don't clear up those crumbs.

I finished the friable muffin as best I could. It was true. I had made a considerable mess on the Turkish rug.

I remained concerned by his reflective mood. You're sure your indigestion isn't playing up again? I asked.

By no means, he said. My fettle is as fine as it can be, although I fear I shall have to find a new doctor since Dr Maserati was recently been found guilty of grand fraud, by misrepresenting a clinical delusion as an ongoing paranoid episode and seeking to capitalize on it to his own eventual profit. Something to do with the belief that our best friends and family are really aliens, I believe. Although I can report on the positive side that his receptionist Sally Dingle appears to have found true love and romance with a patient who was convinced he was a famous Rugby League Football player, which I guess is as alien as you can get.

No, all that is bye the bye. I merely wonder what if things had worked out differently in the scheme of it all. Would you and I, and your charming wife, be in this room, in this universe, at this point in time, having this conversation, awaiting the return of my bride-to-be and her stalwart companion, who looks so good in tweed..

Cartledge, old friend, I said, forget what ifs. Why don't we all just sit down together and enjoy a glass of fine port with the last of these muffins.

Excellent idea, he said, taking a seat, stretching his limbs and sighing contentedly.

There was a long period while the three of us sat silently, glorying in the sense of an excellent unmediated and spontaneous togetherness, unconcerned about the clock of future and past possibilities.

Then Cartledge said, I am thinking of setting up a Rabbit Museum.

THE END

The house lay dark and silent whilst its occupants drifted in dreamless slumber. In a forgotten corner of one of the rooms, veiled within skeins of dusty cobwebs, an ancient Ognula talking drum giggled quietly to itself and, unheard by anything but the spiders and carpet beetles, the dust mites, the, spores, the microbes and multifarious bacteria, said: This is not the end.

**Cartledge & I will return in SPACE! Book Two of
the Chronicles of Cartledge & I**

