

The  
Adventures  
of  
  
Hemlock  
Soames  
  
(and Flotsam)

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THE ADVENTURES OF HEMLOCK SOAMES, ( and FLOTSAM ). Vol.1.

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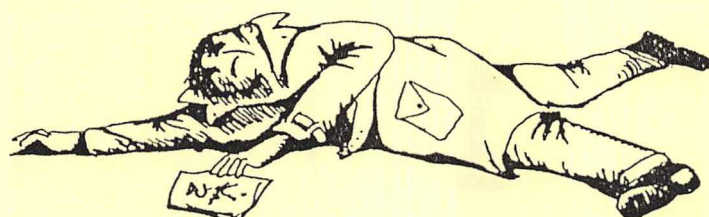
\* THE TENCH LINTEL LIMBO-DANCE was written in collaboration  
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Illustrations. 17 by Steve Jeffery, 6 by Atom, 1 by Alan  
Hunter. The rest are mine, or fudged.  
All of the illos are, I'm confident, readily  
recognisable as to their author.

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# introduction

In 1959 I discovered SF fandom by way of attending that year's convention. Oh yes, there was only one British convention each year at that time.

It took me no time at all to realise that SF fans were my kind of people and I obtained my first fanzines at that convention at the old Imperial. I was hooked straight away and rushed into print. The first Lee Spinge was awful, it still makes me cringe to think of it, but after that it was impossible for Spinge to do anything except get better.

There were probably fewer fanzines being published in those days than in the 90's, but my memory insists that they were individual, lively, exciting, entertaining and varied. Though I admit that this may be the well known factor at work, the one which makes one's first years appear to have been a Golden Age.

In those days the US and UK fandoms were, for all practical purposes, one big fandom, something which, I regret, doesn't seem to obtain today. It was common, indeed usual and accepted without comment, for UK fanzines to feature American letter hacks, illustrators and writers, and for the US fanzines to feature an abundance of UK contributors.

I wouldn't like to have to say which were the "best" fanzines and contributors of the sixties. There was a great diversity in fanzines, from the ultra serious to the wildly unserious. My "best" list would be entirely subjective and, although there would probably be some overlap, my favourites wouldn't necessarily be anyone else's.

For John Berry and the GDA I felt an immediate affinity. I realised at once that Goon Bleary was my sort of hero, which probably reveals something awful about my personality.

John Berry used real fans and events in his stories. Oh, exaggerated and fantasised to be sure. Much of the humour lay in the bumbling ineptitude and low cunning of Goon Bleary himself, which I sometimes think is a reminder of a part of ourselves that we wouldn't like to admit to.

John Berry wasn't the only fan who wrote GDA stories, as readers of the Bleary Eyes volumes will know. A whole mythos had sprung up around the activities of the infamous Agency, and fans of fame and stature didn't think it beneath themselves to pen GDA tales, frequently if not invariably writing themselves, usually fantasticalised, into the adventures.

This whole bundle of interactions created a feeling of camaraderie which, I believe, all GDA fans shared. I felt, and I think many others felt the same, that to be a real, authentic, pukka Goon Bleary fan you just HAD to write a GDA related story.

It was this which was the genesis of Hemlock Soames.

It was not quite as simple as that of course. The name Hemlock Soames is actually an invention of the late 1980s.

Originally my intention was to write stories suitable for inclusion in the GDA archives. Oh, how I faunched to be a GDA operative! So my stories of the sixties followed the convention of including real fans in the adventures.

I wrote A SLIP OF THE TONG at that time, still one of my favourite stories, and one about a fannish ghost on Whobybury Hill, that was A MONUMENTAL DECISION. Another involved Walt Willis and Yukatan tobacco. Another involved BR and a mysterious purple rain. There were probably other stories, if so they're probably in the first dozen Les Spinges.

Early on in the run of Les Spinge I was joined by another Stourbridge fan, one Dave Hale. He was a better editor than I was, not as backward in requesting material for one thing. Dave had more or less a free hand, while I provided the printing and the finances.

Dave was a tall and robust young fan and when I assumed the identity of Catsyes Cheslin, in the stories, he just seemed to fall naturally into the role of my assistant. Catsyes was from the outset much like Soames, and Dave bore some similarity to Flotsam. Of course Dave wasn't of extra terrestrial origin.....

I'm uncertain of the exact order of events but in the latter half of the sixties, when I went to teacher training college, Spinge passed to Darroll Pardoe. He used the title until it was somewhere in the 80s, perhaps higher.

When I unfafiated in 1988 I intended to revive A CHILD'S GARDEN OF OLAF, originally a one-shot produced around the time of the 1965 Brumcon, as an all cartoon fanzine. This was because in the intervening years I'd doodled many an Olaf cartoon. As it worked out I found myself with a certain amount of written material to hand so ACGOO 2 was actually half and half. I did reprint ACGOO 1, an all cartoon issue, some time later.

Having launched into ACGOO, and being diffident about asking folk for material, I wrote some stuff myself. In doing this I revived Catsyes Cheslin and Dave Hale in a rather different form and as Soames and Flotsam.

The internally chronologically first S&F story is THE ORPHAN OF THE STORM, which appeared in ACGOO 10 in July 1991. At the outset, you see, I just wrote the tales in no particular order of their supposed taking place.

Apart from A SLIP OF THE TONG all of these stories have been written since 1988. I've had to struggle with no more than one or two, most of them just wrote themselves, sometimes I've written three or four of them "at a sitting" as it were.

I don't tout them as great stories, but they were fun to write and I hope they will provide you, the intrepid reader, with a modicum of entertainment.

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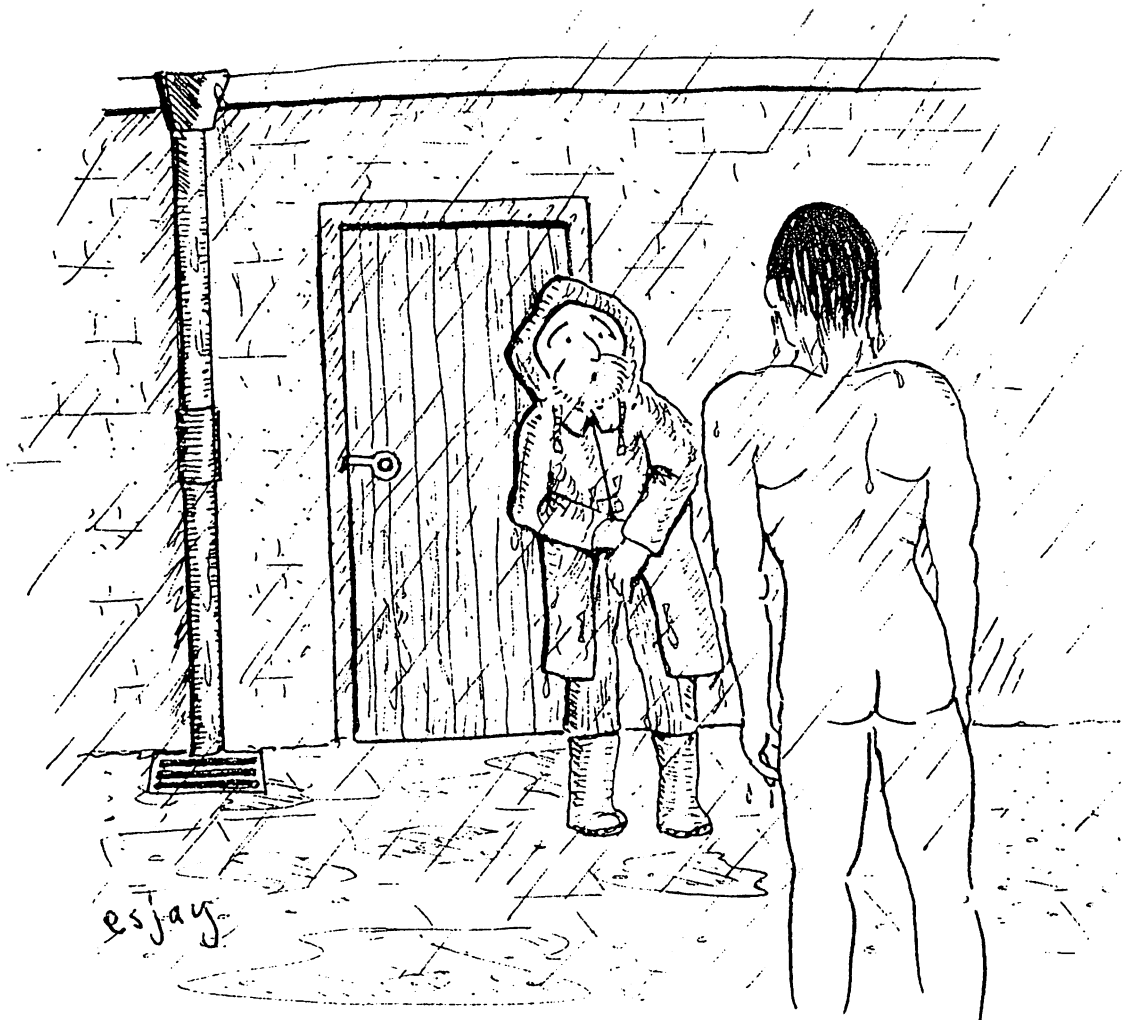


\*\*\* VERY special thanks should go to Steve Jeffery who, very kindly, provided me with illos 'to order.'

# The Orphan of the Storm

It was a dirty night. It had been a rotten day, at the end of a rotten week, in the middle of a rotten April. You know the lines;

When in April the sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root.



Well, Someone Up There had turned the taps on too hard and the 'sweet showers' were doing a damn sight too much piercing. The rain had been lashing down for a month. The Stour had burst it's banks and water the colour of under-milked strong coffee had flooded the lower High Street.

The gale gusted madly, great bullets of rain hurled themselves suicidally at the window panes and hammered holes in the roof. Old Father Noah would have felt right at home, I can tell you.

The 'front room', the only other livable room in Gas Lane Cottage, I'd had to abandon a week ago. When there was a lull in the storm I could hear the merry splashing of water as it fell into the assortment of pots and pans I'd placed around the floor in there.

It wasn't too bad in the kitchen. I'd given that part of the roof a coat of tar last year, and the old solid fuel range threw out a comforting heat.

The dried tea leaves I was smoking were not an altogether satisfactory substitute for tobacco, but one gets used to it. My pipe burned fitfully, the rain beat down, the wind whistled round the eaves.

Life in Gas Lane Cottage, I mused philosophically, was pretty bloody rotten.

Eventually I had to make a move. I needed to take a leak; I mean, I had to have a pee. The loo, of course, was outside in the yard, the one that still worked that is.

I sighed and heaved myself out of the armchair, tripped over several of the cats who were, naturally, hogging the fire, (they were pretty fed up with the weather too), and tottered over to the door. The wind pushed the door open and a blast of rain hit me in the face. "Blow this for a game of soldiers" I muttered peevishly.

Inevitably I was soaked through by the time I got to the loo, not that it made much difference, the roof leaked like a sieve anyway.

My business finished I stood in the doorway adjusting my dress, as the polite term has it. I nearly did myself a mischief then because, just as I was at a rather delicate stage in the operation, there was a terrific bang and a flash of blue light, not fifty yards away, out amongst the piles of junk. The light was blinding. "Funny", I thought, "there's been no hint of thunder".

As I stood puzzling over this a tall shape stumbled towards me out of the Niagra-like rain. It halted, rather unsteady on it's feet, a couple of yards in front of me. It looked at me in a funny sort of a way, dazed like, then fell down all of a heap.

Uncharacteristically I was non-plussed. Not only was the stranger out cold, but he was also more or less naked.

"Not the best of nights for a flasher to be pursuing his hobby", I thought. "He'll catch his death of cold, if he doesn't drown first".

Well, I couldn't just leave the poor sod there. He was much too heavy for me to lift but I contrived to drag him into the kitchen and laid him down in front of the fire.

While I was covering him up with my blankets I noted that his only apparel was a sort of cloak thing, and a pair of arm length gloves of the same silvery looking material.

"Well", I thought, "it takes all sorts".

I sat down and wondered what to do next. As it happens I did nothing. I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew it was morning. The rain, I was pleased to see, had eased off and weak shafts of sunlight were struggling through the holes in the curtains.

I was at least half convinced that the previous night's visitation had been a dream. But the fellow was still there, covered with my blankets and four of the cats.

I stood up. "er... 'mornin', I said nervously.

The stranger blinked and turned his head towards the window, then back to me.

"I concur with your observation", he said uncertainly.

"Feeling better this morning?", I ventured.

He thought for a moment or two, I could almost see the wheels going round in his head.

"I deduce that you are making a generalised enquiry about my state of health or well-being", he said at length, "to which I respond thus; I am feeling quite recovered, thank you".

"Funny onion", I thought, wondering if he was not some run of the mill flasher but had escaped from some home for the mentally bewildered.

He looked around carefully. "Am I correct in assuming that we are within some dwelling, domicile or habitation?" he asked.

"You collapsed in my back yard", I said, "so I brought you in out of the rain".

He thought about that for a while, then said, "I am Obligated to you, sir", distinctly capitalising the O.

"Well", I said, "if you're feeling well enough to get up maybe you'd like a bit of breakfast".

"Breakfast?", he said, rolling the word around his mouth. "That would be the customary first meal of the day?"

"Right", I said, "It'll only be beans on toast and a cuppa tea, but it'll warm you up".

Sam, the big, thick, three-legged tabby, advanced up the stranger's chest and sniffed at his face. I could see that my guest didn't quite know what to make of this.

"If you would be so kind as to restrain your watch-beast", he said, with just a touch of apprehension, "I would be happy to partake of some morning refreshment".

"Watch-beast?" I thought, and "funny bloke".

I shoed the moggies away and the stranger, lithely, got to his feet.

I viewed the apparition with interest, and a certain nervousness. He was a big bloke, well built all over, if you see what I mean.

"Maybe I can find you something to wear", I hinted.

The stranger looked at me, and then at his own semi-naked form, and smiled.

"Some sort of body covering might be appropriate", he said.

I found him some garments out of the pile I'd got from the charity shop. They had been too big for me but they were a little small on him, he being, I guessed, somewhere over six and a half feet tall.

Once he was dressed he looked pretty ordinary.

I made the breakfast. We ate together. He consumed his share rather slowly, tentatively I think you could say, as if he'd never seen beans on toast before. When we'd finished I introduced him to the mysteries of washing up.

"By the way", I said as he put the mugs away, "my name's Soames, Hemlock Soames".

My visitor considered.

"At this point", he said, "I believe it is customary to respond by giving one's own name, lable or appellation. Regretably I cannot so respond, for it seems that my memory was one of the things I lost in the shipwreck".

"Shipwreck?" I said, "are you a distressed seaman then? But it's a bit far from the sea". I was fair puzzled.

"Shipwreck?" he said, as if trying to remember something.

"I'm not sure. The word came to me unbidden".

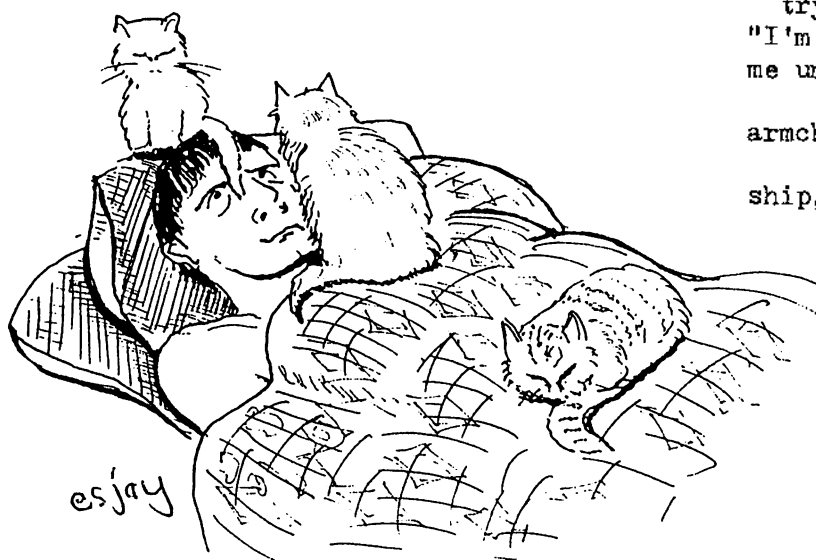
We sat down, each in an armchair on either side of the fire.

"So", I said, "you lost your ship, your clothes, and your memory all in one go, and got, as it were, washed ashore like a piece of flotsam or jetsam".

"Something like that", he agreed.

I looked him over. "A bit simple", I thought. But strong".

"I can't keep saying "hey, you" I said. "As you haven't got a name we'll have to make



one up for you, at least until you get your memory back".

"I have, with no logical foundation", he said, "every confidence that I will regain my memory eventually. In the meantime your suggestion seems to be eminently sensible".

He paused. "What name do you propose that I should adopt?", he asked.

"Ah," I said, "How would 'Flotsam' do? It's not all that unusual, and in the circumstances it would be quite appropriate".

"'Flotsam'", he murmured, try the name out. "It is apposite and has humorous connotations. By all means, 'Flotsam' will do very well".

"Good", I said, and thinking of a tall American bloke I knew I added, "and may I suggest that for a forename you adopt 'Don'?"

Flotsam readily agreed. "I like it", he said, "Don Flotsam", it has a certain ring to it".

"But", I said, that settled, "What are we going to do with you?"

"Do with me?" said Flotsam, surprised and possibly alarmed.

"You're lost and your memory's gone", I pointed out. "Maybe we should go and see the police. You might have been reported missing by your relatives or someone."

"Ah, I see", said Flotsam. "I am confident however that I have no friends or relatives on, in, this country. I fear that a visit to the native constabulary would be fruitless".

I wondered. Illegal immigrant?

Flotsam continued. "Is it possible that I might impose upon your kindness for a little while longer? Perhaps, in return for food and shelter I could assist you in your work?"

"As it happens", I said, "I'm between jobs at present." Forebearing to add "Five years between".

"Oh", said Flotsam, his face falling.

I considered Flotsam's muscular figure.

"On the other hand", I said calculatingly, "maybe you could make yourself useful about the house, and the yard".

Flotsam brightened up at once.

"Such tasks as sir sees fit to assign I will diligently perform", he said earnestly.

"I could be onto a good thing here", I thought. "Very well then", I continued decisively, "the first thing you can do is to help me get some coal".

So off we went to the derelict railway yards. Once I'd shown him how to go about it Flotsam set to work with distressing energy. In fact after a while I left him to it and went home to sit by the fire. The rain had stopped but the wind was chill.

Not very long after Flotsam appeared. I thought he'd had enough and had come in to take a break. But no. He'd filled the coal shed, he said, and what next?

I had to see this. Damn me eyes if he hadn't stuffed the shed to bursting.

"Possibly sir has some other little jobs?" he said eagerly.

So I set him to emptying the rainwater out of the containers in the front room.

He did this cheerfully, but, as he returned from finishing this task he ventured to remark; "Would it not be more economical of time and energy to repair the roof, sir?"

"It would that", I agreed, "but I'm too old and creaky to get up onto the roof. In fact," I complained bitterly, "The whole house is falling to bits, but I can't afford to have the work done. In fact it's all I can do to feed myself and the cats, and I couldn't manage that except that they've got used to eating beans on toast. Mind you, they supplement their diet by catching the small creatures that lurk in the yard".



I switched on the radio and plonked myself down in my armchair with a library book. Flotsam divided his attention between me and the radio, which was broadcasting, as it happened, a Wodehouse story.

I must have dozed off. I woke to find Flotsam standing beside my chair, looming you might say.

"Was there something?" I said uneasy in his shadow.

"Pray pardon the intrusion, sir," said he, in a voice which was the very echo of the 'Jeeves' of the Wodehouse play, "but I cannot but help noticing that sir is Reading a Book".

"Yes?", I said, mystified. "So I'm reading a book".

Flotsam coughed apologetically, Jeevesishly.

"I do not seem able to read", he confessed.

"An illiterate?" I wondered.

"Perhaps", continued Flotsam, "Sir might at some time condescend to instruct me in the Art?"

"What!" I exclaimed, surprised. "Teach you to read?"

"I'm confident that Sir would be an excellent instructor", he said defferentially.

I thought about it. "Well", I said generously, "I'm not too busy just now, we can make a start if you like".

"Sir is incredibly kind", enthused Flotsam, Jeevesishly again.

"For god's sake!" I exclaimed.

"Sir?" asked Flotsam.

"Oh, never mind," I said. "Just stand behind me and I'll point to the words as I read them".

I've always thought that I'd make a good teacher, if I could have stood the kids. By the end of the afternoon I'd got Flotsam reading quite fluently and so I turned him loose on what was left of my library.

After tea, the inevitable beans on toast, I counted my money. Not a lot, two pounds ten pence. "Still", I thought, "it's dole day tomorrow, dammit".

I made up my mind, I'd nip along to the Spotted Cow. I did consider taking Flotsam with me, but the regulars might be a bad influence on the lad. Besides there wasn't enough cash for the both of us.

"Flotsam", I announced, "I have to go out on urgent business. You stay here and read a book, or tidy up or something".

Flotsam made no comment but, having helped me on with my coat, he escorted me to the door and saw me off. I had the impression that he was even looking forward to being on his own for a while.

At the Spotted Cow Sam, an expatriate American gentleman, drew me a pint of Lumhammer and I retired into the corner by the fire to nurse it. The usual crowd was there, plus half a dozen blokes from the Dry Dock.

Arm wrestling was in progress. The betting, illegal of course, was heavy. The Spotted Cow team won handsomly.

While our local lads were feeling full of themselves the Dry Dockers, an unethical and cunning crew, challenged them to a rematch for the following night. It was not until the terms had been agreed, and the bets placed, that the Dry Dockers dropped their bombshell.

Big Bill Donaho would be on their team tomorrow.

This revelation threw the Spotted Cow-ers into a state of considerable gloom, consternation even. Big Bill, a long distance lorry driver, and believed to be away in Aberdeen, was the indisputable champion arm wrestler of the Black Country. He'd never been beaten once in, oh, the last sixteen years or so. Still, a match was a match, even though the Spotted Cow-ers knew that they could kiss their winnings of that night goodbye, and then some!

In a pensive mood, later that evening, I trudged back to Gas Lane Cottage. Indeed, I was so lost in thought that I was into the kitchen and half-way to my armchair before I noticed anything.

Then it struck me that Flotsam was standing in the middle of the floor looking rather pleased with himself. And maybe just a little bit apprehensive too.

Then it dawned upon me. The wallpaper, so old and faded that I'd forgotten that it ever had a pattern, shone like new. And the carpet, it had its pile and colours back. And the curtains, and the armchairs.

In fact the whole place looked as spick and span as one of those rooms in a display house!

"Flotsam!" I said hollowly, waving my arms about in a helpless fashion.

"I hope Sir is not too displeased", he said apologetically, "I took the liberty while Sir was out to do a little work around the house....".

"I don't mind," I said unsteadily, "in fact I'm very pleased, astonished even. You've done a grand job, as good as I could have done myself in fact".

Flotsam fairly beamed. "If Sir would be indulgent enough to view the front room," he said, "I have endeavoured to make that a little more comfortable too."

I let myself be led down the hall to the front room. Flotsam had certainly made it 'a little more comfortable'. The pots and pans were gone, the carpet was bright and clean, there was a new bookcase on the back wall, with all of my remaining books neatly lined up on its shelves. And in the fireplace a fire blazed merrily. I wondered about that, the chimney had been blocked for years.

"Flotsam, Flotsam!" I cried, "what have you been up to?"

"I felt that Sir would be happier in more congenial surroundings." he said seriously.

"But," I gasped, "the furnishings, the fireplace, the roof!"

"The roof needed but little repair Sir," he said, "and the furnishings responded well to my humble attentions. In the case of the hearth I was fortunate to find parts for it in the grounds. Sirs property abounds with useful, restorable, items."

"The junk yard?" I said, wonderingly.

"Sirs outdoor collection of artefacts," corrected Flotsam firmly but deferentially.

A thought slowly surfaced as I surveyed the results of Flotsam's industry.

"You're pretty good at this restoration lark," I said, "are you any good at fixing up old washing machines or televisions and suchlike?"

"I am not familiar with the articles Sir mentions," he replied, consideringly, "but it is possible that I might manage something."

"Right then," I said firmly, "come along with me."

The other two downstairs rooms hadn't been used very much in the past few years. I forced open the door of the nearest one. Under plastic sheets there was a veritable Aladdin's cave of machines and appliances. I'd collected them with the idea of repairing them and selling them, but that had come to nothing because I'm not very mechanically minded, more your intellectual, artistic, type see.

I whipped a few sheets off and pointed.

"Can you fix any of these?" I asked hopefully.

Flotsam picked up the nearest item, which happened to be a washing machine of considerable weight.

"That's a machine to get clothes clean," I explained.

"Indeed Sir?" Flotsam remarked, casually upending the thing.

"It seems to be a simple enough device, I should have little trouble repairing it, probably I could improve its working."

This is all very interesting, I thought.

"If you could repair these, and those in the next room," I said cunningly, "not only could I sell them, thus being able to feed the cats on proper cat food, but it would also give us more room."

My imagination leaped.

"Also," I said, "if you were to renovate the upstairs rooms, as you have done in the kitchen and the front room, you could have a room of your very own!"

Flotsam's eyes lit up like beacons in the night.

"Would it be presumptuous of me to infer that Sir is considering taking me into his service on a permanent basis," he asked eagerly.

I thought. A personal lackey. Who seemed to be a genius at fixing things. Pound signs flashed before my eyes. I felt all of a quiver.

"Is Sir unwell?" asked Flotsam anxiously.

"Pay no heed," I reassured him, "a mere passing faintness brought about by years of overwork, a poor diet, and old age."

Flotsam looked quite stricken.

"Anyway," I continued, "I am indeed willing to take you into my employ, on a year's trial."

"Oh joy unsurpassed!" exclaimed the simple soul, "This is indeed a privilege and a honour."

"Too right," I said severely. "Endeavour to give complete satisfaction and I might consider making the appointment permanent." Somewhat recklessly I added, "I might even allow you some small remuneration."

Another idea occurred to me, seeing him standing there effortlessly holding up the washing machine.

"Put that thing down," I said, "and accompany me to the kitchen. I am about to instruct you in the venerable Black Country sport of arm wrestling."

The next day, after I'd drawn my dole money, I spent some more time rehearsing Flotsam. This consisted mostly in teaching the lad to grunt and groan and generally give the impression that he was less strong than he actually was.

We went down to the Spotted Cow early. After I'd had Flotsam show his arm wrestling prowess the regulars cheered up no end. With good reason.

The Dry Dockers, loudly confident, and Big Bill, quietly confident, duly arrived. With Flotsam in our team we wiped the floor with the opposition. I may add that my winnings were considerable.

A few weeks later I sat before the kitchen fire, toasting my toes, pipe going and a pint of Lumphammer in my hand.

"You know, Flotsam," I said comfortably, "I'm feeling much better now than I've done for years. It aint such a bad old life after all."



"Quite so Sir," said Flotsam agreeably, his voice somewhat indistinct owing to him being under the Lagonda he was renovating.

The various washing machines and other gadgets Flotsam had fixed up, better than new, had sold like hot cakes to the Spotted Cow regulars. I had no idea how Flotsam had done it but all of them worked without having to be plugged into the electricity, and, as for instance in the case of the washing machines, without having to use water or soap powder.

The income this brought in was the reason I could sit in my armchair smoking Sobranie and knocking back the Lumhammer.

"I think I'll go out tomorrow," I said thoughtfully, "I haven't been up to the Sausage Works in ages." I added, overcome by a generous impulse, "and you can come with me, if you've finished the Lagonda."

"I will have to make some replacement parts," said Flotsam doubtfully. "that may well take me several hours."

"That's OK," I said expansively, "work all night if you want to. But don't keep me awake with knockings and bangings."

"Oh Sir! exclaimed the recumbant Flotsam reproachfully, "As if I would!"

"That's all right then," I said, sighing contentedly.

"And I think I'd like Beef Wellington for supper."

end.



A Tom

# THE CAVERN OF FEAR

We presented ourselves, my faithful minion Flotsam and I, at the ticket office of the Black Country museum. I was there at the urgent request of one Dave Reeves, a poet of some local fame, with whom I had, years ago, run a folk and poetry club.

Dave had obviously been waiting for me. He popped out of an office the instant he was paged. In a trice we were into the museum grounds and a few minutes later we boarded the tram which runs between the museum entrance and the Victorian fairground. From there it was but a short walk, over the bridge, past the shops and the pub, to the canal side. Dave ushered us onto a narrow boat, it's electric motor hummed and we off into the hill by way of the Tipton Portal. There was no 'legging it' for us, like they had to do in the old days, or like they put on for the regular visitors. There was no illumination, save for the boat's headlight. We proceeded along in almost complete silence, carrying our capsule of light with us. It was like being in a selfcontained little universe, very weird.

We passed through Shirts Mill basin, open to the sky, and dived underground again. We came out into daylight at Castle Mill basin, briefly, then took the left hand tunnel. We passed the entrance to the aptly named Dark Cavern, went through Hurst's Cavern, and, at last, via the new tunnel, came to the artificially lit Singing Cavern.

The Singing Cavern had been worked out in the 1840's and over the years of neglect there had been roof falls and the canal had silted up. It had remained in darkness until the new cut had been made in 1980.

In 1980 the cavern had been full of great tumbled blocks of limestone, covered in strange fungoid growths. Now it was very different.

The barge slid to a gentle halt and we disembarked. I gazed around, taking it all in.

The canal widened in the cavern, enough so that two boats could pass each other. It narrowed as it vanished into a tunnel at the far end.

The right hand side of the canal was the wall of the cavern. It curved up and over, reaching a height of ninety feet or so.

On the left was a quay and a largish flat area. The quay, about sixty yards long, was the straight side of a semi-circle.

About ten yards from the canal, on this level ground, there had been constructed a low stage.

Sweeping right round the rest of the place there had been built an ampitheatre. The limestone had been carved and built up into steps, and fitted with wooden benches and hand rails.

Above, eighty feet up, but still below the natural ceiling, they'd made an interior roof out of airy steel girders, and covered this with some orange plastic material. This was, I presumed, was to keep any drips off the audience.

The cavern was illuminated by a multitude of electric lights,

Kench



which, reflected off the orange ceiling, gave the cavern a soft warm feeling.

The folk group, who Dave had brought me along to meet, were standing in a nervous looking huddle in front of the stage.

"Very nice," I commented. "But surely the canal can't be the only way in and out. Safety regulations and all that."

"No," replied Dave, "there are entrances up at the back. They lead to the carpark and the museum grounds, the audience will come in by those."

As we walked towards the folk group he continued, "The grand opening is on July the twenty-third, less than a week from now. The Duke of Duggley will do the honours and then we'll have a folk and poetry evening."

We had reached the folkers by now. They'd heard Dave's last remarks.

One of them said, gloomily, "If we do open."

"Ah," I said, "Dave has told me that there is some sort of a problem."

Dave introduced us all round. I forgot their names at once.

"About this problem?" I suggested.

The tall hairy one, Greg I think, spoke.

"It's a bit difficult to explain." He said, and stopped, apparently at a loss for words.

"It might be simpler if we showed him." piped up a smaller, arcordian holding chap. Alan?

There was an uneasy interplay of glances.

"OK," said Greg, not happily, but stubbornly.

While the group got ready we sat ourselves down on a front bench.

Presently there was a muttered, "A one, a two." and the group started playing. They were very good.

At first I noticed nothing unusual, then, somewhere about the middle of 'Brave Duggley Boys', I became aware of a tension in the air. The light in the cavern gradually changed and took on a greenish cast, while the music became, well, rather muffled and distant. A strange undertone

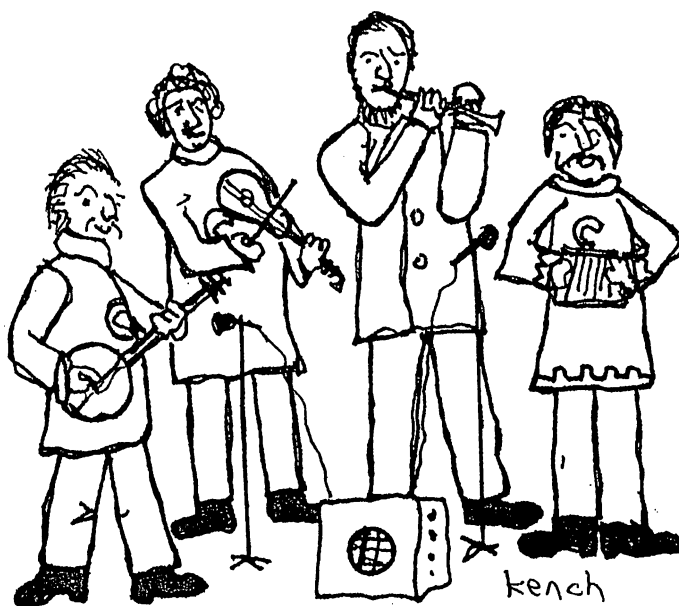
developed, rather reminding me of a gentle sea lapping on a sandy beach. The effects grew more and more noticable until they became impossible to ignore.

At that point the group, sweating rather more than their exertions or the temperature of the cavern warranted, abruptly ceased playing.

We remained in silence for a good few minutes. The strangeness swirled around us, and then began to fade away. The oppressivness diminished until suddenly, rather like the popping of your ears you experience with a change of air pressure, ordinariness returned.

"I see what you mean." I said with professional aplomb. I forced myself to unclench my fists. "The phenomena would certainly have been difficult to describe."

"We've had folk in," said Dave, "electrical engineers to inspect the wiring, a bloke to check the acoustics, even a psychologist from Birmingham University, but none of them can account for the weird effects."



He added, with gratifying faith, "So I decided to call you in. If anyone can clear this up it's you, Hemlock old mate."

Greg ruined the occasion by putting in, "Aye, and we heard you worked cheap."

I gave him my number two icy stare. He tried to hide behind his mates.

Having dealt with the interruption I remarked,

"You did well to consult me, Dave," I said, "I can't promise anything of course, ( I always say that, for insurance ) "but I'll give it a go."

I sprayed the lot of them with an intimidating glance. And continued,

"But I have my own methods. If I am to take the case on I must insist on having an entirely free hand."

Naturally they agreed. I then explained that I had to make certain preparations and arranged that Flotsam and I would return the next day.

"You can show us in, Dave," I instructed, "then the lot of you must make yourselves scarce."

Once home I spoke to Flotsam.

"Some sort of analytical gadget is obviously required," I said. "The nuts and bolts of which I leave to you. Something impressive I think, with plenty of flashing lights and so on. Meanwhile I shall take myself off to the Spotted Cow where, the little grey cells suitably stimulated with a pint or two of Lumphammer, I will cogitate upon the problem."

Flotsam did us proud. The next day we pressed the folk group into service and carried equipment down into the Singing Cavern. I could see that they were impressed with the gadgetry. Once they had laid their burdens down I shooed them away.

Flotsam set to work connecting things up while I examined the scene of the manifestations. Apart from a few curious scratches on the edge of the quay there was nothing out of the ordinary. I hadn't expected that there would be.

"Ahem," said Flotsam presently. "The preparations are complete sir."

"Will this stuff actually do anything?" I asked.

"Sir!" said Flotsam reproachfully.

"Oh, all right," I said, "carry on."

Flotsam switched on. Taped music filled the air. Little lights blinked and dials quivered. It all looked gratifyingly scientific.

Shortly the effects we had experienced the previous day repeated themselves.

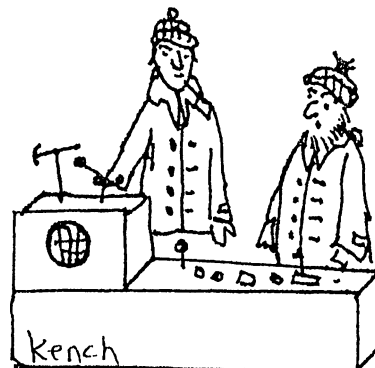
"Damned if I know what's causing it," I thought uneasily, "but it's bloody weird."

The music went on, longer than the folk group had continued yesterday. The light turned blueish, the air became chill.

"Maybe Flotsam should switch it off now," I thought fretfully. I wondered if I could squeeze Dave for half a fee for the attempt.

Flotsam abruptly jerked his head up and gazed intently towards the dark waters of the canal. A mist had gathered upon the water. As I watched the mist grew denser, became a fog in fact. I decided that this would be a good time to go and see if the museum pub was open.

But before I could translate my intention into action the surface of the canal erupted and, like a bevy of penguins leaping out onto the ice to escape an orca, several diminutive forms landed, with loud slaps, on the quay. Each of them regarded us coldly with pairs of dark beady eyes.



"Ooo-er!" I commented.

"Trilobites!" exclaimed Flotsam happily.

"Trogglodites," I corrected, out of the side of my mouth. But on second thoughts I saw what he meant. The little fellows did bear a distinct resemblance to the famous "Duggley Bugs". Albeit they were four foot tall rather than four inches.

A strategic withdrawal was clearly indicated. Alas, before I could get my feet to respond to my brain's frantic commands the little monsters had hustled forward and surrounded me. Us.

Disconcertingly each of the creatures was equipped with two sets of arms, ending in four digit hands. Even more alarmingly they all seemed to be holding some sort of futuristic pistol, and were pointing them at us!

The nasty little sods stared at us unwaveringly. Then, suddenly, the ray guns, or whatever, were thrust away somewhere and they all threw themselves flat on their fronts, hissing and groaning like billy-o and banging their heads on the ground.

After they had banged their heads for a minute they recovered their composure and sat up on their back ends.

A voice, inflectionless yet somehow trembling with some strong emotion, emanating from a small box one of them had strapped to it's chest, spoke up.

"Master," it quavered, "forgive us! We did not know."

I'm used to such reactions of course. Like others before them they had suddenly realised that they were confronted with a being of superior intelligence.

I hesitated while I composed some suitably kind but authoritative reply. Then it struck me that they were all gazing at Flotsam.

"Bugger me," I thought peevishly, "just because he's a foot taller than me!"

"Rise," said Flotsam, in the sort of voice he uses to try to get one of the cats out of his chair. (It never works).

The little chaps scrambled to their feet, or flippers rather, and stood in a respectful row. I did think of asserting myself at that point but Flotsam seemed to be doing well enough so I said nothing.

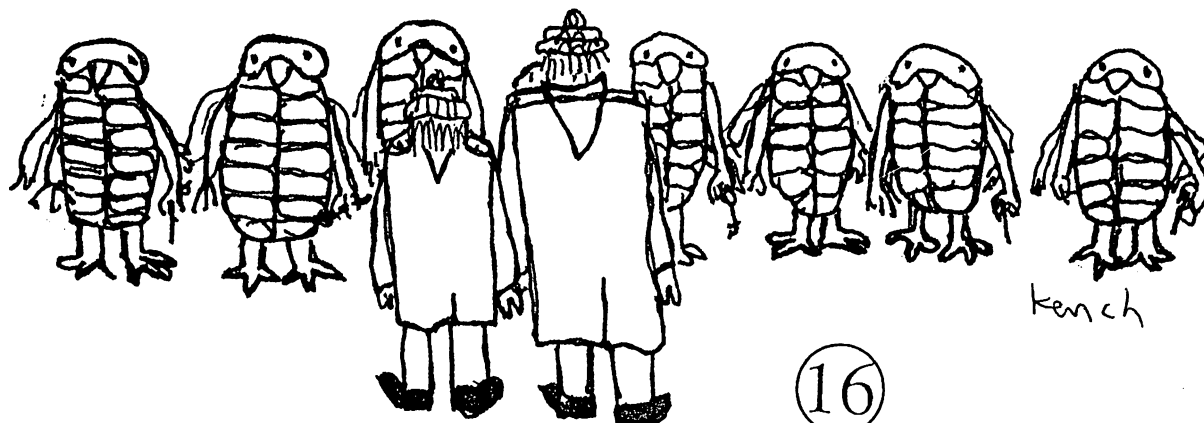
"The strange things that have been happening," said Flotsam firmly, "they are your doing?"

"A thousand pardons, O Great One," said the smarmy little creature. "We are but humble archaeologists. We have come here to try to trace our ancestors, those you name 'Trilobites'. Unfortunately our devices are resonating with the electrical equipment in this place, it has been that which has been causing you inconvenience."

He added cheekily, "And interfering with our work."

"Ah," said Flotsam. "I understand."

"Master," whined the little beast, "we will have finished our researches by sunset. May we have your honour's gracious permission to continue until





then. We will have gathered up all our equipment and departed by midnight at the very latest."

Flotsam cocked an enquiring eye in my direction. He at least knew who was boss around here. I nodded judiciously.

"Midnight will do fine," I conceded. Besides I didn't know how the little perishers might react if I said otherwise.

"Very well," said Flotsam, "you have until midnight. No great harm has been done. But make sure that you leave nothing behind."

After abasing themselves once more, again, mistakenly, to Flotsam, they turned and shuffled off to the canal. They stood for a moment, then they all plopped into the water and vanished.

"Well," I said, "another case brought to a successful conclusion. You did well lad." Prompted by a characteristic generous impulse I added, "Tonight you may accompany me to the Spotted Cow, where we will celebrate in the traditional manner."

Flotsam's face broke into a gratified smile.

"Sir is indeed the soul of generosity," he acknowledged, and then set about dismantling the equipment.

The next day I was able to demonstrate that I had cured the group's problem.

The Grand Opening was a great success, or so Dave told me. We were invited of course, but I had a previous engagement.

In addition to my trifling fee I accepted life-time passes to the Black Country museum on behalf of Flotsam and myself. I seldom use mine, but Flotsam goes up there frequently. He fixes machinery for them.

As an extra treat I allowed the lad to watch all of the Arthur C. Clarke's programmes. When I could spare him of course.



BEM FOUND ON PLANETS AND  
INSIDE CRUZZINES

ATom

# THE BLUE DEVIL

"McVeigh," says I over my second Lumphammer, "you haven't changed a bit!"

McVeighs several chins wobbled as he laughed heartilly and patted his ample belly.

"Get away with you, you old fart factory," he responded. "It's been eight years, and I've put on half a stone every year!"

I smiled remniscently. "D'you remember that time," I said, "at the Kettering con, when Ken Slater..."

"Ho,ho,ho!" roared Kev, "that bloody water-melon story!"

We fell about.

Flotsam sipped at his pint and looked on, polite and mystified.

Suddenly the door burst open and in dashed a distraught midget. He was wearing a NEDs tee-shirt and a sort of overall. He was sceaming loudly and waving his arms about. Instantly I deduced that the fellow was upset over something.

He made a bee-line for McVeigh. Flotsam, who can move pretty fast when he wants to, intercepted the mite and held him, struggling helplessly, three feet off the ground.

"Put me down you big bugger," quoth our visitor in an ear-splitting scream.

"It's all right Flotsam," said Kev, and to the hairy apparition, "Calm down Darroll, calm down!"

Flotsam obligingly let the midget go, whereupon the unfortunate fellow dropped onto the carpet. This didn't faze the mite, he was on his feet in an instant and clutching at Kev's sleeve.

"Doc," he gasped, "Doc, you gotta come. Andy's sick or drunk or summat, you gotta help!"

Kev lurched to his feet like a hippo leaving its wallow. He grabbed his medical bag off the sideboard and permitted himself to be dragged towards the door. "Come on, Hemlock," he cried as he was hauled away.

Flotsam and I followed as fast as we were able, down three flights of stairs then back up the hall.

Kev and Darroll were already inside the flat when we arrived. Kev was kneeling on the floor by the side of a recumbant figure who I guessed was Andy. Another bloke was also present.

"Bloody drunk again," remarked this person, with evident satisfaction. I took against him at once.

"Shut your dirty gob," exclaimed Darroll indignantly. "Andy's sick, not drunk."

"And I suppose this is just barley water?" sneered the other, poking at a whiskey bottle which lay on the carpet with the toe of his boot.

"What's up?" I said.

Darroll piped up. "I came

down to see if Andy was ready," he said. "The door was locked so I went and



got shite head here to help me break the door down."

Rather drastic, I thought.

I examined the door. It had certainly been forced. The lock was a sturdy one. Behind the door there hung a key.

"Is this Andy's key?" I asked.

"Must be," said 'shite head'.

"Was it hanging here when you broke in?" I asked suspiciously.

"It was," said SH swiftly, "Isn't that right Pardoe?"

"The bugger's right," replied Darroll grudgingly, "I noticed it myself."

"Hmmm," I said. "Is it possible that the keys to the other flats also fit this door?"

Darroll shook his head. "They don't," he said. He pulled out an almost identical key and gave it to me. "Here," he said, "this is mine, try it."

I tried the key but the lock wouldn't turn.

"Now your turn, Carny," said Darroll.

"Mr. Carne to you, bugger lugs," said Carne. But he hauled out his key confidently. That didn't fit either.

"The lock may be broken," offered Flotsam.

"I was just coming to that," I lied. "You try Andy's key."

Flotsam took out a handkerchief and carefully removed the key from behind the door.

"What's the handkerchief for?" asked Carne, uneasily I thought.

"There may be fingerprints on the key," I explained.

The key turned easily in the lock.

"There you are," chortled Carne annoyingly. "Andy locked himself in and then got stinking drunk. He won't be riding tonight."

"Riding?" I asked.

"Aye," said Kev. "All the blokes in these flats are members of the Cradley Heath speedway team, you know, The Heathans."

"Ah," I said, light dawning.

"Flotsam," I said. "check the key for prints, the bottle and the glass too."

"Surely that's a waste of time," protested Carne. "It's quite obvious what happened."

I scratched my beard thoughtfully and stared into the distance.

"I remember a case very similar to this," I said remniscently. "There was this locked room see. The door had to be broken down to get in. There was a key behind, er, on the table. Two chaps broke into the room, both saw the key. One bloke sends the other off to get help. While he's gone the remaining bloke picks up the key from the table, which was not the room key at all, but one very similar. He replaces that key with the real room key, which he had in his pocket all the time."

Darroll glared suspiciously at Carne. Carne said not a dicky bird but suddenly looked a bit pale.

"Is there some baking powder, or a similar substance, in the flat?" asked Flotsam.

Carne shrugged. "I have no idea," he said, "I've never been into the kitchen."

Darroll spoke up. "Would French chalk do?" he asked, "Andy's got some in the kitchen, the right hand cupboard, under the sink."

"That will do very well," declared Flotsam, and off he went.

Just then the figure on the floor, Andy, gave a sort of a moan and began to stir.

Kev held a bottle of something under Andy's nose, he livened up at once.

We lifted Andy into a chair. He seemed to be a bit groggy but he was awake.

"Stap me vitals," he groaned, "me mouth tastes like the bottom of a budgie's cage."

"Andy!" cried Darroll, "You promised to lay off the booze!"

"Well, so I did," said Andy indignantly.

Carne pointed dramatically at the empty bottle.

Flotsam returned quietly. He dusted the bottle and the glass. Andy smiled weakly. "Well, I did have a drink," he admitted sheepishly, "but only the one, I swear!"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Anything to report?" I asked Flotsam.

"Rather peculiar sir," said Flotsam. "There are some rather doubtful fingerprints on the glass and the bottle, but none at all on the key."

"No prints on the key?" I mused. "Very significant, very significant."

"Very significant", sneered Carne. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

I turned a pitying smile upon Carne. "It's quite obvious. Flotsam, you explain."

"Certainly sir," beamed the idiot, "It is hardly likely that, er...?"

"Andy," supplied Darroll, "Andy Butler."

"Thank you sir," said Flotsam, and continued. "As I was saying, it's not likely that Mr. Butler would have bothered to wipe the key. Therefore someone else must have done. Very probably the person who drugged the whiskey."

"That proves nothing," put in Carne. "Just because Andy was unlikely to have wiped the key off doesn't prove that he didn't. Besides, you could have cleaned it up while you were in the kitchen, out of sight!"

I could see that Flotsam was offended.

"Just a minute," exclaimed Darroll, "what do you mean by 'drugged the whiskey'?"

"Quite simple, sir," explained Flotsam, "If we assume that Mr. Butler is telling the truth when he says that he had only one drink then it follows that, to knock him out, the whiskey must have been drugged."

"Precisely my reasoning," I declared confidently. "And there may still be traces of the drug in the glass or the bottle."

Carne looked unworried. I wondered....

I picked up the bottle gingerly.

"Here Kev," I said, "you're the whiskey expert, take a sniff of this."

Kev stuck his magnificent red veined nose over the bottle and inhaled copiously.

"Hmmm," he said, "Clan McMuish '85 I'd say."

At that point Flotsam whispered in my ear. "If I could have a little word Sir."

"A moment, gentlemen," I said. "I wish to instruct my assistant in privacy." We retired into the kitchen.

The others were waiting with various degrees of patience when we returned.

I stood by Andy's chair while Flotsam, as unobtrusively as possible, made his way round to the door.

"The whiskey," I asked, "are you confident that it is Clan McMuish?"

"Certain sure," declared Kev confidently. "In any case we can have it analysed."

"Let's assume that you're correct," I said. I picked up the bottle.

"Clan McMuish in the bottle. But," I pointed, "The label clearly says that this is WILLIS'S FINE OLD IRISH MALT!"

"Never drink anything else," said Andy firmly.

"In that case," I said, "What's Clan McMuish doing in the bottle!"

"Beats me," said Andy. There was much shaking of heads.

"It doesn't beat Hemlock Soames," I cried. "This is what I deduce must have been the sequence of events."

We can leave aside the mechanics of how the drug got into the bottle, we can assume that it did. Now then, just in case anyone got suspicious, our villain waited until the drug had taken effect, then he let himself into the flat with Andy's key, which he had previously stolen. He then washes out the bottle and the glass. But our man is cunning. He realises that someone might spot that the dregs are only tap water, so what does he do? Why he pours a

drop of scotch, his own stuff, into the bottle and the glass, thinking that no-one would notice the difference. But", I said triumphantly, "he reckoned without the astuteness of Hemlock Soames, and, the exceptional powers of Kev's nose."

"Here, Carney, you're a Scotch man," said Darroll, more than a bit suspiciously.

"Rubbish!" declared Carne. "You claim that Andy wouldn't have had Scotch in his bottle, but he could have. And you can't prove otherwise!"

"Maybe, maybe not," I said. "But there is something that I can prove."

Carne looked distinctly shiftily.

"Here," broke in Darroll, "if Andy is banned from riding you'll be the top man, and you'll get the bonus!"

"Ah!" I said, "the motive!"

"I don't have to stand here and listen to your insinuations," said Carne hotly.

"Just a minute," I said. "You claimed that you'd never been into Andy's kitchen, right?"

"That's right," said Carne, his eyes darting about.

"In that case," I said, "you will not have trodden on the curry powder that's on the kitchen floor!"

Carne bolted for the door.

Flotsam intercepted him with no trouble. Holding his struggling victim on high the lad deftly whipped off Carne's boots and, letting Carne fall to the floor, he came over and presented me with his, er, booty.

Carne bounced up, swore nastily, and shot out of the room.

Darroll was after him in a trice, but Flotsam stopped him.

"But he's getting away," yelled the mite.

"It's all right," I said, "it's better this way."

"But you had him dead to rights," said Kev, "there's no reason Carne would have curry powder on his boots if he didn't go into the kitchen."

"There was no curry powder, sir," said Flotsam quietly.

There was a shocked silence.

"You see," I said, "we had no real proof that Carne was our man. A clever lawyer could have got him off. (we all spat to the left). This way he's gone and condemned himself. I don't think we'll be seeing Mr. Carne again."

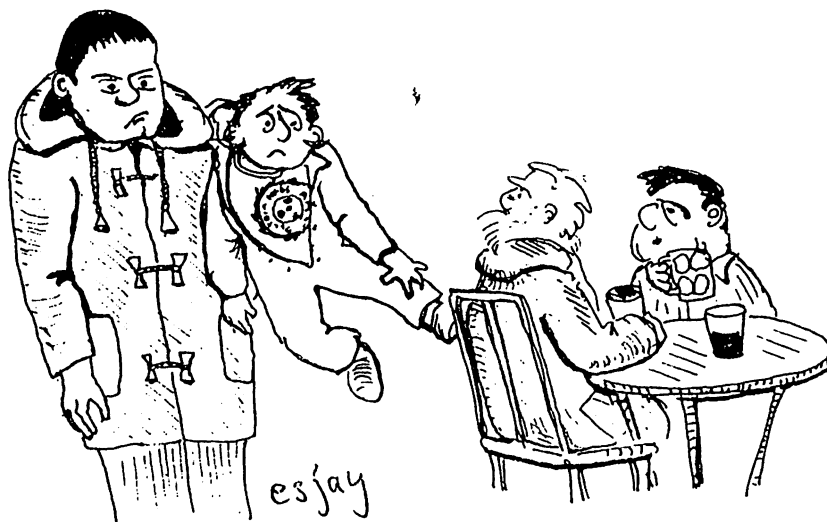
"What'll we tell the boss?" asked Darroll.

I shrugged. "Up to you," I said. "If you think he'll keep mum I'd say tell him exactly what happened. Otherwise, well, it's only us as knows."

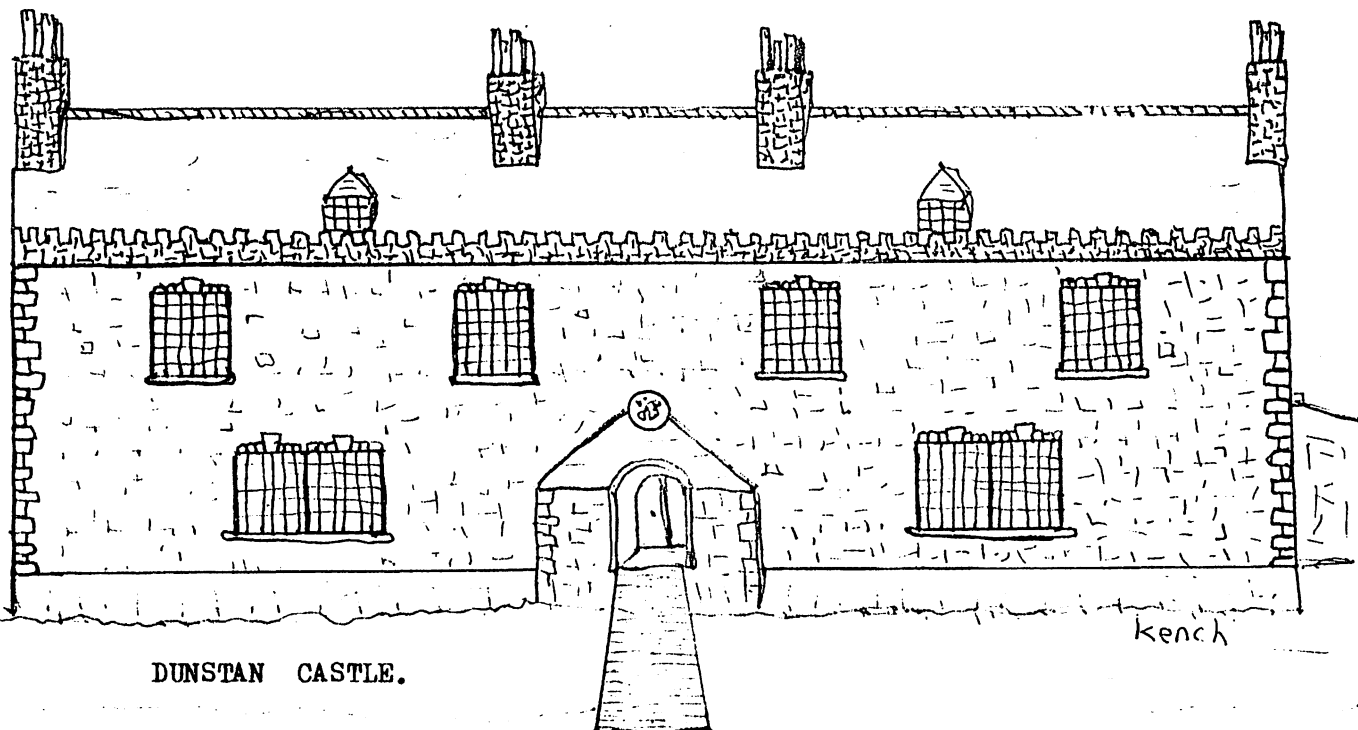
I still keep getting these tickets from the speedway club. Damn bore as far as I'm concerned. Still, I always get a good price for them down at the Spotted Cow.

Oh yes, the Blue Devil. That's the rather childish nom-de-plume Dave rode under.

It takes all sorts.



## THE TENCH LINTEL LIMBO-DANCE.



### TO THE READER

It is not often that two such outstanding cultural bastions as mighty West Midlands publishing magnate Chester Kenlin and self-styled "under-arm poet, stream-of-consciousness philosopher and wit" Henri de Nelson come together, with but a single purpose, upon the printed page. However the papers here laid before your impartial scrutiny represent a union of wills, a conjoining of kindred spirits, a paragon of co-operation unequalled since the glorious days of Hengist and Horsa...Burke and Hare...Jekyll and Hyde...

For far too long, a pall of mystery has shrouded the tragic events that occurred as far back as - oh, ages ago - at the erstwhile country seat of Dunstan Castle. The time has come to put the facts of the case before the public, that you, our Readers, may judge the evidence for yourselves. To this end, the two great men of letters have allowed certain private papers from their personal collections to be made publicly available. Thus, we, the sole agents for both parties, can now reveal for the first time the unexpurgated memoirs from the files of the brilliant but modest sleuth, Hemlock Soames, together with the report of the remarkable lady defective, Sherry Hormones, (previously chronicled, but never before presented 'in her own words'..) to the Black Country Pumphrey Society, for which she presumably received due remuneration.

Here, then, are the papers - arranged in an alternating fashion, to give a balanced view of the sequence of events - relating to the bizarre occurrences at Dunstan Castle. An occasional editorial note is introduced, for the purpose of clarifying odd details. The earliest reference to the affair is to be found in the records file of Hemlock Soames, in the keeping of Mr. Kenlin. It is therefore with this that we shall now open the proceedings.

Pierce, Nipple and Tweake, Literary Executors.

# TENCH LINTEL

## LIMBO DANCE



with Neil. K. Henderson.

FROM THE FILES OF HEMLOCK SOAMES  
(Chester Kenlin Collection.)

His Grace is a lot better, lately. Still rather weak, though. The events of 28th January have left him shaken and exhausted. "Be circumspect," he said. "Stick to our story that it was no more than a tragic accident."

"Fair enough, Your Grace," I said, pocketing the fistful of fivers. "Not a word of the affair shall pass my lips." And so it won't. I merely set down this account for my own satisfaction.

If His Grace had not gone to that Twelfth Night meeting of the Black Country Pumphrey Society, none of it would have happened. As it was, he did attend the meeting, and he did listen, "with increasing incredulity" as he put it, to the "fantastical assertions" of the principal speaker, one Sir John D'Arcy Rickett.

After the meeting, His Grace, Wolverhampton Jones, the unorthodox archaeologist, and Keith 'Walk on' Waters, the proprietor of The Pumphrey Watcher's Monthly, had a somewhat heated discussion with Sir John. This culminated in Sir John flinging out a challenge.

"Come and stay at Dunstan Castle on the 28th weekend," he said. "Each of you can bring two witnesses, and I'll provide irrefutable proof of my assertions!"

His Grace naturally asked me to accompany him, having well-placed confidence in my astuteness. He also desired, for no good reason that I could see, that Flotsam should attend.

Snow started to fall during the 27th. By the time His Grace picked us up, around six o'clock on the 28th, it was thick upon the ground and still coming down heavily. His Grace's chauffeur, Jordan, took twenty minutes to drive the five miles to the turn-off, and a further ten minutes to negotiate the steep, narrow, winding and high-hedged lane to the castle.

The castle was situated on an island in a moat formed by the River Stour. A car was parked near the bridge which led to the main door. I noticed, with a shiver, as we trudged over the wooden drawbridge, that it was not in good repair, and that the moat was full of swift black water.

MacAndrew, the butler, opened the massive front door and led us down a wide hallway, through a couple of sets of double doors, and into the Great Hall.

The Great Hall was about seventy feet square. The lofty ceiling was difficult to see through the glare of nine great chandeliers. To our right

and left, broad stairs led up to the next storey, where a wide balcony ran entirely round the hall. On the other two walls there were massive fireplaces, though I noticed that the fires burning there were 'realistic' gas fires. A large table took up the middle of the hall, and around the walls there stood various weighty sideboards and cabinets.

"Clarke will show you to your rooms, gentlemen," MacAndrew informed us heavily, in a George Sanders-type voice. "Sir John is in the Napoleon Room with some of the other guests, and desires you to join him when you have settled in."

Nice rooms too, on the east side. One for me and Flotsam, and one for His Grace across the corridor.

When we went down, Clarke conducted us to the Napoleon Room, and went off to take Jordan to the servant's quarters.

Sir John was a wiry gent with a clipped, military-style moustache and a sun tanned face. The kind of bloke one thinks of as frequenting the Army & Navy or the Explorers Club. He wore an air of barely restrained excitement, and his blue, piercing eyes glittered in a way that made me feel uneasy.

The publisher, Waters, I recognised from His Grace's description of him, 'a cross between Tarzan and Albert Einstein', before we were introduced. The Herbert Lom type turned out to be Mike Gould, the junior editor of The Pumphrey Watcher's Monthly, and the spotty youth was Brian Stovold, a 'cub' reporter on the same magazine.



MacAndrew, the Butler.

"These gentlemen arrived before you," said Sir John, shooting out his words with the rhythm of a riveter. "The others should be along shortly. Meanwhile, Glover," he indicated the bar and barman with a quick jerk of his head, "will dispense whatever refreshment you desire."

There was no beer, so I settled for a brandy. I took a sip and idly observed 'the principals' conversing animatedly near the fire. The room was noteworthy for the large portrait of Napoleon, directing some battle or other, over the fireplace, and six other portraits of the same general, two to each wall. One of them bore the 'Esjay' monogram of the historical portraitist Steffan Jeevery. There were also six lifesize busts of the emperor placed around the room. I thought about this.

Five or ten minutes later, the remaining guests were shown in.

I hardly noticed Wolverhampton Jones. He was an ordinary sort of bloke - if you discounted the cowboy boots, and the jodhpurs, ignored the tiger skin shirt and the yak hair jacket, and didn't let one's gaze linger on the large pistol strapped to his chest, or the brown statson.

There was also a repulsive, smelly little oik - a dead ringer for the late Clem Attlee - dressed in a dirty plastic mac and spats! If there is a hierarchy of rankness among the Great Unwashed, then he must be the Napoleon of Grime. Whilst I was choking on my drink, he slipped past and grabbed a bottle of gin.

It was the third guest who drew my attention.



REPORT BY SHERRY HORMONES TO THE BLACK COUNTRY PUMPHREY SOCIETY.  
CONCERNING RECENT EVENTS AT DUNSTAN CASTLE (Property of Henri de Nelson).

It must have been fate, or destiny...call it 'Kismet', that first drew the world-famous - the unforgettable - adventurer, Wolverhampton Jones and myself together, at the Twelfth Night bogie-croggling extravaganza of the Black Country Pumphrey Society. The event itself is well chronicled in the last issue of The Pumphrey Watcher's Monthly - serving as a fitting memorial to the magazine's former owner, Keith 'Walk On' Waters, whose tragically premature death has stunned and shocked the publishing world from Aberfeldy to Macclesfield. As for Wolverhampton Jones...

Our eyes met across the crowded room - and if it had not been for my assistant, Walter 'Hawk' Snottapon, going into an impromptu coughing fit and ill-advisedly 'launching a loogie' (as we say in the profession), who knows what intimate relationship we might instantly have struck up? (Had the Wally not already lost his wherewithal in a freak frostbite incident in Sauchiehall Street, I would have given him the heel of my Pathfinder Explorers' Stiletto in the crotch. As it was, and given the decorum of our situation, I merely slipped him an IOU for a good going-over later on...)

I must say, Mr. Jones was ever the gentleman - politely averting his gaze as he wiped the slimy missile from his eye with his lucky kangaroo scrotum. I should be so lucky...lucky, lucky, lucky...He could wipe me down anytime.

By way of changing the subject, Wolverhampton, (as I was urged to call him) asked me what I thought of these claims of Sir John's - knowing that I myself was something of a connoisseuse of pumphrey matters.

"D'Arcy Rickett..." I began.

"Yes, I thought it sounded a bit shaky, myself," he interposed manfully. "How about you and the dwarf accompanying me to Dunstan Castle as a witness? 'Walk On' Waters is going with two witnesses himself...but perhaps our little team can take a less scientific, more laid back, look at things..."

As soon as he said 'laid' I agreed instantly... 'Our little team!' I have to confess I was star struck.

It transpired that Wolverhampton and Sir John were both old boys of the renowned Monkton Bastardly public school for the sons of so-and-sos. He therefore had no difficulty in getting himself and Wally and I invited along to Dunstan Castle to watch the sport unfold. He was to pick us up in his Wurlitzer Kamikaze landrover on the 28th...I made a mental note to put extra-strong elastic in my jogging bloomers - in case we were in for a bumpy ride.

FROM THE FILES OF HEMLOCK SOAMES. (Continued).

The goddess who kicked the despicable Snottapon into the room wore a sort of combination deerstalker and pillbox-hat of muskrat skin, from under which



Wolverhampton Jones.

her glossy black hair fell, like a long, polished ebony wave, to her Ulster-caped shoulders. I jerked my eyes past her glorious bosoms, to her hip-hugging jogging bloomers. These were of a particularly arresting orange and blue tartan. My eyes watered even as I lusted.

The vision stared at me intently. Was the good old Soames charm still working? I wondered hopefully.

Just then, as luck would have it, MacAndrew appeared, and announced dinner. It took me a minute or two to get my legs working again, so by the time I got to the table only one place that was available - though that was directly opposite the delectable Sherry.

Flotsam tells me that it was an excellent dinner. I hardly noticed. I spent the time trying to strike up an acquaintance with Sherry across the table, but to no avail. Not only was the table too wide, but that disgusting Snottapon unnerved me, both by his revolting habits, and also because he had this trick of leering across the table in a nauseatingly intimate fashion.

Flotsam, sitting next to His Grace, who was next to Sir John, said that Sir John refused to discuss pumphries or anything like that. Instead, he spent the whole time relating his exploits in World War Two.

"Truly amazing." Flotsam commented later. "If my calculations are correct, Sir John spent June 1942 simultaneously fighting in North Africa, Afghanistan and New Guinea."

#### REPORT BY SHERRY HORMONES. (Continued)

We arrived at Dunstan Castle in style. (What a pleasant change not to have Snottapon's scrawny shoulders digging into one's posterior! Cost notwithstanding motorised vehicular transport has distinct advantages over piggy-back riding - at least, in the winter.)

As we thundered down the narrow approach-lane, and over the bridge leading to the car-park by the moat, I thought I heard the muffled sound of falling masonry. It was hard to tell, with all the snowing that was going on. There was a sort of drawbridge affair over the moat, between the car-park and the castle entrance, and this time there could be no denying the creaking, groaning protestations of the ancient timber, as it bravely tried to bear the full beefy hulk of Wolverhampton Jones: a steak-pie-and-murfin goliath, if ever there was one. (I was secretly hoping the drawbridge would collapse, and Wolverhampton would have to rescue me! And there would be the added thrill of watching Snottapon drawing...)

We were ushered through the Great Hall and into the Napoleon Room, where we were introduced to the other guests. Of course, I had already met Keith 'Walk On' Waters and his journalistic acolytes through the Pumphrey Society, but there were these three quaint specimens I wasn't familiar with.

There was the quietly aristocratic duk @ of Duggley, who I recognised from the Twelfth Night bogie-croggling bash, and a taller chap - introduced



Sherry Hormones.

(seen through the eyes  
of Hemlock Soames)

as Don Flotsam - who bore a distinctive 'other-worldly' air which seemed somewhat out of place in these gloriously antiquated surroundings. The third was a fairly nondescript fellow, with a beard and a pipe. The Duke introduced him in suave tones as the 'brilliant and modest sleuth, Hemlock Soames'. That was all very well, but he certainly had no control over his own eyeballs. Those little jelly babies were leaping out of his skull and wriggling about all over me, like an epileptic groper's fingertips. (I could only pray that he'd manage to keep his hands to himself - I've still never got over the horror of having Professor O'Lafferty, the Norwegian of Crime, putting his hand up my jogging bloomers...Boy, did he get a shock when the mousetrap went off!!).

It suddenly occurred to me that I'd heard the names Soames and Flotsam before...Of course! I'd been trying to track them down in Accrington, after having a premonition that they were in danger from none other than the dastardly Professor himself. So this was what they looked like. What a let down.



Sir John D'Arcy Rickett.

My sixth sense told me that Snottapon was thinking something - the pain of his misguided brain-strain goes through me like a knife. He was having some kind of waking nightmare about going to a watery grave. I felt a sudden twinge of guilt for my thoughts about the moat...

"Aaaargh!!!" he gasped, "This gin's been watered down!"

I hadn't even noticed him grabbing the bottle - it's amazing how unobtrusive he can make himself, when it's in his own interests.

I turned my attention to our host, Sir John. This was the successor to Theo Ross - that most pumph-worthy previous proprietor of this particular palatial pile. Mind you, having listened to Sir John's inarticulate bodgerings at the Society do on Twelfth Night, I had little hope of his ability to match the wit and wisdom of his predecessor. I decided to draw him out a bit.

"Of all the castles in all the moats with all the drawbridges in all the world, thank you for letting me walk over yours into this one..."

He just stared at me, a trickle of Old Marmaduke dribbling past the congenitally-absent chin of the D'Arcy Ricketts.

Keith Waters was glaring razors at me. "That was my line!" he stammered, trying to keep calm. I don't know what it was, but something made me think it was more than mere telepathy that was rattling his drawbridge...Maybe someone had just walked over his burial plot...and maybe he wanted to be buried at sea...

Dinner was an ordeal. I was so bust trying to put the evil eye on the lecherous Soames that I hardly noticed the snap and squeal of my mousetrap going into action once more. It was only the coroner's remark about the corpse's damaged fingers that made me realise what the pubescent Stovold had been up to, in the seat next to mine. But, then again, I do have a tendency to let my guard down at times.

I suppose I must be scrupulously honest here - after all, it is in the best interests of the Black Country Pumphrey Society (and indeed, it already came out at the inquest). I have a...weakness...a peculiar fondness...OK, an addiction to Spiv's Delights. It all started at a party...I thought they would be like Turkish Delights, only more...exotic. (But you don't want to know about that.) Of course, my psychoanalyst, the celebrated Dr. Al Persona, says that there are side-effects; that Professor O'Lafferty, the Norwegian of Crime, is entirely illusory - a figment of my imagination occasioned by this dependency. (Mind you, you should hear what the Prof. has to say about Dr. Persona!).

Suffice it to say that, unable to bear the tedium of desultory dinner time chit-chat, I slipped one or two (OK - half a dozen) from the pill box in my hat into my drink (OK, up my nose) to pass the time more pleasantly.

I must say, that Soames bloke looked so much more interesting with the three green heads...though his mate Flotsam remained curiously unchanged.

However, I was thus rendered sadly unable to recall most of what took place during and immediately following dinner. My subordinate, Snottapon, informs me that I looked quite *compos mentis* during all the hoo-hah about the forged diary and the flooded cellar and so forth; and I can only thank Providence that the gin was sufficiently diluted for the Wally himself to be able to supply me with odd snippets of information. Apparently, I saved the little bastard's life when he tried to drink some cyanide. Now he'll be eternally grateful to me...Oh, the tragedy of Spiv's Delight dependency!

But I'm getting ahead of myself - these Spiv's Delights play merry hell with one's sense of continuity.

#### FROM THE FILES OF HEMLOCK SOAMES. (Continued).

After dinner, Sir John led us off to the library. There were a couple of tables there, each draped with a cloth which bulged suspiciously.

Sir John whipped off one of these cloths. Six fish lay there. Oh, not real fish - brass ones. Each was a foot long, flat on one side and fishy on the other - shiny for the most part, but with a trace of verdigris here and there.

"Behold!" cried Sir John, "The Sacred Tench of the Pumphrey-Watchers!"

There was a bit of confusion then, as people tried to get hold of one of the tench to examine. Somehow Flotsam half-inched one.

"Interesting," he observed quietly.

"Uh?" I said, trying to catch a glimpse of Sherry amongst the milling backs and waving hands.

"The fish, Sir," said the lad. "I rather think it's meant to be a carp. These runes on the back are indeed a dedication to 'The High, Mighty and Fruitful Pumphrey', but see here, on the other side, around the eye?. That's Chinese. If I'm not much mistaken, it's the equivalent to 653AD. That would make it the T'ang dynasty."

"Obadiah Locke," Sir John was declaiming, "says in his History that he found these in the moat when he was stanking."

"He was what?" said a wheezy, excited voice. Snottapon of course.



Sherry Hormones.  
(as seen by  
Flotsam)

Sherry whacked him round the back of his head.

"Stanking, wretch, stanking, Not stinking!"

"Exactly," said Sir John, "You dam off the moat and drive the fish towards it, then either take the fish out with nets, or build another dam and empty the water out. Obadiah almost certainly used the second method.

Anyway, according to his History the manifestations began soon after he recovered the tench, -"

"Carp," I muttered under my breath.

"- and didn't stop until he buried them under the chapel. The ruins of which lie against the north wall of the bailey."

"A fortuitous discovery," observed His Grace.

"By no means," said Sir John sharply. "I had already found the History in the course of the renovations - and that led me to the hiding place."

"Ah, of course," said Waters. "I remember now. This place used to belong to Theo. Ross, the antiquarian."

"Quite correct," said Sir John. "A strange creature, to be sure. He'd decided to retire to some remote location, in order to lead a life of humiliation and prayer."

"That doesn't sound like Theo," said Gould, shaking his head, "Eccentric, yes. A peculiar sense of humour, yes. But not religious, never in a thousand years."

"Be that as it may," went on Sir John, "I discovered the History during the alterations, and that led me to the sacred tench."

"Carp," I said.

"I beg your pardon?" said Sir John peevishly.

"I think the fish are carp," I said. "The runes on the back look authentic enough, but this here pattern round the eye is a date, in Chinese, roughly 650AD. That and -"

Hamming it up like mad, I brought up a fish to my mouth and tongued it carefully...

"- the distinctive flavour of the seventeen percent tin in the alloy, means it's T'ang work."

I thought Sir John would bust a gut. His face purpled, his hair stood on end, he strove to speak through a snarl-twisted mouth.

"Obviously," he said at last, "if you are correct, that doesn't rule out the possibility that they found their way to this country within a couple of years, and were then inscribed with the runes before being dedicated."

"I agree," said Wolverhampton Jones suddenly. "Stranger things have happened, as I well know."

He smirked at Sherry. I looked daggers at him.

"What about this diary or history thing?" asked the publisher bloke, Waters.

Sir John's mood changed at once. His ill-temper vanished, and was supplanted by a beaming smile.

"Over here," he said, and shepherded us over to the other table.

He whipped the cover off, and revealed a book on a reading stand. The book was quite thin - about two foot on a side - and covered in mouldering



Snottapon. esjay

red leather.

"You may examine it in a moment," he said, opening it at the first page.

"But first, I'd like you to have a look at these."

"These" were a sheaf of papers, a set for each of us, citing evidence from local and national records.

"As you see," said Sir John, "I've been able to find out a good deal about Obadiah 'Mortify the Flesh' Locke, the Pumphrey Finder General from 1645 to 1650, and several of the documents prove that he was resident here at the time he mentions. I have also traced most of the people he cites as witnesses to many of the happenings. Some of their descendants still live around here."

"Very impressive," agreed His Grace. This seemed to be the general opinion. Flotsam was rather quiet, I noticed.

I recognised the signs. I sauntered over to him.

"You've spotted it, then?" I said quietly.

Flotsam started. "Sir!" he exclaimed.

I shrugged. "Obvious, really," I said confidently.

"Indeed, Sir," said the wight, and pointed at the photocopy of the first page. "The...."

Shortly after, I managed to take His Grace to one side.

"I think I should mention," I said, "certain...oddities...which I have spotted."

His Grace leaned closer. I explained my discovery and my conclusions.

"By Jove," he murmured, "Brilliant work, my dear Soames, brilliant work!"

I smiled modestly.

There was dead silence when His Grace dropped the bombshell.

"I'm afraid, Sir John," he said, "that you have been taken in by a very clever forgery."

Sir John went white, then red.

"Forgery!" he cried, "Forgery!!"

"I rather think it was meant as a joke," said His Grace, sympathetically.

"One perpetrated by that rascal Ross."

"Impossible!!" fumed Sir John.

"Oh, it was cleverly done," admitted the Earl. "But see here - the first page tells all."

He pointed to the page:

The true account of the devilish and  
Harrowing events which took place in the  
Environs of Dunstan Castle during the month of  
October in the year of Our Lord 1649  
Reliably witnessed by several worthy gentlemen  
Of the Parish, or by myself, or by both.  
Sworn statements from certain common labourers and  
Servants I do also include.

Obadiah Mortify the Flesh Locke.

Pumphrey Finder General.

November 5th 1649.

"What?" said Sir John.

"The first letters of each line," explained  
His Grace, "They spell out T.H.E.O. R.O.S.S..."



Waters.

Sir John clutched the table.

"A coincidence," he gasped, "A damnable coincidence!"

"Could be," agreed Wolverhampton Jones. "The paper looks right. Though maybe if the ink was tested..."

Sir John's eyes glittered madly. But he recovered his composure.

"Extraordinary," he muttered, "Extraordinary."

"In the circumstances," opined Waters, "this does cast some doubt upon the claims you made at the meeting." He added tactlessly;

"It'll make an interesting item for the next Pumphrey-Watcher's Monthly, though."

Sir John's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"I hardly think your readers will be interested," he said. "The evidence is far from conclusive."

"Millionaire Pumphrey Hunter Fooled By Forgery." murmured Stovold, much to loudly.

"Well, we'll have to see about that," said Sir John. He drew himself up resolutely.

"However, there is one thing more I'd like to show you, if you'd please follow me."

A somewhat subdued company trailed after Sir John. We proceeded from the library to the Great Hall, and down into the cellars. It was well lit, but something of a maze. Eventually, we entered a smaller cellar - rather damp, and completely empty.

"Just stand over there, facing that wall," said Sir John, and we obediently did as we were told.

Sir John stepped back into the corridor, and reached up behind the lintel. There was a grating noise, and a great stone slab dropped down - completely blocking the entrance.

"You Bastards!!" screamed D'Arcy Rickett through the slab. "I'll teach you to try to make a fool of me. Swines! Swines! Swines! You'll not get out of here alive!!"

There was a stunned silence for an instant, and then a veritable hubub broke out.

"Bloody Hell!" someone exclaimed - with good reason, for a liquid was flooding into the cellar from previously unnoticed holes at the bottom of one wall.

Flotsam sniffed. "Oil," he pronounced. "Probably for central heating."

"I thought the fires were gas," I said.

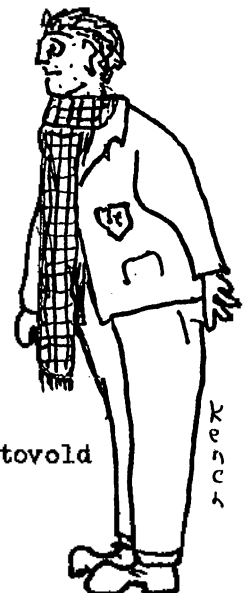
"Quite so, Sir," said Flotsam. "I imagine that there must be calor gas tanks elsewhere about the castle."

"You're a great comfort to me," I said, though my sarcasm was wasted - he only smirked gratefully.

Well, the oil kept rising, rapidly. Then there was a twanging sound - as dozens of steel spikes, each about two foot long, appeared out of the ceiling. Then damn me if, with considerable creaking and groaning, the ceiling didn't start inching down.

So, there we were, up to our chests in oil, which was still rising, with the spikes coming down to impale us, arched over backwards in the shrinking space - like so many limbo dancers.

"Interesting," observed Flotsam brightly.



I did my best to kick him in the shin, but the oil was too thick for me to put any force into it.

"I'm not interested in drowning or being spiked to death." I informed the big idiot.

"Oh," said Flotsam, and extended his arms up between the spikes somehow and gave a mighty heave. There was a groan and a sound like stripping gears, and the ceiling jerked to a stop.

"Oh, well done," exclaimed His Grace.

"We're still trapped," said Sherry - calculatingly I thought.

"Flotsam," I said, "see what you can do about getting us out of here."

"As Sir wishes," replied the silly fool, as if he was quite content to stay where he was - which is not at all unlikely.

He waded over to the slab where the doorway had been, and examined it. After a moment he drew his arm back, and gave it a smart karate chop. The slab flew into a dozen pieces, the oil flowed out, and we staggered after.

From somewhere along the passage there came a scream of diabolical rage.

We sloshed through the cellars and up the stairs. As we emerged, there was a twang - and Stovold dropped, with a crossbow bolt through his chest.

Wolverhampton Jones unlimbered his artillery and rushed forward, spraying bullets before him. He missed.

Sir John ran out of the hall hotly pursued, though not by me, and dashed into the library. Jones pounded on the door, but it was locked. Also, a minute later, a bullet slammed against the inside of the door.

"You'll be sorry if you do get in!" yelled D'Arcy Rickett.

A white-faced MacAndrew and a couple of footmen came running up.

"Sir John seems to have suffered a nervous breakdown," explained the publisher, Waters.

The butler didn't seem to be very surprised.

"Is there another way out of the library?" asked Jones.

"Well, there are the windows, sir," admitted MacAndrew, "but they open over the moat. And the weather is inclement."

"Freeze the balls off a brass monkey," put in the inelegant Snottapon. And got a kick up his arse for his impudence.

We stood there for a few seconds, oil dripping off our clothes onto the Axminster.

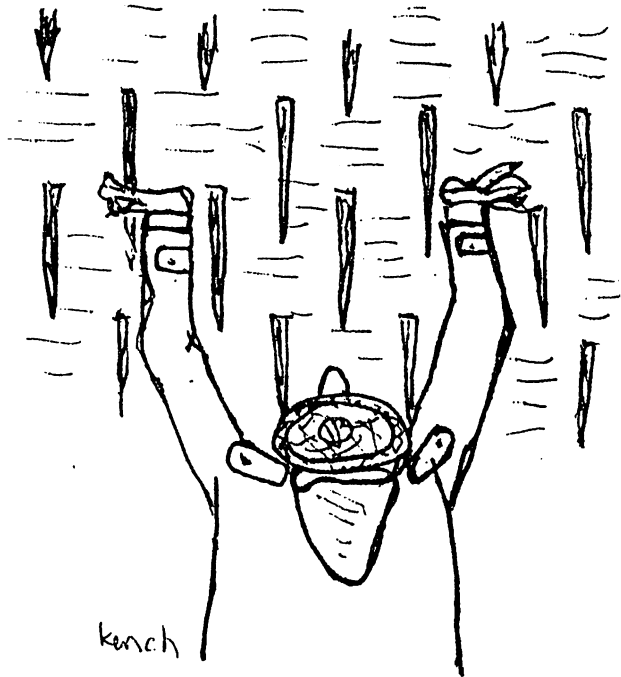
"I suggest that we get cleaned up," I said.

"But Sir John?" said His Grace.

I shrugged. "Pile a mountain of furniture in front of the door," I said. "MacAndrew can see to that."

I'd forgotten about poor Stovold. We went back to look him over.

"Dead as a doornail pronounced Gould, not unsympathetically. Shocked I suppose.





"I'll see that the gentleman is laid out in the Nelson Room," offered MacAndrew.

"OK," said Jones. "You do that."

"I think you'll find," put in La Belle Hormones, "that he's only fainted. See - the bolt has merely spent itself in his scarf, but his body is quite intact."

The explorer gazed at her admiringly. I could have killed the sod.

"Me and Gould will stay and help," said Waters. "We'll get changed later."

So off we went.

A quarter of an hour or so later, when we had bathed and changed, Flotsam and I escorted His Grace down the stairs.

We were soon joined by Jones, Sherry and the somehow still smelly Snottapon.

"Where's the other two?" asked Sherry.

MacAndrew had arrived in time to hear the conversation.

"I believe the gentlemen went up to their rooms," he volunteered.

"Ah," said His Grace. "Have you heard anything from Sir John while we were absent?"

"I left Pickles in the hall, Your Grace, replied the butler, "with instructions to inform us of any activity."

"We should notify the police," suggested Wolverhampton Jones.

"Alas sir," said MacAndrew, "we have no phone available at present. One of Sir John's little foibles is to cut the telephone lines whenever we have guests."

"Ah. Inconvenient," said Jones. "But they'd probably never make it through the snow tonight anyway...Well, we'll stick it out until morning. Maybe you could rustle up some drinks and a bite to eat?"

"I'll consult Mrs. Pearson at once," promised MacAndrew. "Meanwhile.." he crossed to a cabinet. "You will find liquid refreshment here."

We sat around the table. Sherry sat next to me. The awful Snottapon had found another bottle of gin, and was chatting up Flotsam. Wolverhampton Jones and His Grace sat further along the table, conversing quietly.

"Soames," whispered Sherry.

My body twanged like a bow string.

"Yes, Sherry?" I breathed.

"There's something I must tell you," she said, leaning closer and putting a hand on my knee. Hot flushes raced up my leg and suffused my manly frame.

"I've been following you..." she said huskily.....

"Good God!" cried Jones, jumping up suddenly.

All eyes turned to him, and then followed his gaze. A figure was leaning over the balcony, just over the door which led to the main entrance. Even as we watched, it slid out of sight.

"It's Mr. Waters," observed Flotsam interestedly.

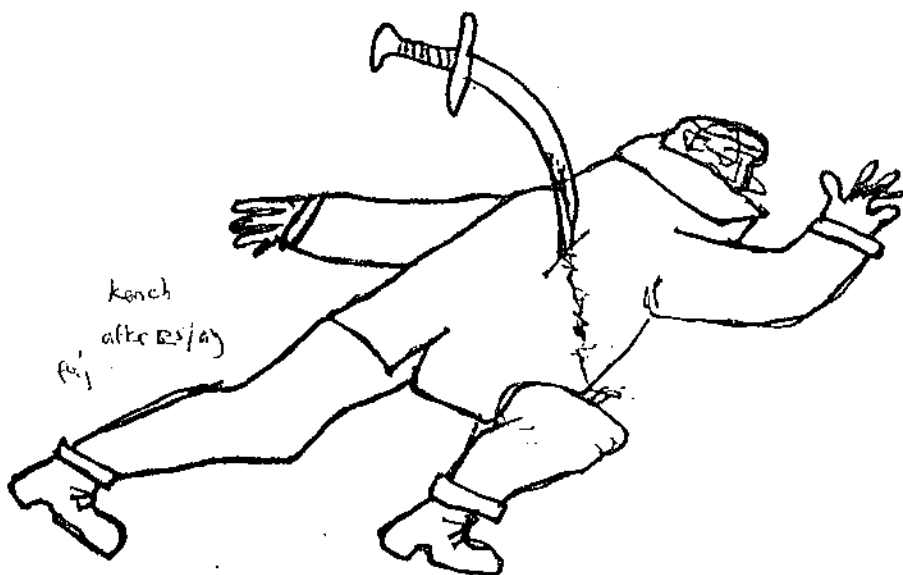
Jones was on his feet and running for the stairs, Sherry and Snottapon close behind. I hurried after them, naturally allowing His Grace to precede me.

'Walk On' Waters would publish no more magazines. Not with a ruddy great sabre sticking out of his back.

"Gould!" yelled Jones. His pistol in his hand, he rushed off towards the bedrooms, with us trailing after.



Gould.



REPORT BY SHERRY  
HORMONES (Continued)

The Wally has jolted my memory of the events leading up to Keith 'Walk On' Waters sad demise - which is, after all, fairly relevant to the purpose of this report.

I remember lying on the big four-poster in the

Marie Antoinette Stateroom, thinking pleasant thoughts about the bold Mr. Wolverhampton Jones.

"Come up and see me sometime - Big Boy..."

Without warning, my bubble burst, and my nose was assailed first by an evil oily stench, then - more powerfully even than that - by the unmistakeable odour of Snottapon. He was endeavouring to undress me. Thank God he's minus his equipment - or he'd have been minus his equipment after a stunt like that. He seemed to think that just because I was covered in highly inflammable liquid, he was entitled to take liberties...but the shock did take the edge off the Spiv's Delights. I had the strangest feeling that something was amiss...beyond the obvious behavioural problems of my amanuensis.

Through a cloud of gin fumes, he nattered, belched and burbled a load of rubbish about mad hosts and nearly-murdered guests, and brass trout or pike...or was it sharks? Piranhas, that was it. And some stuff about a tench lintel limbo-dance, or whatever. Then he staggered downstairs for more booze. I was just reaching for my supply of Spivvies, when the wish-fulfilling Wolverhampton knocked on my door and suggested we went down and joined the others.

"Come up and s- " Damn! Too late!

Alas for my designs, the disgusting Snottapon engaged the attention of Wolverhampton, along with Mr.Flotsam and His Grace, in one of his public toilet poetry recitals...leaving me seated next to the lascivious Soames. Just his luck the replacement mousetrap in my spare jogging bloomers went off prematurely, attaching itself to the leg of his trousers. I had to think quickly. Putting my hand on his knee, I gazed theatrically into his eyes - all the while groping frantically to release the trap.

That's when Wolverhampton came to the rescue, yelling and pointing to a figure on the balcony. Saved in the nick of time. My hero..! Wrenching the mousetrap free, I hastened after the Great White Hunter and the Wally in the general direction of what turned out to be the sabre-skewered Keith 'Walk On' Waters...He'd be walking over the Great Divide, now.

The others headed off to follow the trail of blood back to Waters's room, but something poking out of the corpse's inside jacket pocket caught my eye - a scrap of folded parchment bearing the legend: "YE PUMPHREY TOPPE TEN"...

I didn't need to read it then and there to know what it was. It had been the object of a fruitless journey I had once made to Pumpherston, West Lothian, some years ago. It would make my name once and for all in the world of pumphrey-watching. This was none other than the coded secrets of the

ritualised magickry of Forbidden Pumphrey-Raising! This was more important than a few brass herrings...red tenches...old carp.

No time to study it now, though. Duty bade me hurry after the others to the discovery, as it transpired, of the stiffened Gould. That's when I made my big mistake, and saved Snottapon from the same fate. When will I ever learn? A heaven-sent opportunity to be rid of the little stinker once and for all, and I have to throw it away. I really must do something about these damned compassionate impulses.

As for the Wally, he was somewhat overcome after such a narrow escape. In fact, he was as overcome as a newt, sliding gracelessly into a thoughtful heap on the floor.

Streuth! It's enough to drive a girl to Spiv's Delights, and no mistake. You'd think he'd try and show a tiny bit of gratitude toward the hand that had clutched him so steadfastly from the jaws of death. I couldn't even get him to raise the alarm.

"Get off your arse, and go bang a gong," I urged.

"The hell I will," he drawled back.



Sherry Hormones  
(as seen by Snottapon)

#### FROM THE FILES OF HEMLOCK SOAMES

(Continued).

We followed the trail of blood to the Alexander the Great Restroom, which had been Waters's room. It was empty - though from the amount of gore, this seemed to have been the place where the attack had occurred.

"Gould!" exclaimed Sherry, but Jones was already pushing past her.

Gould was in his room - he was not a pretty sight. Stone dead, of course. Jones sniffed at the decanter on the dressing table, and shook his head.

Flotsam was on his knees beside the corpse.

"I think your suspicions are correct, sir," he said towards Jones, "There is a definite aroma of almonds."

"Cyanide!" hissed Sherry.

Snottapon had edged around the corpse, apparently oblivious to this exchange. He reached towards the decanter, licking his lips in anticipation.

"This," I thought, "should be interesting."

But alas, it was not to be. Sherry leapt across the room and siezed the wretch by the back of his collar, and shook him like a rat.

"Not that, you bloody idiot - it's poison!" she screeched.

Colours flashed across Snottapon's face: white from the narrowness of his escape, and purple because Sherry was choking him.

I began to wonder if Sherry might not be, well, too athletic to be considered as a soulmate.

"Dammit," said Jones. "It looks as if Sir John has an accomplice."

"Perhaps not, sir," offered Flotsam. He was crouched by the window seat.

"There appear to be bloodstains here."

Indeed there were. At least, a faint heel-print.

I scratched my beard. "I see." I said.

"What!?" said Jones, Sherry and His Grace almost simultaneously.

"Well," I said, "it's pretty obvious, ain't it?"

Puzzled looks prevailed.

"You found it, Flotsam," I said, generously, "You explain."

Flotsam simpered gratefully.

"Sir is correct, as usual," said the lad. "The heel-print is close up to the panelling, facing the wall..."

"Of course!" exclaimed Sherry. "It looks as if someone just walked into the wall. There must be a hidden door!"

"That could mean," said His Grace thoughtfully, (several of his own homes were riddled with secret passages), "that there is a passage from the library to here. It may be that Sir John is on the loose."

"Damned if I can see a way of opening it," muttered Sherry.

"Possibly it only opens from the other side," suggested Jones. "Maybe we could get an axe or something, and break it open."

"I don't think that will be necessary," I said, and, "Flotsam!"

"Certainly, Sir," he said, and kicked the panelling to splinters.

Actually I hadn't meant him to do that. I was sure that there had to be a way of opening the secret door from the room side, and if there was then Flotsam would soon find it. Oh well.

A narrow flight of stone steps led down into the darkness. It made me feel quite queasy.

"Torches, that's what we need," declared Jones. "I bet MacAndrew will have a couple."

"It won't be necessary to trouble the butler," said Sherry, delving into the folds of her ulster. "I have a perfectly good light here."

"Sod this for a lark." I thought resentfully.

"Capital!" cried His Grace, far too enthusiastically for my taste.

"I also have a source of illumination," put in Flotsam, producing what looked like a small searchlight.

I glared at him.

"Sir John is presumably armed," I pointed out, "and as mad as the proverbial hatter."

"Pish and tush," pished and tushed the tiresome Jones. He put his hand behind his back, and fished out another gun.

"My back-up," he grinned, as if he's said something clever, the swine.

He handed the spare pistol to Flotsam.

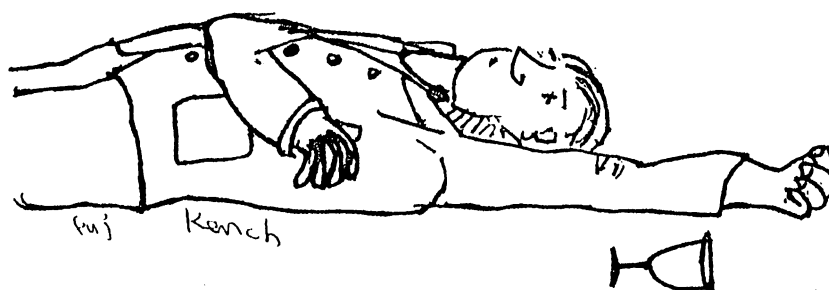
"You'd best take charge of this," he said.

With some distaste, Flotsam took the weapon and put it in a pocket.

It was at this highly inappropriate moment that young Brian Stovold chose to reappear upon the scene, scarf and all, from his 'laying out' in the Nelson Room. You'd have thought his close shave with the crossbow bolt would have given him a

healthy aversion to D'Arcy Rickett hunting.

However, he seemed to have more interest in trailing wistfully after the seductive Sherry than in looking out for his own skin. Pathetic youth.



"Right then," said Jones, "I'll go first. If you don't mind me borrowing your torch, Miss?"

Stovold looked positively green. That is, even greener than he already looked.

The steps must have gone down to cellar level. There, we found a small chamber about a dozen feet across, circular in shape, with a domed roof about ten foot high. Two tunnels led off in opposite directions. I spotted a footprint just inside the left-hand tunnel, pointing into the chamber. The others were milling around - with Stovold getting in everybody's way - so it was easy for me to scrape my foot over it.

"Look here," I said, decisively like, "We can't stop here all bloody night. We have two torches. I'll take one party up this way, and Wolverhampton can take the rest up the other passage."

"Fair enough," said Jones, rather, I suspect, taken aback by my sudden assertiveness. It was a pity that Sherry was in Jones's party, but I figured that she could take care of herself. Besides, she had Jonesy and Snottapon ahead of her, not to mention young Stovold, who now seemed strangely anxious to impress the lady defective with his own 'prowess'.

As the fearless foursome ( ha! ) disappeared up the right hand tunnel I could just make out the coarse ramblings of the unspeakable Snottapon before all sounds of the others faded away:

"Don't you worry if you get separated from the rest of us, Brian. If you need us, just fart...You know how to fart, don't you? Just put your cheeks together, and blow! (Heh! Heh! Heh! )"

Fortunately, His Grace seemed not to have heard.

I instructed Flotsam to lead the way, and placed His Grace in the middle.

"That way," I explained to him, "you'll have protection front and rear."

The old boy nodded and shook me by the hand.

"You're a brick, Soames," he declared, and blinked back a tear.

#### REPORT BY SHERRY HORMONES (Continued)

That Don Flotsam is quite aggressive for a manservant. The noise and upheaval caused by his heavy-footed dismantling of the oak panelling in the Alexander the Great Restroom were enough to wake the dead. Even Snottapon had no difficulty leaping the two-foot-six or so into the air which jerked him hastily back into the land of the living from his comatose squat. As I reached inside my Ulster, ostensibly to produce a torch to illuminate the steps leading down from the hole in the wall, I surreptitiously slipped the still folded "PUMPHREY TOPPE TEN" into a poacher's pocket in the lining of the cape. No need to show my hand just yet...I had my suspicions about that fellah Soames - which were only strengthened, as we descended the stairs, by the way he kept breathing down the back of my neck.

I can only conjecture what animalistic passions were stirring within that 'brilliant and modest' breast.

Suffice to say that by the time we had reached the little chamber at the foot of the steps, I actually spotted him pawing the ground!



With that, and all these tunnels and passages everywhere, I couldn't help thinking of Theseus and the Minotaur...and...Ariadne. I didn't have a piece of string with me; but when Soames - much to my relief - suggested we split into two groups, I carefully unravelled a bit of my hand-knitted, double-thick, Auchtermuchty string vest, and attached the end to the remains of an ancient torch-holder on the wall by the tunnel entrance. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but I soon noticed that the further we went, the colder my...chest... was getting.



D'Arcy furioso.

That wasn't the reason, though, for the ghastly shiver that went up my spine when we finally reached the end of the tunnel and emerged through an open doorway onto a landing. The blessed Wolverhampton had warned us all the moment we caught sight of it that the fact of the door being 'conveniently' left open probably indicated a trap. But - oh, the impetuosity of youth - young Brian Stovold, with more than a mere cub reporter's keenness, had seen something in the room facing us, and dashed straight ahead without warning. The door slammed shut behind him with a permanent-sounding click. Wolverhampton lost no time in whipping out his weapon, but it immediately transpired that the magazine was empty.

"I might have known you'd be firing blanks," sneered Snottapon.

"That's a good one, coming from you -" I began, but was interrupted by a muffled boing sound from the room, followed by a squeal... then an indistinct gurgling noise.

By the time Mr. Jones had reloaded, and blasted the lock off with his hand-howitzer, it was too late...The sight which greeted us was grottilly grizzly in its gruesome grimness...

Halfway up the panelled wall of the Oliver Cromwell Debating Chamber (as we later to learn it was called) was the strangled corpse of Stovold, suspended like a stoat on a gibbet from a spring-loaded Civil War pikestaff. The tip of the pike had ingeniously caught itself in Stovold's yellow Rupert the Bear scarf, hoisting him into the air and hanging him by the neck - as surely as if it had been a gallows...His youthful features were cruelly twisted in the contortions of death. His nostrils flared, as if trying to suck in a last gasp of precious oxygen.

"Cor..." mused the Wally. "Look at the size of the bogies up there! I bet they'd take some croggling!"

Before I could administer a buffet, our ears were assailed by a sinister sniggering and guffawing from the landing behind us.

"Wait there!" yelled the heroic Wolfie. "I smell something fishy..."

"I smell something fishy!..." Oh, Wolverhampton...Wolverhampton...How can you have wandered so cruelly out of my life? Those words, 'I smell something fishy' - were, it pains me to record, the last he ever spoke to me...or to anyone...

The remainder of our party (me and the Wally) stood rooted to the spot in the Oliver Cromwell Debating Chamber, listening intently as a sprightly set of footsteps clattered away into the distant labyrinth of the castle's corridors - to be followed by the triumphal thundering of Jones's elephant-hunter's gallop...Then all became silent...silent as the grave.

Snottapon began to sniff noisily, breaking the spell.

At first I thought he was about to commence one of his lung-wrenching coughing fits - but then I realised that he was sniffing the air.

A familiar aroma was starting to filter into the room. I recalled it from the dining table - it was the same smell which had assailed my nose in the Napoleon Room at dinner....just before I...ingested the Spiv's Delights.

"I smell Old Marmaduke," wheezed Snottapon excitedly. "C'mon! The drinks are on me!"

We followed the scent of the toff's equivalent of fortified wine, using Snottapon as a second-rate bloodhound. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I think I was hoping the cyanide would get a second chance to rid me of this troublesome pest. Up and down steps we gallumphed...

backwards and forwards round tortuous corners...Till we came at last to a concealed wine cellar in the bowels of the basement.

"Jings," opined the snottery one. "That Sir John likes to keep his booze well hidden, doesn't he? I'm knackered."

But I was unable to reply. I was staring through the gloom, where the beam of my torch lit up the massive sides of huge vats and barrels of centuries-old alcoholic beverages. The dark shapes loomed ominously, like giants' tombstones. And there in the far corner was the tomb of a giant who had died with his boots on...Size fifteen cowboy boots, to be precise - the only part of the late Wolverhampton Jones still visible above the rim of the barrel.

"Wolfie, baby!" I wailed. "Done to death in a cask of Old Marmaduke! The magnificent Wolverhampton Jones,

archaeologist and adventurer - as drowned as a dolphin...!"

"Dolphins can swim," put in the know-it-all Snottapon.

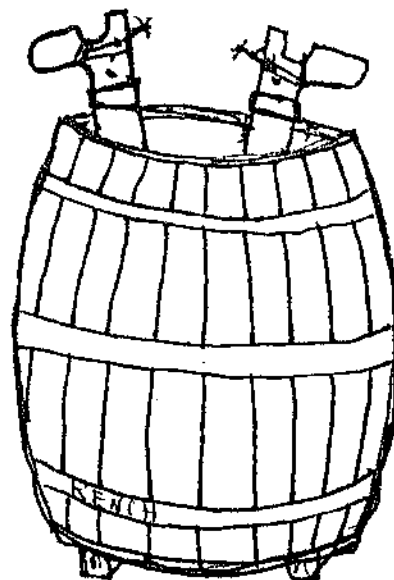
"Not when they're dead, they can't," I sighed.

Who could have done this dreadful deed? I had my suspicions. Hemlock Seames had certainly taken more than a passing interest in my womanly charms. Yet my feelings for Mr. Jones could hardly have escaped his notice. Was he capable of such all-consuming jealousy? He certainly had a shifty look. 'Brilliant and modest,' the Earl had said about him. Well... they say that there's only a very thin line between brilliance and madness. As for modesty - everyone knows it's the quiet ones that are the worst.

It was all too much for a consultative defective all-round goody-two-shoes two-time girl to bear.

As we trudged back through the sticky puddles of sickly-sweet Old Marmaduke spillage, I gave in once more to temptation. After all, Snottapon was helping himself to bucketfuls of plonk from the taps of various casks, so why shouldn't I indulge in a little pick-me-up? Strangely enough, it was only once I'd taken a few more Spiv's Delights that the thought of Professor O'Lafferty came back to my mind...

The Norwegian of crime! Yes, that Scandinavian ne'er-do-well - the evil antithesis of Santa Claus - would do anything to spoil my happiness. And it was only natural that Soames should get the blame...given that previous premonition of mine that the Prof. was out to get him at the Acorington Convention.



As we idly traced the threads of my string vest (my granny had knitted it extra, extra thick - so there was enough wool to lay a trail to the North Pole) back the way we had come, I began to think that Hemlock Soames wasn't such a bad type, after all...He had actually seemed quite handsome at dinner, when he had the three green heads...

Suddenly, the earth moved for me - it felt like the whole castle was shuddering. Wow. Could this be love? Then again, maybe there had been an explosion, and the palatial pile was burning down...

#### FROM THE FILES OF HEMLOCK SOAMES (Continued)

Well, off we went into the left-hand tunnel, and after I suppose about thirty yards, we came to another chamber, more or less identical to the last one.

"There are no new signs in the far tunnel," reported Flotsam. "but it looks as if the steps have been used recently."

That suited me. "Right," I said, "Up we go."

At the top of the steps we found heavy wooden panelling, in which was set a door. Over the lintel there was a lever and, set into the exit-panel at about head height was a flap. Flotsam carefully lifted the flap and revealed a peep-hole.

"It's the library, Sir." he said, "And it looks empty."

I'd suspected as much.

Flotsam moved the lever, and pushed the panel open. I stepped through the door first, I knew it was safe enough, and it served to impress the Earl with my bravery. As I'd guessed, the front side of the door was disguised as part of a bookcase. When we opened the library door proper we were confronted by the piled furniture and some panicky shouting. We called after the bloke MacAndrew had left on guard, but to no avail. So I set Flotsam to dismantling the barricade. He was still removing the last bits when MacAndrew, Jordan, and Pickles, each armed with a piece of antique ironmongery, appeared at the far end of the hallway. Their relief at finding us, rather than Sir John, was all too evident.

"Sir John's got out," I explained, "via a secret door. The whole damn place is riddled with hidden passages. Jones and the others are still in there somewhere..." "Oh yes, Sir John's bumped off Mr. Waters, and Mr. Gould too."

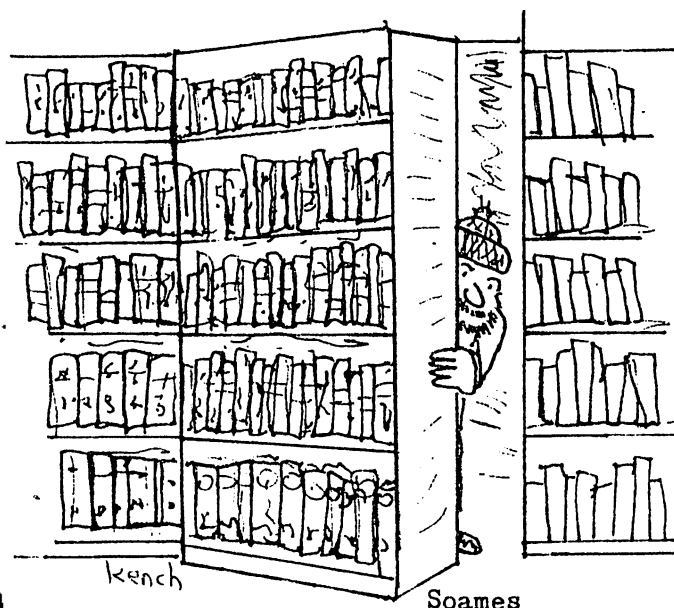
This news did very little to cheer the servants up.

Back in the Great Hall, we all had a restorative drink. I'd hardly touched mine when we heard a burst of muffled gunfire.

"It sounds as if someone's found someone," observed Jordan nervously.

"We should go to their assistance!" exclaimed His Grace.

"No," I said firmly and reasonably. "Where did the sound come from?"





We can't tell. If we went dashing off, Jonesy might easily shoot us by mistake. Best we wait here and nab Sir John when they flush him out."

His Grace shook his head admiringly.

"Soames," he said, "you've got nerves of steel!"

I shrugged modestly. "Comes with the job," I said.

For the next ten minutes, there were occasional shots...then silence. Now that made me nervous.

Suddenly, simultaneously, there was a burst of automatic weapon fire and a scream of maniacal laughter. The bullets, I was glad to note, did not penetrate the table-top - though they must have played hell with the French polishing.

"He's up there in the rafters," said MacAndrew, with less than his customary butlerian aplomb.

Well, it was crowded under the table, but safe.

More slugs ripped into the table top, accompanied by more maniacal laughter. Sir John was obviously enjoying himself.

"The next thing he'll try," forecast Jordan apprehensively, "is ricocheting the bullets off the floor and under here."

"Dammit!" I thought.

"OK," I commanded, "when I give the word, Flotsam'll shoot off a few rounds in Sir John's general direction, and we'll make a dash for it - you, MacAndrew and the other servants, towards the kitchens and the servant's quarters, and me and His Grace, oh, and Flotsam, for the main door."

Risky, I thought, but if we gave the flunkys a couple of seconds start Sir John would probably go for them first. As it happened, things turned out differently.

Before we could make a move, there was the mother and father of all thunderclaps, and the whole of the castle shook violently.

There was a long scream, cut off by a sickening thud, and there was Sir John spreadeagled on the carpet, not ten feet from us.

"The explosion must have shaken him loose," muttered MacAndrew.

This was hardly the time to indulge in speculation, I thought. The whole roof and surrounds were in flames, shooting up like so many volcanoes.

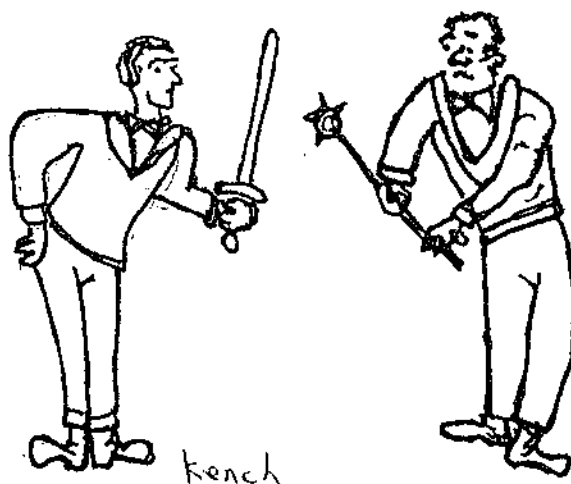
"The oil," suggested Flotsam, "It must have ignited, and the calor gas tanks too, by the sound of it."

He's a regular Job's comforter, is the lad.

"MacAndrew!" I said, "you go and get the staff out," and off he dashed. "Meanwhile," I said to His Grace, "we'll make for the front door."

And that's what we did.

It's a good thing I'd thought to bring Flotsam along though, because we'd never have been able to smash our way out through the flaming debris without him.



I'd forgotten about the sodding snow in all the hassle. We managed to get to His Grace's car, but there was no moving it - at least, not up the mile of so of snow-choked lane. So we spent a not too uncomfortable night drinking the Earl's booze and watching Dunstan Castle burning merrily.

REPORT BY SHERRY HORMONES. (Continued)

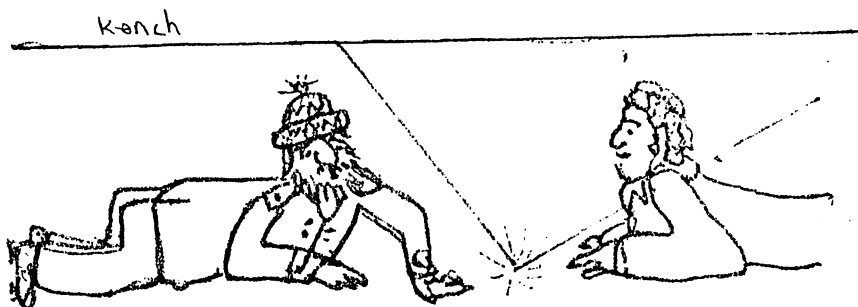
The next thing I remember is coming to in the remains of a toilet, in what I soon discovered was a ruined chapel in the castle grounds. It was absolutely freezing - so I wasn't complaining this time about Snottapon's smelly presence. The wretch had obviously been so grateful to me for not letting him poison himself that he had thrown his entire body on top of mine - and remained there all night - to protect me from the cold. Well...now that there were just the two of us, I suppose we had to stick together. God alone knows what guiding spirit led us here, but as I gazed through the glassless window at the charred rubble of Dunstan Castle, I had a feeling that the fear of being burned alive probably motivated us in the right direction. (out). Thank granny for the string vest!. Without that line to follow, we would have been fried, or even sauteed, by now.

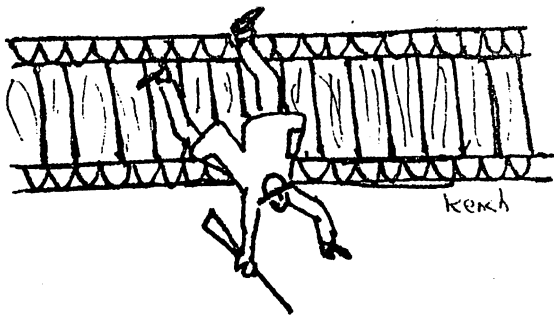
I wondered what had become of my fellow investigators...No doubt they had made their own...withdrawal arrangements. Snottapon said that during the night he had seen a light two floors up in a distant turret which had escaped the blaze. That might have been them...or else...I decided not to speculate just yet. As I have been known to remark in the past - there are two sides to every second storey.

Whatever had become of Soames and Flotsam, at least my fears about Professor O'Lafferty had temporarily evaporated. He probably couldn't withstand the presence of so many defectives - not to mention the vaporising heat of the conflagration. (It's well known in the trade that too many sleuths boil the Prof..) But the thought of heat made me urge the Wally to try and get a fire going in the chapel, while I tried to figure things out. He found some old floorboards in what was left of the chancel, and with them, and some old boxes of bones and stuff, he soon made a nifty little pyre, which I ignited with the miniature flame-thrower which I keep secreted in my jogging bloomers.

It was while I was taking care to avoid setting off the mousetrap, that I remembered Brian Stovold and his well-hung demise. That pikestaff must've been rigged up on the same principle as the mousetrap - with some kind of powerful spring attaching the base of the shaft to the floor. Though normally fixed vertically, as a wall adornment if the pike was set to lie flat across

the ground, some trigger device under the floorboards could be set to make the shaft recoil back to the wall - if someone of a predetermined weight stepped in the right place. That would explain the being noise we'd heard. Even so, I thought - it would have to be carefully adjusted to catch Stovold's scarf at just the right height....





I was beginning to warm up, and by the light of some burning crosses and statuettes, I took out the folded piece of parchment from my Ulster and began to read:

YE PUMPHREY TOPPE TEN.

- I. STANKING OF OLDE SHALL YE PUMPHRIES UNFOLDE.
- II. A PUMPHREY IN YE HAND BE WORTH TWO IN YE BUSH.
- III. TWO'S A PUMPHREY, THREE'S A CROWD.
- IV. LOOK BEFORE YE PUMPHREY.
- V. TIE A YELLOW PUMPHREY ROUND YE OLDE OAKE TREE.
- VI. RED PUMPHREY IN YE MORNING BE A SHEPHERD'S WARNING.
- VII. WHEN WOLVERHAMPTON COMES TO DUNSTAN, YE SEVENTH SON OF  
(PUMPHREY SHALL BE BOGIE-CROGGLED.  
(MONKTON SHALL BE BASTARDLY.
- VIII. MONY A MEIKLE MAK'S A PUMPHREY.
- IX. HEY NONNY NO - PUMPHREY PIDDLE-UMPHREY PO.
- X. A SURFIT OF PUMPHRIES SHALL BRING YE HOUSE DOWN.

Things were beginning to fit. I re-read number five: "TIE A YELLOW PUMPHREY ROUND YE OLDE OAKE TREE". I couldn't escape the similarity of Brian Stovold's Rupert the Bear scare grimly attached to the pikestaff, halfway up the oak panelling - like a cruel parody of this line. Maybe other deaths could somehow be linked to the ritual! Blimey, I thought, this was getting like that book by Agatha Christie about the ten little members of an ethnic minority group...Perhaps 'Walk On' Waters - the previous possessor of the parchment - had come to the same conclusion...and it had cost him his life...

I looked again at number seven: "WHEN WOLVERHAMPTON COMES TO DUNSTAN..." That might explain his startled aspect on our arrival yesterday. I noticed that this particular item had been mysteriously defaced, with the bogie-crogging reference partially deleted, and the words: "MONKTON SHALL BE BASTARDLY" written on top. What could it mean? It seemed like a reference to the public school attended by Sir John and...I began to muse on poor old Wolverhampton Jones, and his untimely end. What a way to go...pumphrey piddle-umphrey po... Drowned in a vat of piss-up juice. It must have taken superhuman strength to keep his head under long enough - after all, he was a big, big man.

I felt a sudden chill clutch at my bladder. What had startled Waters was my remark about the drawbridge...the drawbridge which had creaked so ominously under the weight of Wolfie! Perhaps he hadn't been meant to get across safely! That would mean Waters was somehow implicated...But he was a victim...wasn't he? I had seen the blood for myself...and very red it was, too - perhaps just a bit too red! "RED PUMPHREY IN YE MORNING...."

Sherry's warning! And by the same token: "RED PUMPHREY AT NIGHT - SHEPHERD'S DELIGHT". I recalled the delighted sniggering outside the Oliver Cromwell Debating Chamber...but where could shepherd come in? Of course! The Good Shepherd - well-know exponent of: walking on water! I should have guessed - those sprightly footsteps were a dead giveaway.

So that was it: Keith 'Walk On' Waters had somehow faked his own death, using a red pumphrey concoction to look like real blood, along with a dummy sabre. Well, here's looking at you, Keith...looks like you've had a miraculous resurrection...

Then another thought struck me. He must be bumping off everyone else. And I had lifted his hit-list, thinking it was a valuable relic of pumphreydom! That meant he would be after me next - "TWO'S A PUMPHREY, THREE'S A CROWD". I had to think. I had to try to understand his motivation. If only I could remember what had been said at dinner, or even in the library afterwards. What was all that nonsense about tench... and a lintel... and some sort of limbo-dance that Snottapon had been on about? Surely the solution must lie in these brass fishies...Maybe it was all connected to dear old Theo Ross, in some way...And what about Wolverhampton's last words - I smell something fishy? Thanks to the Spiv's Delights, it was pointless trying to rack my own brains - I was going to have to cudgel it out of the Wally.

I raked around among the spilled contents of a wooden casket he had used for firewood. Just the thing - a heavy, ornate metal soup spoon. Beckoning the slave to approach me, I slowly swung the spoon before his eyes, like a hypnotist's watch-chain.

"Snotty, Snotty, with no balls - tell Auntie Sherry about it all," I crooned. "While you're in hypnotic trance - what's tench lintel limbo dance?"

He sat motionless for a moment, an even more than usually glazed look on his face. Slowly, he leaned his hideously wizened face towards me, opening his mouth as if to speak. To my amazement and dismay, he then brought up his fingers to his parted lips and proceeded to make a baby-like burbling sound!

"OK, then...We'll do it the hard way."

By striking him sharply on the forehead at strategic intervals with the metal utensil, I eventually managed to elicit what I hoped would be the key to the mystery:

"Runes..." he began. This sounded promising. I whacked him again. (God, it was like getting blood from a stone.)

"T'ang."

Another whack.

And that was all I could get - "T'ang, T'ang, T'ang," echoing like an empty oildrum every time I hit his head with the spoon.. It was no use - I was going to have to get hold of Soames and Flotsam, if I wanted to piece the relevant details together.



Obadiah Locke

Peering out the window, and through a gap in some demolished parts of the castle, I could see that the drawbridge by which we had come was no more.

Wolverhampton's Wurlitzer Kamikaze landrover stood alone in the car-park, indicating that the Earl's contingent had already left...Well, we could always get in contact through the Pumphrey Society...As for the landrover, neither the Wally nor I can drive - so it was the usual means of locomotion for us. After scouting round the obviously deserted ruins for a bit, we found a wooden footbridge just past the tower where the Wally had seen the light.

"Assume to position, Snottapon!" I exhorted. "Hup-la!"

And I sprang onto his shoulders for a piggy-back ride in the general direction of home.

#### FROM THE FILES OF HEMLOCK SOAMES (Final Fragment)

At first light MacAndrew struggled through to us, in the car park. The drawbridge had collapsed, but he came the long way round, using a footbridge at the western end of the island. He and the other servants had spent a warm but fearful night crowded into the gardener's cottage - one of the wall towers which had been converted for his use. Somehow they had managed to adapt one of the phone lines, the gardener's extension was wired up separately from the castle, and had by-passed the main system and contacted the emergency services.

His Grace and MacAndrew came to an amicable understanding - so, when the police cars, the fire engines and the ambulances, preceeded by a snow-plough, arrived, our story was that there had been a tragic accident.

"He was a bit of a bounder," His Grace admitted in private, "but, well, we went to the same school, y'know. And even though he got expelled and ended up at that dreadful Monkton Bastardly place...the old school tie, Soames...it still binds a chap to his fellows..."

And that's nearly it. Except that yesterday I got a phone-call from Sherry Hormones. You can imagine my astonishment - and relief, of course. She'll be calling around today. It should make for an interesting... conversation.

Ah, the doorbell - that might be her now.



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Note by Mr. Hemlock Soames.

While there are elements of fact in the following pages I'd advise the reader to take anything that Sherry Hormones writes concerning pumphries with a bucketful of salt. It's my belief that, if she gave up Spivs Delights, pumphries and 'the Norwegian of Crime' would be seen to be delusions of her sick mind. So there.

Hemlock Soames.

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## REPORT BY SHERRY HORMONES (Conclusion)

When I dialled the telephone number which the secretary of the Pumphrey Society had finally given me - after some persuasion - I was somewhat surprised to hear the voice of Hemlock Soames, and not that of His Grace the Duke, whose number I had specifically requested. Maybe this was going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship - though it would take more than a few Spiv's Delights to make it blossom. Be that as it may, I needed the assistance of Soames anyway, to help me figure out what had really been going on at Dunstan Castle on the weekend of the 28th January.

I had a lucrative assignment to complete, after all.

"This thing is bigger than both of us..." I explained.

Soames mumbled something about getting an extension.

After an uncomfortable pause, it was agreed that I should go round to his place to "compare notes on the case", as he put it. I was to take a copy of my report so far, while he would let me see - not his own "private" notes, but a selection of the observations His Grace had made on the business in his pumphrey-watching diary. Of course, I had to promise faithfully not to use these notes for any purpose beyond my own files - and my bond is my word... my word is my...well, let's not get distracted by bondage, just at the moment. (Besides, my finished report might never make it into print...)

We got the train back down from Glasgow, and eventually managed to find the Soames residence.

"Did you have to bring that with you?" asked Hemlock, staring up at me where I perched upon the Wally's shoulders. Of course, I needed to have Shottapon with me to try to fill any embarrassing gaps in my memory of events.

Once seated in the brilliant but modest parlour of the so-so sleuth, I handed him my report - which, to my annoyance, he passed straight to his henchman, Flotsam, who glanced briefly over it and gave it him back. Soames, in turn, handed me a photocopy of some entries the Duke had made in his journal. These, explained my host, had originally been intended as the basis of an anecdote His Grace was to have included in his forthcoming Memoirs. In the light of the tragedy, he had naturally abandoned this idea.

"I must say," I remarked, "I was hoping to have spoken to His Grace in person...After all, we are fellow members of the Black Country Pumphrey Society."

"We are the Duke's representatives in this affair," said the Soames boy, "He rarely condescends to speak to his social inferiors about personal matters."

Social inferiors! To hell with a beautiful friendship - this guy was going to end up getting a Glasgow Kiss\* if he wasn't careful.

(\*EDITORIAL FOOTNOTE: The politically incorrect, racist term Glasgow Kiss denotes a vicious head-butt to the bridge of the nose, often occasioning much bleeding. This, of course, casts a dreadful slur on the behaviour of the people of Glasgow - and is, moreover, just their way of saying hello.

Pierce, Nipple and Tweake.)



While Soames began to pore over my report, I had a look at the Earl's diary entries. "It was obvious on entering the main dining room," wrote His Grace, "that D'Arcy Rickett had still never got over his obsession with Napoleon..."

So that's who the bloke in all the pictures was...I suppose that's why it was called the Napoleon Room. Funny how he was dressed exactly like my Uncle Max - the one with the nervous disposition.

"Clearly," the diary continued, "his belief that Bonaparte was possessed by a French pumphrey, which imparted to him all his worldly powers, still persists. Poor D'Arcy Rickett. I think he has been setting his sights on similar grandeur. I am afraid the man is quite unhinged."

I read with mounting fascination. At last, the significance of the brass fishies was revealed to me. (I'd heard of a wolf in sheep's clothing - but never a carp in a tench-coat.) But something didn't add up...

"I see you are puzzled by the inconsistency in Sir John's account of the discoveries in the old chapel, where you spent the night," remarked Flotsam. "Judging by the amount of priceless treasure you and your...companion...appear to have destroyed, no such excavation can have taken place."

Soames looked up from my report.

"Do you mind, Flotsam?" he said, "Can't you see I'm trying to read?"

"Not at all, Sir," continued the flunkey, unperturbed. "Ms. Hormones's assessment of Mr. Waters indicates that it may have been he - possibly disguised as a pumphrey - who supplied Sir John with both the forged History and the brass fish. (Which most certainly did not come from the moat), impressing upon him the utmost need for secrecy. Indeed, this false claim that the 'tench' had been traced to the old chapel may have blinded them both to the fact that this real treasure was actually there all the time. The most obvious place is frequently the last place anyone looks..."

"Speak for yourself," muttered Soames.

"Thank you, Sir," said Flotsam.

"As I was saying, it is even possible that Waters doctored Locke's History - using the acrostic signature of Theo Ross to throw suspicion off himself. With the brass carp as the preliminary bait to attract the interest of Sir John, the bogus History would provide the ideal ammunition for blackmail. No doubt, the idea of inviting so many witnesses to Sir John's gullibility had been subtly suggested to him by Waters - who was, you will remember, eager to egg him on after dinner to show the volume off. (Mr. Gould's superior knowledge of Theo Ross's personality nearly gave the game away there - no wonder Waters shut him up first, before faking his own supposed 'murder' and leaving a heel-only shoe-print to alert us to Sir John's secret exit.) Of course, the threat of exposure in The Pumphrey-Watcher's Monthly was calculated to put the egocentric millionaire in Waters's power, so that he would either reveal the whereabouts of the treasure, or help him find it, in



return for his silence. Little did he bargain for Sir John's outrageous insanity, his antisocial attitude and unpredictable bloodlust... That spiked ceiling must have put a strain on the negotiations, for a start."

"Huh!" wheezed the Wally. "These Monkton Bastardlitties are ten-a-penny!"

"Hang on..." said Soames. "This here Pumphrey Toppe Ten..."

"Of course, you are perfectly correct, as usual, Sir," said Flotsam. "The demonic Keith 'Walk On' Waters was, indeed, the one who actually was possessed by an evil pumphrey. Besides his all-too-human greed for the lost treasure of Dunstan Castle, he was probably already intent upon the ritual murders of those he saw as rivals - or 'necessary sacrifices' - within the Black Country Pumphrey Society. Sir John's 'witnesses' must have been carefully selected beforehand, so the actions of Sir John when he realised he had been duped still provided the ideal cover for Waters to set his own fiendish plans in motion..."

"And Sir John was suitably vociferous about his intentions." I added enthusiastically. "Too inept, however, to dispose of Stovold properly, after the lad's credibility-crushing headline suggestion.

Sir John obviously had never fired a crossbow before in his life... Unless Waters sabotaged it, so that he could personally act out the yellow pumphrey ritual from the Toppe Ten..."

"I suppose he must have perished in the blaze," said Soames, with a suspicious hint of satisfaction, "so we'll never know the full story."

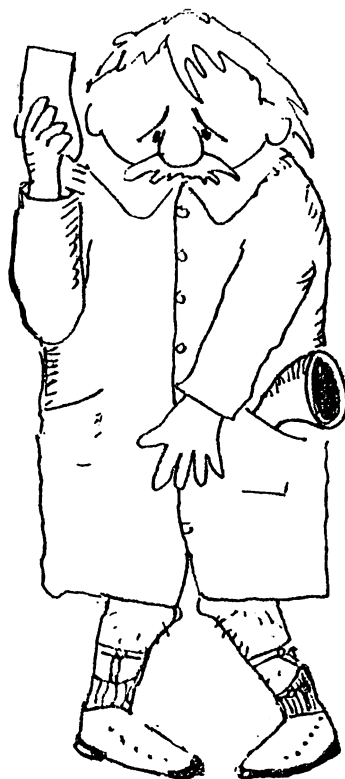
I smiled indulgently.

"The Pumphrey Society car was gone from the car-park, and Waters was the only one left to drive it away. Since none of us remember seeing it after the fire, we can assume he made his escape before yourselves and His Grace got out. (Thank God his booby-trapped drawbridge held up until after the exodus.) I imagine he'd had some sort of shoot-out with Sir John, following his murder of Wolverhampton Jones - the Bake's diary mentions more bursts of gunfire after Wolfie shot the lock off. It must have been Waters himself who started the fire, while the mad Sir John was hiding in the rafters, taking pot-shots at your party - not even he would be mad enough to go up there if he already knew the castle was alight."

Soames muttered something about some females' place being in the home.

"A SURFEIT OF PUMPHRIES SHALL BRING YE HOUSE DOWN, is the actual wording, I believe," put in Flotsam. "And as Waters has been possessed by a pumphrey, it would explain the unearthly cunning and complexity of all his nefarious endeavours - not to mention the source of the superhuman strength needed to forceably drown Wolverhampton Jones in a wine cask."

I had a strange feeling when Flotsam said 'unearthly' and 'superhuman'. How come this guy knew so much?



esjay



"But he's still out there somewhere," I mused, "and there's still some of the Toppe Ten items unaccounted for..."

"My God!" said Soames. "The Duke!"

"As you will recall, Sir," offered Flotsam, "His Grace is presently on vacation in Switzerland. That's why he left you to divulge his jottings -"

As if by pumphrey-powered synchronicity, we were interrupted by the phone ringing. Flotsam answered it, then handed the receiver to Soames.

"Ladies, gentlemen and smelly old gits..." he eventually announced, after replacing the phone on its rest. "Keith 'Walk On' Waters has reaped his just deserts. We can breathe a sigh of relief. That was His Grace in person on the blower, -"

I strove to suppress a pang of social indignation.

"- calling from the health spa of Reichenpumph, in the Swiss Alps. Apparently Waters followed His Grace there, and actually tried to murder the Buke this very morning. He was in the act of pushing His Grace over the Reichenpumph Falls, when His Grace, blissfully unaware of what was afoot, stooped to admire an eidelweiss. It seems Waters uncontrollably somersaulted over the precipice into the lethal maelstrom...and that, by all accounts, is that."

"LOOK BEFORE YE PUMPHREY," cited Flotsam. "The Pumphrey Toppe Ten has claimed him for its own."

"Hoist by his own pumphrey!" Soames agreed. "An His Grace saved by the power of his own innocence."

We still had one or two loose ends to tie up, so while Flotsam took Snottapon to the car-wash, Soames and I got together for a little tete-a-tete. I've never been fond of real ale, so when he went to get himself a drink, I popped a couple of Spiv's Delights...

...And that's about all I can remember - except for the sharp snap, followed by a scream. Oh dear, I must have forgotten to disarm the mousetrap. I do hope Hemlock Soames is not a virtuoso musician. Something tells me his piano-playing fingers might be in need of some repair...

#### EDITORIAL NOTE : PUMPHRIES

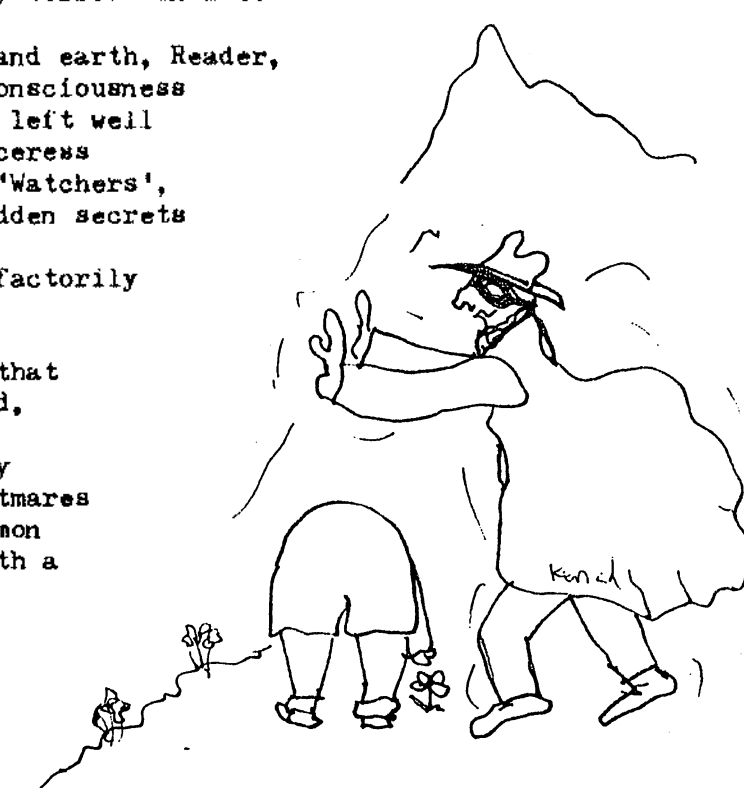
Although the 'official' documentation ends here, we feel it incumbent upon us to say a few words about the mysterious entities referred to throughout as pumphries.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Reader, than are drempt of even by stream-of-consciousness philosophers. And some things are best left well alone. From the legendary Dark Age sorceress Morgana le Pumphrey to the modern-day 'Watchers', many have attempted to probe the forbidden secrets of primaeval pumphreydom. But none who so dared have since been able to satisfactorily confirm or deny their sanity.

You have been warned.

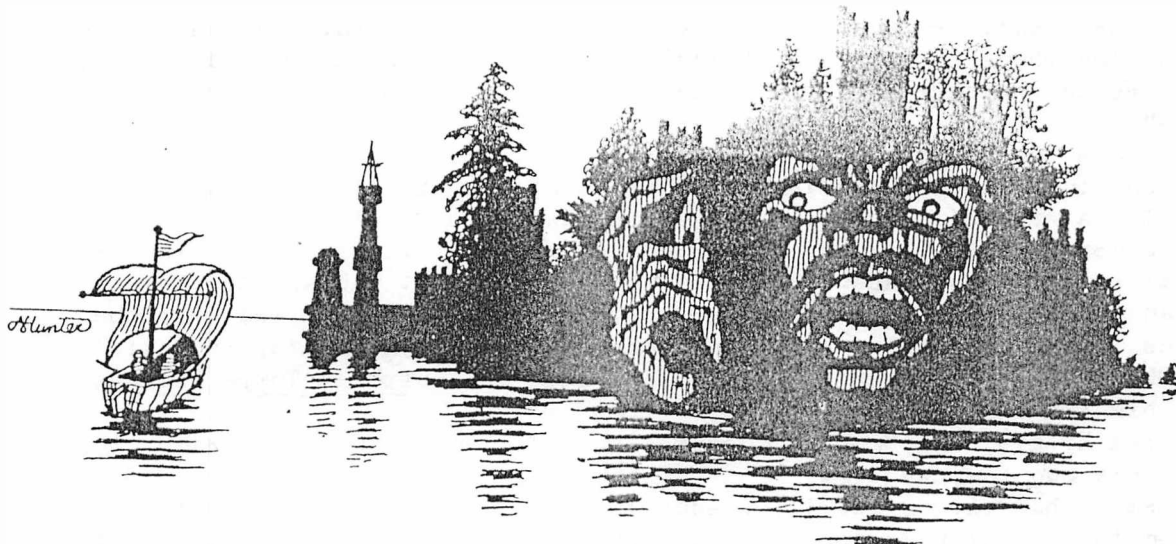
Please do not delve inquisitively into that which cannot be rationalised, explained, described, or easily illustrated...

This is not to say that you, or any 'normal' person, should be having nightmares about pumphries. Just use a bit of common sense, and if anyone approaches you with a cheap or double-glazed pumphrey, or



some chocolate chip cookies that 'fell off the back of a pumphrey' -  
JUST SAY NO.

Pierce, Nipple and Tweaks.



BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

NEIL K. HENDERSON was born in Glasgow in 1956, and has lived, worked and died there ever since. (At least the first two claims are true - and he's working on the last, by breathing in and out a lot, and not looking where he's going when crossing the road.) He had an early involvement with fanzines as a teenager in the early 70's, as Scottish Area Secretary of the original Syd Barrett Appreciation Society, which produced the now legendary TERRAPIN. After graduating in English from Glasgow University in 1977, Neil consulted the Oracle - and the Oracle said: "Give up art, my son, and study plumbing." So he gave up oracles and, after various mundane jobs - including helping to compile Glasgow University's Historical Thesaurus of English - started producing a steady output of poems, stories and uncategorisable articles (including his still unpublished book: "FISH-WORSHIPPING - AS WE KNOW IT"). He regularly appears in the organs of the Independent Press. Have-A-Go Henderson has been called a bohemian and an equivocator. He uses words to put his own case:- "I could tell you I was a seven foot blonde-bearded Norse god. I could tell you I was a potent fermenting genius whose insight knows no bounds. I could tell you that I was second to none in matters of delicacy and taste. But every one of these statements would be a bare-faced lie.

Suffice it to say that I am a small crusty being from a northern dominion of Here, currently investigating putty. Henderson's the name - equivocation's the game. Bohemian enough for you?

\*\*\*\*\*

Neil K. Henderson, 46 Revocch Drive, Knightswood, Glasgow G13 4SB,  
Scotland, UK.

# THE HAUNTED HILL



"You may remember," said my old, er, acquaintance, Brian Jordan, the editor of the Black Country Trumpet, "that a few years ago the Standing Stones, up on the top of the Clent Hills, were daubed with paint."

I nodded wisely and filled my largest pipe from the caddy of Sobrani he'd very incautiously left on his desk.

Brian's mouth twitched but he remained silent. I deduced from this that he needed me for something.

"You may also recall," he said, chewing distractedly on his cigar, "that it was never proved who did the dastardly deed, though there was a rumour going round at the time that it was the work of students from Brum University."

I borrowed Brian's matches and lit up.

"Any road up," he went on determinedly, "this morning Lord Wychton got this in the post." So saying he passed me an envelope and a letter.

Only mildly interested I read the missive.

'Dear Capitalistic Running Dog' it began politely,

'The fake Standing Stones erected at the behest of your crazed ancestor have long symbolised the frivolity of the idle aristocracy. One day very soon they will appear in a new guise'

It was signed;

'Yours faithfully,

el Sid,

for the International Marxist Muslims Peoples Front'

"Ah," I observed, "The I.M.M.P.F."

"You've heard of them! exclaimed Brian, astonished.

"Well, actually, no," I admitted. "I just like playing around with initials."

"Oh," said Brian. I could see that he was a bit peeved.

I inspected the letter and the envelope more closely. The postmark indicated that it had been mailed in Quinton and, as I had suspected, it bore a first class stamp. Therefore, I reasoned, the sender or senders were probably countrymen, they have a touching faith in the efficiency of the postal service, no townie would be so foolish.

"The composer of this letter," I lied, "is a one-eyed Welshman who is presently employed as a hedger and ditcher," and just to liven things up I added wickedly, "He has recently been engaged in an unnatural relationship with a Herdwick sheep."

Brian's eyes fair bulged. I relented a little, but, naturally, didn't withdraw my misleading remarks. Let the sod stew I thought.

"The envelope, and the paper the message is typed on, are both cheap and may be readily obtained from any big store, such as Messers Woollworth. The typeface seems to indicate some portable machine, a Nitchi for example. The irregular registration of the letters suggests that it was used by someone who was using only one finger, thus he is very probably an inexpert typist."

Brian, of course, was completely stupified by the brilliance of my deductions.

"You can tell all that?!" he spluttered.

"You lack understanding of my methods," I remonstrated, "and therefore you are impressed by these simple deductions."

I tossed the papers carelessly onto the desk.

"So why show me?" I asked, suspecting what was to come.

"I had a long talk with His Lordship," said Brian, "he sent for me this morning. We agreed that it would be a mistake to give this matter any sort of publicity."

Brian sighed.

"His Lordship had heard of you, not from me I hasten to add, but from His Grace, the Duke. He wants you in on the case."

I stayed mum. Brian went on.

"His Lordship will have a quiet word with the police, and he's going to keep his own men on the look-out."

I glanced at the calander, averted my eyes from the nubile young lady, and checked the date. As I thought.

"It's the 19th of June today," I said, "In a few days time it'll be Midsummer Eve. I should think that if these vandals haven't painted the Stones by then Lord Wychbury can rest easy for another year."

"I don't follow you," said Brian. I wasn't surprised. This was the bloke who thought accolade was a fizzy drink.

"It's the magical time of year," I explained patiently, "you know, when the Stones are supposed to perambulate. It's the obvious time to do the deed."

"I see," said Brian. I'd given him food for thought. "I see what you mean. You may well be right."

"Have you ever known me to be wrong?" I asked modestly. "But this brings up the question. What exactly do you want me to do?"

Brian. I perceived a definite touch of reluctance in his voice. Spoke on.

"Me and His Lordship," he said, "feel that the letter was written by somebody local, not by some imaginary leftist group from Brum. We reckon that word'll get around that we'll be having the police keeping watch, and the staff. What His Lordship fears is that there'll be some sort of a diversion, luring the cops away. So his nibs insisted that I contact you secretly, and hire you to keep an extra eye on things."

I could see that His Lordship's demands were not to Brian's liking. For reasons I decline to go into Brian and me....well, let's just say he had a nasty, suspicious mind.

"OK," I said, "I'll begin today and keep on the job until after Midsummer's Eve."

"Right," said Brian. "Until after Midsummer's Eve."

"Now," I said, hitching my duffle coat into a more comfortable configuration. "the important bit. About my fee....."

Over tea I explained to Flotsam something of the background of the case.

"These particular Standing Stones are of no great antiquity," I said.

"They are most notable for the fact that they form part of one of the



earliest works of the famous landscape gardener, Capability Brown.

It was Lord Smallpiece, a more than ordinarily eccentric ancestor of the present Lord Wychton, ( in an age when eccentricity was common ), who commissioned Brown.

Apart from setting up the Stones Brown also erected the 'Temple' on the slope of Wychbury Hill, the obelisk known as 'The Hagley Monument' the 'ruin' behind the Hall, and several other odds, sods, and wotnots.

He was also responsible for the 'romantically' sited groves of trees one can see from the grounds of the Hall.

The Stones therefore, like the other structures, are a mere conceit or folly, decorative features only, with no history prior to around 1750.

Nevertheless, in spite of the mundane origin of the Standing Stones, they soon became the focus of a number of stories. The most popular of these fictions has it that on Midsummer Eve the Stones uproot themselves and amble down to Walton Pool for a drink. After they have indulged in this annual slaking of their thirst they return to the top of the hill and resume their places until the next year, presumably satisfied."

"They must get very thirsty between drinks," said Flotsam worriedly.

I permitted my lip to curl in a modest sneer.

"My dear Flotsam," I said, "they are rained upon, are they not?," and continued...

"the most ridiculous part of this tale is the contention that anyone who happens to see the Stones on their annual outing is forthwith frozen solid, yea, even unto the marrow of their bones. Deaded in fact!"

I laughed derisively.

"One would have thought that this 'fact' alone would have made for a

shortage of reliable witnesses."

"Maybe they didn't all perish immediately, sir," suggested the gullible fool, "maybe they gasped out their story with their dying breath."

I eyed Flotsam quizzically.

"I fear you are too much of a romantic, my dear Flotsam," I said kindly, "in all the years I have tramped those hills, aye, even as far as the bald Walton Hill, I have never yet been able to find evidence of even one death remotely attributable to the Stones. Death from pneumonia due to sleeping off a drunk on the hills maybe, but nary a single 'frozen to the marrow of their bones' victim of the Stones."

I could sense that the lad was not entirely convinced by my rational arguments so I left it at that.

Midsummer Eve arrived as scheduled. Flotsam and I got to the Hill Tavern shortly after opening time. My intention was to sample the four brands of Real Ale they served there; on the expense account of course, while we waited for the onset of darkness. I also planned to listen to the local gossip in the hopes of picking up some clue as to the identity of the intended vandals.

It was good to be indoors because the weather, which up to then had been exceptionally warm and dry, showed every sign of breaking up. Dark clouds had shouldered their way up the Bristol Channel intent on making mischief, a storm threatened.

Meanwhile we supped our ale and listened, myself with amused disbelief, Flotsam agog, to the natives putting the wind up the tourists by relating



bloodcurdling tales about the supposedly death-dealing Stones.

At closing time we reluctantly turned out.

In the shadow of the oaks across the road we were accosted by Constable Gould, who had news for us.

"His Lordship has gone missing," he confided, "he went out to the stables not long since but never came back."

"The Stones," intoned Flotsam hollowly.

I administered a hefty buffet to bring him to his senses.

"It is possible," continued the arm of the law, "that His Lordship has had an accident and is lying out in the woods somewhere, and it promises to be a dirty night."

"It is also possible that he's been lured away, or kidnapped by the folk we're looking for," I mused. "In fact this may be the diversion we anticipated."

"Very true sir," said the constable, "we've thought of that. But we have no alternative but to call off the watch so that we can organise a search for him. We can't take the chance that His Lordship might be lying injured somewhere, and that's more important than the Stones getting a coat of paint."

With that line of reasoning I had to agree.

Constable Gould mounted his horse and trotted off into the gloom. Flotsam and I walked up towards the Stones to stand our lonely guard.



Thunder boomed, Thor's chariot rolling atop of the clouds. Lightning scrabbled it's crazy fingers across the sky. And as we approached the top of the hill big fat drops of rain plummeted into the dry earth.

On the north side of the hill, where the ferns grew closest to the Stones, Flotsam and I concealed ourselves.

Though we were no more than fifteen yards from them, so dark was the night between the lightning ilashes, that we couldn't see them.

It was eerie, wet, and damned uncomfortable. My sou'wester kept out some of the rain and Flotsam, wrapped in an army-surplus ground sheet, fared not much better. Being so high up, the top of the hill is just a little less than a thousand feet above sea level, the storm was raging all around us. Every so often the hill to was briefly illuminated, starkly white, by an uncomfortably close lightning stroke.

The night drew on, the tempest continued. There was less rain but more lightning now. Still we waited and watched.

A few minutes before midnight Flotsam drew my attention to some indistinct figures struggling up the back slope, behind us and a bit to our left.

I had to shout into Flotsam's ear to make myself heard above the noise of the storm.

"I will remain here in support," I yelled, "You go up and keep the Stones from harm."

Flotsam nodded vigorously and vanished into the night. I crouched down and watched the approach of the, suspected, vandals.

The light from the frequent flashes enabled me to make out that there were four of them. With much stumbling they climbed the path, which ran past where I was hiding no more than ten feet away. They paused at the edge of the ferns apparently to see if the coast was clear. They were so close that I could catch snatches of their shouted exchanges.

"Don't be so bloody daft!" one shouted, "Nobbut old wives tales!" shouted a second. "Let's get done afore we catches our deaths of newmania!" shouted a third.

I got the distinct impression that they were nervous.

After another brief shouted exchange they plucked up their courage and, in a bunch, made a lumbering run towards their objective.

Just as the four of them got to within spitting distance of the Stones an extra long and bright flash of lightening lit up the top of the hill.

Suddenly something large, billowing and indescribably menacing rose up amongst the Stones.

The four stood, a frozen tableau, jaws agape, aghast.

The great flapping shape, with super-human strength, ripped the Stones out of the ground and holding the monoliths on high began to ponderously descend the slope.

I expect the would-be Stone vandalisers had had enough by then, but just to make sure I cupped my hands and emitted a hackle raising yodel, (taught to me by Running Ferret, alias Bill Temple, a leading light in the Hob Green Wild West reenactment society).

This decided them. Dropping what later examination found to be an assortment of spray paints, they hurled themselves down the track, fighting each other, shrieking and cursing, until they vanished into the woods.

I struggle up the hill and ran down the other side. I caught up with the great flapping shape halfway down to Walton Pool.

"It's all right, Flotsam!" I yelled, "They've gone. You can come back now!"

Flotsam, his cape whipping in the wind, the lightning reflecting weirdly off its wetness, plodded back up the hill.

"Did I do right, boss?!" he bellowed.

"You did fine," I bellowed back. "Just replace the Stones, there's a good lad!"

So Flotsam replaced the Stones, giving each a sharp tap to settle it in its hole.

I squinted at the result. Then it struck me. The silly lad had not put each Stone in its own hole.

"Oh well," I philosophised, "it'll give the locals something to talk about. May as well leave them as they are."



We were just in time to meet the search parties returning. His Lordship having been found, tied and gagged and locked in a pig sty. It seemed an inopportune time to see His Lordship so I left the evidence with the constable and went home to a warm drink and bed.

"All in all," I thought, gazing fondly at the case of fine old port gracing the kitchen table, "not a bad night's work."

I gave Flotsam a can of coke, after all he had done his bit too.

\*\*\*\*\*END\*\*\*\*\*





# THE VANISHING EQUESTRIANS



"So, you've got it working then?" I asked.

"Indeed Sir," the minion replied distractedly. "although, well, you can't get the wood you know."

I sucked my pipe and pondered this last rather puzzling remark. However, feeling unwilling to be subjected to another obtuse lecture, such as Flotsam is inclined to deliver at the proverbial drop of a hat, I kept my mouth shut.

Instead I cast an interested, but wary, eye over the humming boxes, flashing lights, and the myriad wires which festooned the room.

"It's a pity it's not more portable," I remarked absently.

"I'm afraid that was <sup>not</sup> a factor I took into consideration, Sir," said the lad apologetically, "Still, it might be possible to reduce the size of the apparatus to some degree, if Sir insists."

"Could you make it small enough so that four men could carry it?" I said speculatively.

Flotsam frowned dubiously.

"Don't bother," I said hastily, "It's working OK as it is so just leave it."

"That might be just as well, Sir," said the minion with visible relief, "I'm not at all sure that I could get it to work again if I disassembled the machine."

I indicated the picture on the central screen.

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Ah, Sir," said Flotsam, "that's a field of wheat not far from Walton village. I thought it best to test the device out in the open country, just in case there should be any...er...unforeseen side effects."

"Oh-o!?" I thought.

"And have there been any 'side effects'?" I asked suspiciously, remembering some past experiences with Flotsam and his scientific twiddlings.

Flotsam hesitated. "Not really, Sir," he said, looking damn shifty.

I narrowed my eyes and gave the rogue one of my, 'minions who try to pull the wool over Sir's eyes get their arses kincked' glares.

"Ah. Well," said Flotsam uneasily, "there is just one, tiny, insignificant, er, thing."

"Oh yes?" I said mildly menacingly.

"It's nothing really," protested the guilty faced lackey, "it's just that now and again, while it's warming up, it, er..."

It did IT.

The screen flickered for a split second, and...

"I see," I said heavily.

"It's perfectly harmless Sir," quavered Flotsam, "one wobble a day is all it does, when it's first switched on."

I considered the screen carefully. After all I did have a use for the machine, a particular use.

"OK," I said, "but it had better be harmless my lad, because if there's any trouble," I said threateningly, "it's you for the high jump!"

"I think it's the ionosphere," said Flotsam reflectively, "it fluctuates with the sun's activity and that affects the way the Z-rays bounce off it."

"No lectures!" I admonished. "Just show me how to operate it."

"Certainly, Sir," said Flotsam, relieved that I'd let him off so lightly, "the knob controls the height above the ground and the joy stick controls the lateral movement. It's very simple."

I watched while Flotsam demonstrated then I had a go. Flotsam was quite right, it was absurdly easy.

"Right," I said firmly, "you nip off now and have your breakfast. But remember, I've a client coming at half nine so make sure the place is clean and tidy."

With Flotsam out of the way I placed my notebook on the desk and set to work.

I located Walton Hall without any difficulty and whizzed the picture round to the back terrace. As I had hoped the warm June morning had tempted the family out to breakfast in the sunshine. I adjusted the picture to suit my convenience and began to make notes.

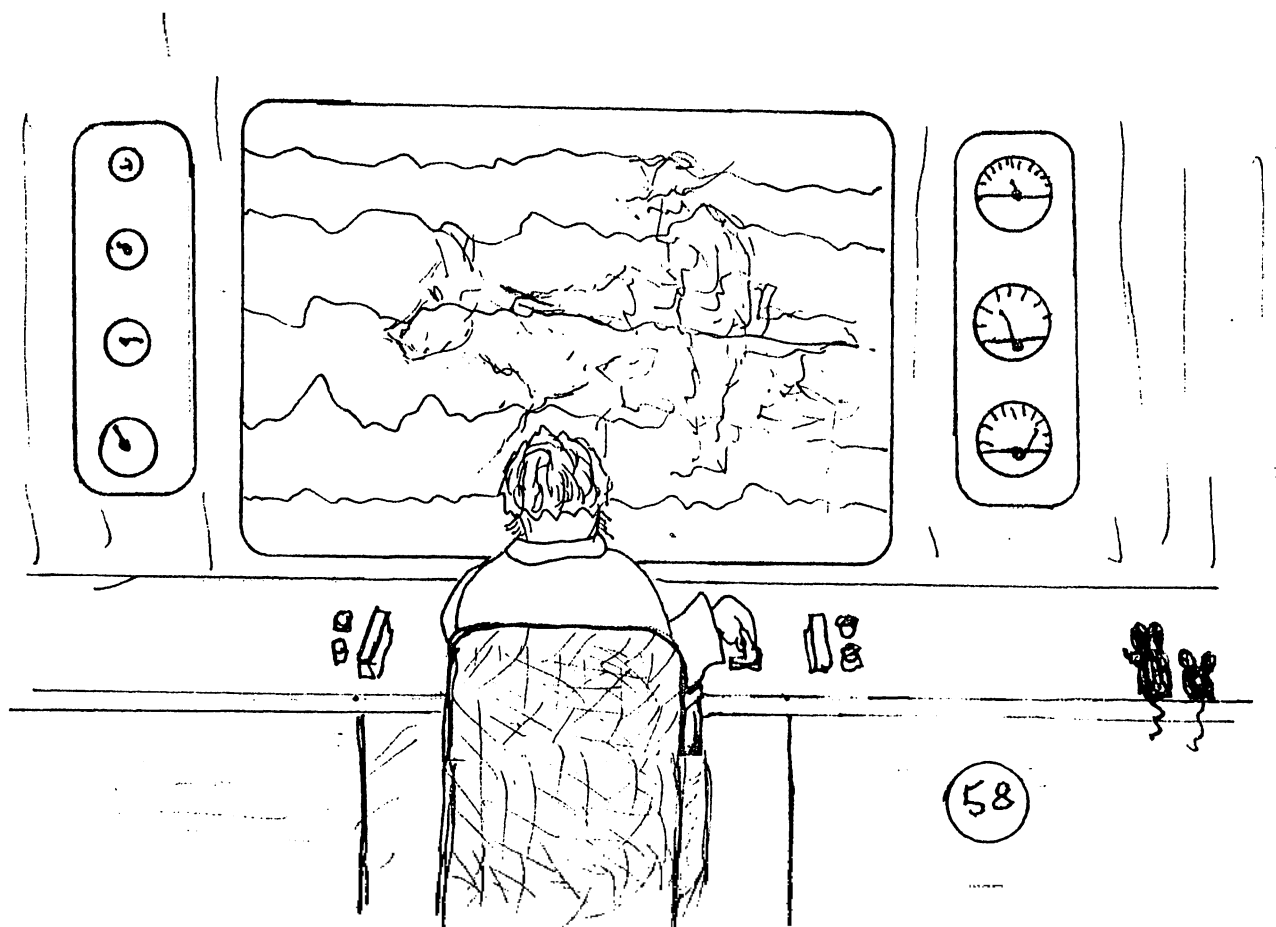
I nipped downstairs just before Sir Steven arrived. Flotsam showed him into my study and, dismissed, went off to continue with his chores.

I could see that Sir Steven wasn't over impressed by our humble abode, or by me, though he was polite enough to try and hide it. I smiled a secret smile.

"Er, His Grace say's you're the cat's whiskers when it comes to, er, unravelling mysteries," he said, his voice hinting at his disbelief.

"His Grace's opinion is not one to be ignored," I suggested, allowing just a tinge of reproof to show.

"Ah, yes, of course," responded Sir Steven, rather embarrassed.



I gazed thoughtfully at Sir Steven for a moment, then said,

"You were up and dressed before eight o'clock this morning. You breakfasted, in company with about four other people, in some open space, likely a south facing stone slabbed terrace...on chops, eggs, and..hmmm.. mushrooms I think..."

Sir Steven sat bolt upright, he looked rather like a startled rabbit.

I went on relentlessly.

"You read a magazine, possibly the Horse and Hound and, while drinking coffee, you had a slight spillage. Later you were in some sort of a yard, where you encountered a shorter, older, man, probably an employee, and you came into contact with a large brown horse..."



I could see that Sir Steven was mightily impressed, flabberghasted even, but I had the bit between my teeth now and pressed on mercilessly.

"You travelled to Stourbridge in a chauffeured Bentley which you left in the Lower High Street, and very plainly you walked here through the underpass."

Sir Steven took out a large white handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"Fantastic!" he gasped, "One would think that you'd been following me around all morning!"

I smiled modestly. "Merely a matter of applied observation, Sir Steven," I said, "As a greater man than I once remarked, 'Most people see, but few actually observe'.

But you have some small problem you wish to consult me about?"

"I wouldn't call five disappearances in five weeks 'a small problem!'" exclaimed Sir Steven.

"Really?" I said casually, "Pray do continue, Sir Steven."

"Well," said Sir Steven, "actually they all reappeared again, all unharmed thank god, but none of them could remember a thing. In each case a lone horseman went out early in the morning, and was found wandering about in a dazed condition very late the same night, or very early the next morning. Their horses too," he added indignantly.

I took out my notebook.

"If you would be so kind as to answer a few questions," I said, "such as the names and addresses of the disappearers, the approximate times they vanished and reappeared, when and where the incidents took place, that kind of thing."

"I thought you might want the details," said Sir Steven, "so I made a little list."

He took out a sheet of paper, put on his glasses, and continued.

"The first one to go was Leland, Sir Leland Sapiro of Thirsk House, Clent. He vanished on June the twenty eighth. He was last seen in Broome Lane about half past six, in the morning, he was turning off the bridle path onto the hill. He reappeared about two am the next morning not far from Bell End.

Next to go was Major Dale Spiers of Calgary Hall. That was on May the fifth, also around six am. Mr.Haines of Hill Farm saw him up by Burnt



Copse. He was found wandering in Stream Lane at half past one the morning after.

Then there was Baron Manning..."

I had to admit to myself that Sir Steven had done a thorough job.

When he had finished going through the list I had a look at it myself.

There was something there that tickled my memory, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"The police are completely baffled!" exclaimed Sir Steven. "Completely baffled!"

"Ah," I said, "the police." I shook my head gently but refrained from comment.

"So," I said, "And what exactly do you want me to do?"

"Huh?" said Sir Steven, "why, obviously, I want you to find out what's happening and put a stop to it."

"That might not be too easy," I warned, "After all, you say the police are baffled and they command more resources than I do. Why should I succeed where they have failed?"

"His Grace seemed...No! His Grace was absolutely convinced, that you could solve the mystery." And, desperation evident in

his voice. "Can't you at least try!"

"Two hundred pounds a day, and expenses?" I suggested.

"Cheap at the price!" cried the distraught knight.

Mentally I kicked myself. Still, I thought, there's always the 'expenses'.

"Very well," I said decisively. "I'll take the case. You understand however that I can't work miracles. I'll give it a try for a week, then we'll see what I've turned up and we can take it from there."

"Fair enough," agreed Sir Steven. "Will you need any help, from the local police for instance?"

"At this stage I don't know," I said, "I'll give you a ring if I find that I do."

Sir Steven left. I called Flotsam.

"What does the noble boss person require?" he asked brightly. The sly sod appeared so quickly that it reinforced my suspicions that he had been hovering at the top of the stairs trying to listen. One of these days, I thought, I'll catch him at it. And then...

"Dig out the Ordnance Survey map of Clent," I ordered, "and fetch me your felt pens."

Some minutes later the map was unrolled on the kitchen table. I considered it carefully and, in due course, proceeded to mark certain locations on it with different coloured felts.

I could see that Flotsam was mystified, but I waited for his curiosity to get the better of him. Which it did, of course.

"Oh enlightened one," he said respectfully, "May your humble skivvy be allowed to enquire as to the significance of these artistically executed markings?" Sly bugger.

"Quite simple, my dear Flotsam," I replied loftily. "The blue is where the victims live, the yellow marks the places they vanished, and the green is where they reappeared."

"And the red, Sir?" said the lackey, unable to contain himself.

"Ah," I said, "Very important. The red marks the pubs!"

"The pubs?" asked Flotsam suspiciously. "Sir is being paid expenses then?"

"Fie upon your untrusting nature!" I cried. "I've a good mind to stop your Eccles cakes for a week!

Naturally I'm being paid expenses. But that is not my main reason for highlighting the pubs. You should know by now that pubs are prime places for picking up rumour and gossip. We could well come across some useful clues."

"Oh," said Flotsam, deflated. "Sir is the very fount of wisdom."

"Aint that the truth." I admitted.

"Now, go get the trike ready, we'll make a start today."

That was the Monday. I fair wore myself out that day, but I learned very little that I'd not already heard from Sir Steven.

When I managed to steer the conversation away from women and football the locals gossiped about the vanishing gentry all right. But they were more interested in the rash of corn circles which was afflicting the district.

One school of thought had it that the circles were made by the gentry's wilder elements, a second gaggle of pundits reckoned that the circles were vanishing the gents. There was even one old gaffer who muttered about fairy rings. But the main body of opinion was that no-one had vanished at all, and the circles had been made by the supposed disappearances while pissed out of their minds and riding their horses round and round in the corn. But, they said darkly, it had all been covered up by their influential pals.

Tuesday I devoted, with breaks for refreshment, to visiting those places where the vanishing horsemen had last been seen.

Seated in the trusty trike, with map in hand, I directed Flotsam to the first site. Not a single bloody clue.

Though curiously enough, there was one of those damned corn circles just up the lane.

We fared no better at the second place. Though again, in a nearby cabbage field, there was one of the mysterious circles.

Similar results were obtained at the other three sites. By the end of the tour I was beginning to entertain a certain suspicion.

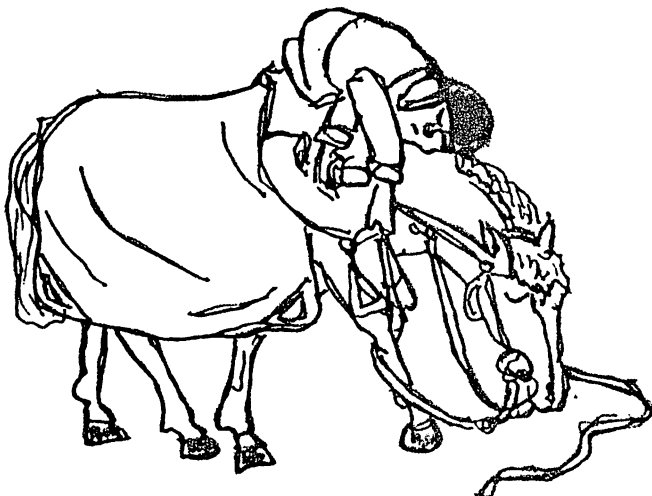
"Flotsam," I said companionably, at supper, "What have you been doing these last few Wednesday mornings?"

Flotsam immediately looked guilty.

"Wednesday mornings, Sir?" he said innocently, "Why, Sir, I get up at four am, as usual, and start on the chores. First of all..."

"Stop right there! I cried. "I don't want to hear about your normal routines. What have you been doing recently that's different!?"

"Well, your esteemed bossness," he said uneasily, "I have been, er, sort of nipping up and..."



Flotsam's voice faded away. I glared at him. He swallowed uncomfortably. He had obviously twigged what I was getting at.

"I switch on the machine," he confessed.

As I thought!

"This needs thinking about," I declared.

We went upstairs to Flotsam's work room. The machine hummed contentedly.

"There seems to be but one conclusion," I said soberly.

"I fear so, Sir," said Flotsam miserably.

"There Are Some Things Man Was Not Meant To Meddle With!" I declared.

"But, Sir!" objected the minion, "Just last week Sir said 'human knowlege knows no frontiers', with great firmness too."

I dismissed his purile argument.

"That was last week," I said firmly, and gave the cheeky rascal a buffet for his impertinence.

"Of course," I said pensively, "we can't be absolutely sure..."

Wednesday morning came. As instructed Flotsam got me up at the wholly indecent hour of four o'clock. Fortified with a cuppa tea and a sausage sandwich I followed him along to the work room.

"OK," I said, "you operate the thing. Get Walton Hall."

As luck would have it Sir Steven chose that morning to go for an early canter over the hills. That was his bad luck.

We followed the horse and rider closely, on the screen. Just as the noble knight emerged from Chantry Lane onto the fern covered slopes of Walton Hill the screen flickered and Sir Steven, horse and all, winked out. At the same instant a sixty foot circle of flattened ferns appeared.

"Pretty conclusive, eh?" I said.

"Shall I dismantle the machine, Sir?" asked Flotsam humbly.

"No," I said. "Not yet. You never know, it might interfere with Sir Steven's return. But as soon as we heard he's back YOU CAN BLOODY WELL TAKE AN AXE TO IT!"

The lad winced. Cringed even. As well he might, the great oaf.

I sighed. "Oh, very well," I relented, "just take it apart."

Early on Thursday morning the 'phone rang.

"You'll never guess what happened yesterday morning," gabbled Sir Steven in some distress.

"You went for an early morning ride and you vanished," I said calmly. There was a stunned silence.

"How did you guess?" asked Sir Steven, his voice quavering.

"I never guess," I said firmly. "I'd like to make my report in person, What time today would be convenient?"



When we arrived at Walton Hall we were met at the door by Sir Steven himself. He was not a happy man.

"Pray do not distress yourself," I admonished kindly. "You have, to be sure, had an unusual experience. But no harm's been done, and I can promise you that there will be no more 'incidents'."

"Eh!" exclaimed Sir Steven, open mouthed. Also, "What? What?!"

"A little medicinal tot of brandy will do you good." I hinted.

We sat in Sir Steven's study sipping a very decent brandy.

"I am not at liberty to disclose the details," I said, "for reasons I can't go into. But, I repeat, there will be no more vanishings."

Sir Steven's eyes narrowed. "Like that, is it?" he said shrewdly.

"Like what?" I said, with obvious blandness.

"Some bloody government secret weapon!" he exclaimed, "or an experiment gone wrong?"

"I'm afraid I must decline to comment," I said virtuously.

"Humm." said Sir Steven. "So that's the way the wind's blowing."

"I'm afraid I really can't say." I said, noncommittally.

"But there'll be no more of these, happenings?" Sir Steven asked anxiously.

I leaned forward confidentially. "You have my word on it," I said. And in a lower voice I added. "I have it on good authority that a certain, device, has been dismantled, very recently. Although," I shrugged, "this may, or may not, have some connection with, er, certain events."

You can hold onto my fee for a few weeks," I suggested, "until you are convinced that it's all over." This remark had the result I'd intended, Sir Steven, bless him, coughed up on the spot.

That evening I surveyed the disassembled remains of the machine.

"Another fine mess I had to get us out of," I reproved. "If you must go around inventing things you should make something useful, something of benefit to mankind in general; like a never empty pint pot of Lumhammer.

Flotsam froze. A strange, far-away look in his eyes.

I kicked his butt.

"Flotsam!" I said, "did you hear me?"

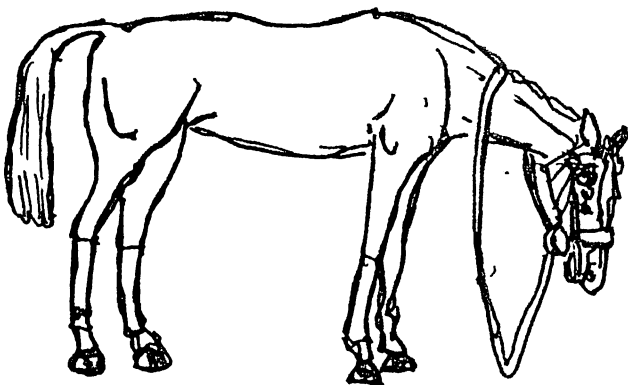
His eyes unglazed. "Ah," he said placidly, "time for Sir's tea." and with that he clumped off towards the kitchen.

I scratched my beard, lost in uffish thought.

"No," I scolded myself, "No. Even Flotsam couldn't get into any trouble trying to fabricate a never empty pint pot."

I dismissed the thought and hurried after the lackey.

"I hope you remembered to get some more Eccles cakes," I called.



# THE ADVENTURE OF THE MISSING BREW

I staggered, shaken to my very marrow. My trembling fingers scrabbled at the counter for support. Flotsam deftly whipped a bar stool under my quivering bum. I sat down shakily, come all over weak and faint.

"Say it again, Sam," I quavered, hoping desperately that my ears had deceived me.



"The Lumphammer's on ration," said Sam in funeral tones. "One pint, per person, per day."

I was taken with a fit of uncontrollable shuddering. A chorus of heart rending groans wrenched itself from the parched throats of the regulars who were crowded into the bar. Over in his corner Old Tom Sadler was sobbing inconsolably.

"But you can't do this to us!" I remonstrated angrily, "Generations of sturdy chain makers, skillful glass workers, and sweaty students from the Mavis Fagg School of Dance have slaked their thirst here!"

I thumped the top of the bar.

"We'll complain to the brewery, that's what we'll do, we'll complain to the brewery!"

"That'll do no good at all," replied Sam with gloomy triumph, "it was young Mr. O'Rorke himself, the Owner's son, who gave me the order."

Another outburst of anguished groans reverberated around the room. One robust chap, with 'Lumphammer Rules O.K.!' tattooed tastefully across his chest, closed his eyes and slid almost un-noticed to the floor.

I didn't feel too good myself, what with the heat and the shock and everything.



"What ho, we'll be all right, there's plenty of lager." piped up some pin-striped pip-squeak from near the door.

The air in the bar turned icy-cold, the atmosphere fairly crackled. Faces, a moment before pale and wan, turned red, suffused with righteous indignation. Rage even.

"One of they bloody furriners frum up 'agley," growled Steve Sneyd, the plumber.

"orta be drowned in a butt of lager," remarked Chuck Connor menacingly.

"Or chucked in the cut!" cried an obviously peeved Sid Birchby.

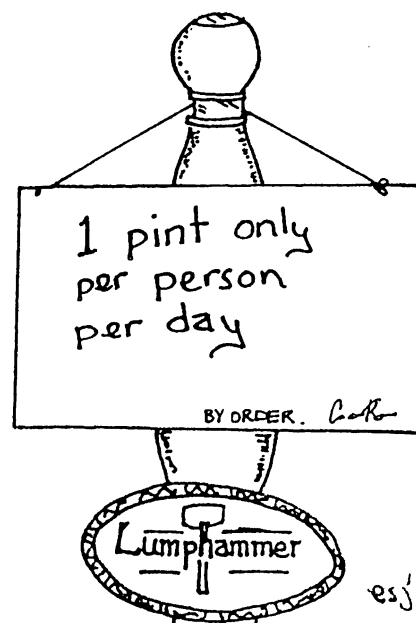
Amid exclamations such as, "shame!" "blasphemy" and "aye, chuck the bugger in the cut!" the white faced wimp fled.

Meanwhile I had been cogitating mightily.

"There's only one thing for it, lads," I declared, "I will personally go up to the brewery and get to the bottom of this."

The gloom lightened a trifle.

"But first of all," I said, "I'll have my paltry pint of Lumphammer, while Flotsam passes the hat round to defray our travelling expenses."



I was so absorbed in morbid speculation that I hardly noticed the blazing heat as our 'bus threaded it's way past parched fields and drought stricken hedges towards the brewery.

We alighted opposite the main gate. The road wound dustily away right and left, the brewery loomed large, and un-naturally silent.

Burnt brown meadows ran down the slope in front of the brewery to the canal. I expanded my nostrils the better to savour the aroma of toasting hops which should have filled all the air with their heady fragrance, but there was hardly a sniff to be snuffed. No steam arose from the oast houses and, on crossing to the gate, I saw the great drays were parked in silent rows like some prehistoric leftovers. No-body seemed to be about.

Except some old codger snoozing in the gate house.

It took some considerable rattling of the gate and shouting to arouse him. When he did condescend to come out he was not very helpful.

"There's nobody 'ere but young Mr. O'Rorke," he grumbled, an expression of extreme stubbornness struggling with gloom on his face, "and he canna be disturbed."

"My dear fellow," I exclaimed, "I must insist that you let us in. It is no ordinary Tom, Dick or Harry who stands before you. It is I, Hemlock Soames. Inform Mr. O'Rorke that I wish to see him, at once!"

"It aint no use," he said truculently, "I got me orders."

I fixed the uncouth fellow with a stern gaze.

"My companion also insists that you let us in," I said threateningly, and tipped Flotsam the nod.

Flotsam took the hint, we'd been in situations like this often enough before. He bent down and tore a cobble out of the surface of the yard, which quite startled the uncooperative gate keeper. His face became even paler when Flotsam proceeded to slowly crumble the cobble to dust between his hands.

The gate keeper took an involuntary step backwards and swallowed visibly.

"I'll see what I can do, sir," he said nervously, and scuttled off across the deserted yard.

A few minutes later a vigorously striding, bespectacled young man came hurrying across towards the gate, the miserable old begger of a gate man peering anxiously from behind him.



"What's all this then!?" demanded the newcomer. "You have a damn cheek coming along here and putting the wind up our Norman!"

"I'm sorry about that," I said insincerely, "but our mission is urgent," I added, "I am Hemlock Soames, the famous consulting detective, and this is Dr. Don Watson, my assistant."

(Flotsam, by the way, really does have a degree, of sorts. One of those twenty dollars a time ones, at least the envelope had American stamps on it. Some place with the initials M.I.T. )

"We are a deputation from the Spotted Cow and we've come to find out why you've introduced this dastardly beer rationing."

"Hemlock Soames?" said young Mr. O'Rorke, "I've heard Brian, the editor of the Black Country Trumpet, speak of you." He eyed me speculatively.

"If he's been filling your head with wild, unfounded, tales of missing tins of tobacco," I said defensively, "it's lies, all lies!"

"I beg your pardon?" said O'Rorke, evidently completely mystified.

"Nothing, nothing," I said hastily. "Now, about the beer situation, what's up? Can I help?"

"Ah," sighed O'Rorke sadly, "a very bad situation. I'm sure there's nothing anyone can do about it...

... though," he added with a faint flicker of hope,

"Brian has told me about some of the remarkable

results you've had."

O'Rorke's manner became decisive.

"Come on in," he said, "it can do no harm to explain just what the problem is."

Leaving a subdued Norman to close the gates O'Rorke led us across the yard, the heat from the cobbles reflecting up as if from a furnace, and into the venerable brewery.

It was much cooler inside.

O'Rorke conducted us past stacks of empty beer barrels, our footsteps echoing eerily on the bare boards. We threaded our way amongst huge towering vats and intricate looming machinery, which looked as if it had come directly from the set of some Hollywood 'mad scientist' movie. Time itself seemed to be standing still in there, all the paraphernalia of the brewery poised motionless but expectant.

We came at length to a great iron-bound door set into a giant igloo shaped structure easily twenty feet in diameter. It was built of massive stone blocks, and out of the yop, which was as high as a house, a gargantuan pipe emerged and wandered off into the gloomy distance, way up in the roof.

His whole attitude exuding something closely akin to an Israel priest serving the Ark of the Covenant O'Rorke solemnly unlocked the massive padlocks and swung the great door outwards. As it opened on it's silent hinges there eddied forth a draught of cool pure air.

Reverently O'Rorke led us inside.

The centre of the room was taken up with a circular stone wall about eight feet across and three feet high. An iron lid was fitted over the top, through which the great pipe sprang up and vanished into the roof.

O'Rorke patted the lid.

"Here you are," he said. "Apart from the secret receipts this is the most important factor in the brewing of the famous Lumphammer beer."

"Looks like a mine shaft," I remarked.

"In a manner of speaking you're quite correct, Mr. Soames," said O'Rorke. "for what is a mine but a dry well."

His words seemed to hang in the air. The sense of them slowly percolated through to my conscious mind. Realisation dawned.

"A well!" I exclaimed. "A dry well?!"

"Precisely," said O'Rorke grimly. "This is the very well from whose pure water the unique Lumphammer beer has been brewed for the past two hundred and seventy four years. Now it's as dry as a bone."

Bone. Dry. Icy fingers of horror curled themselves around my palpitating heart. I fainted.

I came to in O'Rorke's office. Flotsam was waving a glass of Lumphammer under my nose. I clutched at it gratefully and quaffed the holy nectar. I immediately felt a little better.

"Dry?" I quavered weakly.

"Dry as a bone," O'Rorke confirmed gently.

"Can nothing be done?" I enquired anxiously, "maybe you could dig it a bit deeper?"

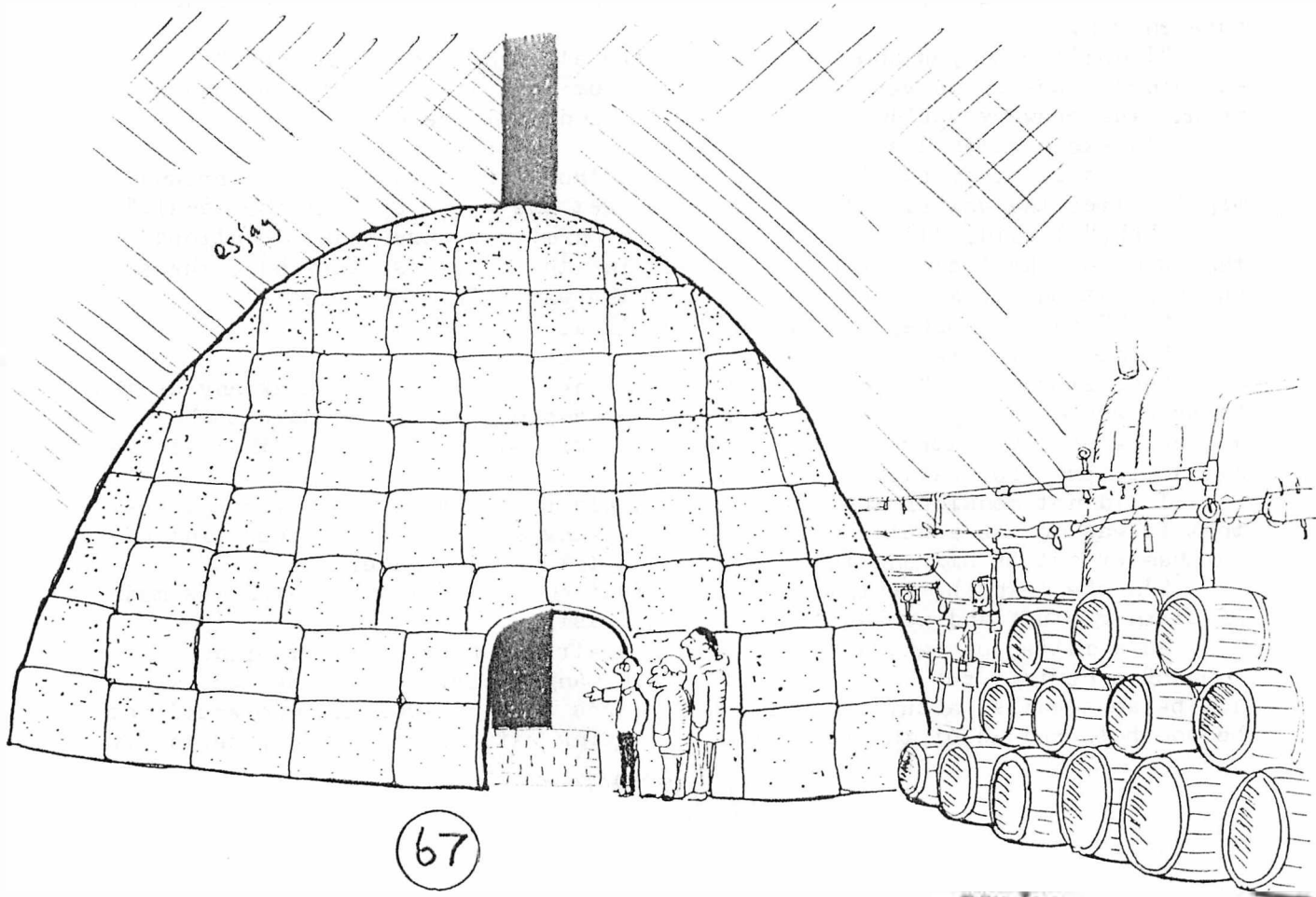
"We thought of that," said O'Rorke, shaking his head sadly, "But we're down to the bedrock already. It would do no good. The cause of the well's failure is this wretched drought, it hasn't dried up since 1863."

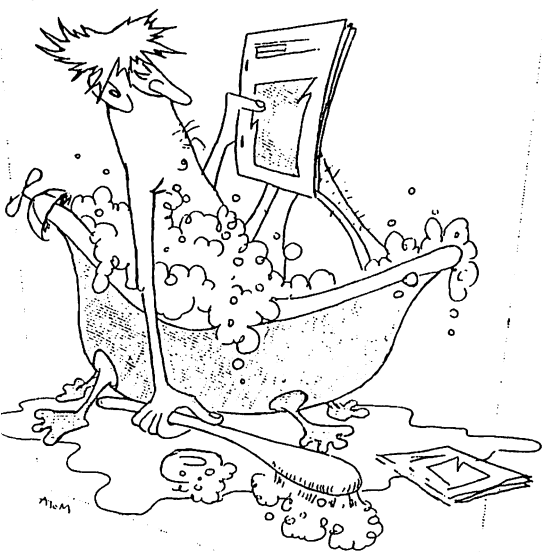
"Ah, yes," observed Flotsam, "the water table must be exceptionally low."

"This is no time to be discussing short furniture," I snapped peevishly, "it's the lack of water in the well we're talking about."

O'Rorke gave me an old fashioned look.

"Dr. Flotsam is quite right," he said, "when the rain falls the water sinks into the ground and seeps over the impervious clays, that's why springs





continue to flow even though no rain has fallen for some time. Unfortunately there has been no rain for so long now that the underground seepage has dried up." He shrugged helplessly.

"So there will be no water in the well and therefore no Lumphammer until we have had a good downpour."

"Couldn't you use water from the mains?" I suggested. Even as the words left my lips I realised how unthinkable the idea was. I put it down to my agitation.

O'Rorke grimaced. "We might use tap water," he said, "but it wouldn't be the same. Besides we're not on the mains, we've always had our own supply."

I took a sip of beer. My brain was working overtime.

"If the ground for a few hundred yards around the brewery was to get a good soaking," I asked, "might that do the trick?"

O'Rorke looked doubtful. "It might," he said cautiously, "but we're talking of thousands of gallons of water here, maybe even millions of gallons. We use ten gallons of water to make one gallon of beer you know, so our requirements are pretty stupendous."

"The canal," I said calculatingly, "there's still a lot of water in the canal. You could use that."

"Good heavens no!" cried O'Rorke, horrified. "the canal water's nowhere pure enough!"

"I don't mean you should use the water straight from the canal," I explained, "but if we were to pump water from the canal onto the ground all around the brewery wouldn't that soak down and fill the well?"

O'Rorke scratched his nose.

"It is remotely possible," conceded O'Rorke reluctantly. "The ground might filter the water. But how would you get the water up from the canal?"

"Ah," I said, "I've thought of that. On my way here today I noticed that some of the local farmers were watering their fields. They have these ruddy great pumps, and they were getting the water from the canal!"

"So?" said O'Rorke, not getting the idea. I explained.

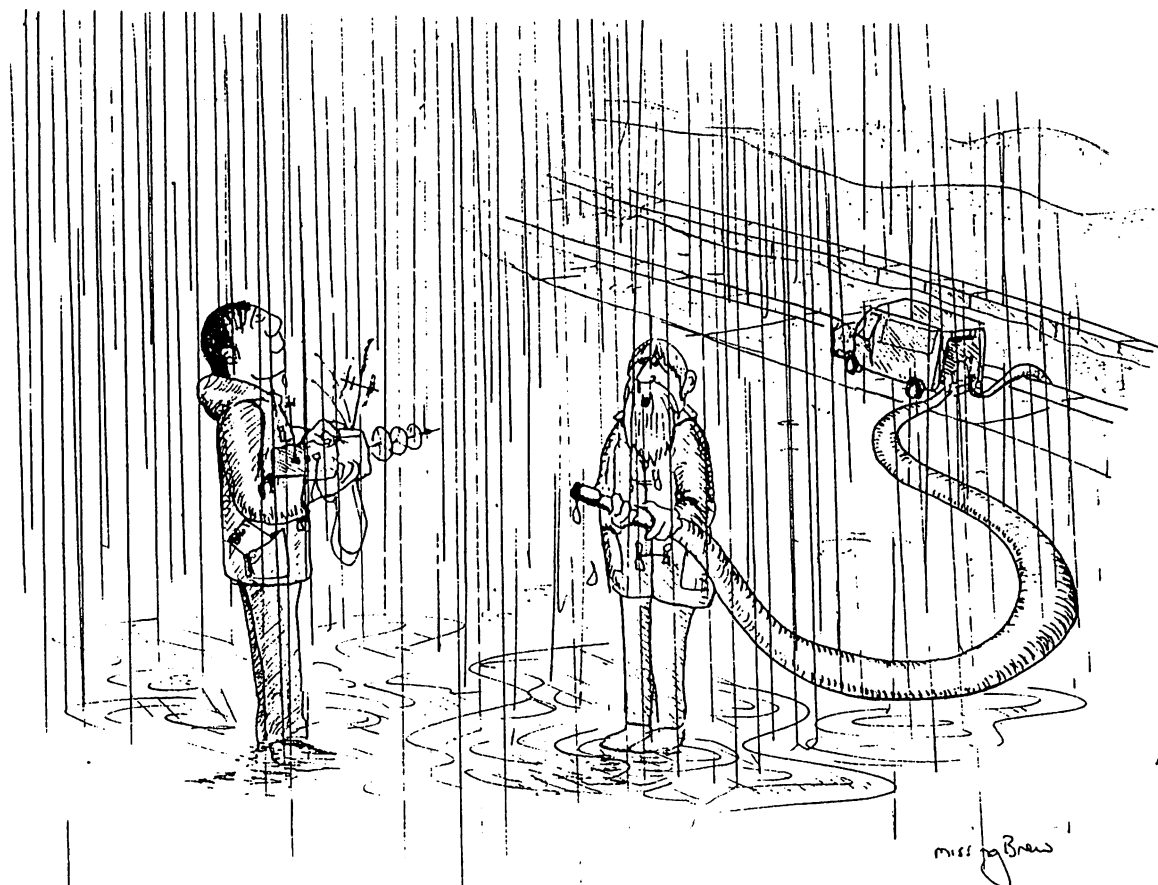
"Simple!" I cried, "we borrow a couple of pumps!"

"No, it won't do," said O'Rorke. "for one thing I don't think any of the farmers would lend you their pumps, and for another thing you have to have a licence to take water from the canal". He sighed. "I'm afraid that all we can do is pray for rain."

I did not consider the latter plan would pay dividends but I could see that it was no use arguing with O'Rorke. I wangled another precious pint of Lumphammer out of him and then Flotsam and I took our leave.

O'Rorke might be resigned to the situation, but Hemlock Soames was made of sterner stuff and would not give up so easily.

As a matter of fact a clever plan was already forming in my mind. I knew of a certain pub where I might recruit many a daring soul, men who would not be so squeamish about borrowing a farmer's pump or two, and who would not be too bothered about the legalities of taking water from a canal, certainly



not if it meant restoring their beer supply...and some were sure to be able to borrow a lorry or two.

Engrossed as I was in developing my brilliant scheme I paid no heed to the burlblings of Flotsam. While he rattled on about jest teams and inverting liars, precipitation and ducks participles I concentrated on working out the details.

"So it will be all right if I knock up a little something?" he asked as we walked back from the 'bus station.

"Yes, yes," I muttered absentmindedly. "You run along home and amuse yourself, I'm off to the Spotted Cow."

It being a Saturday many of the regulars were at a loose end. I lost no time in explaining my masterly plan. The audience, possibly with the enthusiasm of the truly desperate, was appreciative and cooperative.

By a little past midnight we had managed to 'borrow' no less than three pumps and had transported them to the scene of operations. It was a bit of a struggle but soon we had them set up around the brewery and were pumping water onto the parched ground.

Flotsam kept getting in the way waving this box thing at me. I got rid of him by instructing him to go up onto the roof and keep an eye out for the fuzz, in case they got wind of our little enterprise.

We all got soaked to the skin, but we were happy. Everything was going well, the pumps were working fine and I hoped that in a few hours, well before dawn, the Lumphammer well would be filling up.

The night drew on. A chill wind got up. Un-noticed clouds had crept over the sky. Suddenly there was a flash of lightening. Curiously it seemed to originate from the brewery roof and leap into the clouds. I was mulling this over when Flotsam hurried up.

"Sir!" he cried, "the constabulary are on their way, I saw their flashing lights from the roof just now!"

"Dammit," I thought, and cried, "OK lads, the rozzers are on to us, leave the pumps on and scarper!"

"Anyway," I said with some satisfaction as we rocked from side to side in the back of our speeding lorry, "we gave it a good go, it might just do the trick".

"I do believe it has," said Flotsam smugly. I shot him a suspicious glance. But whatever else he might have been going to say was left unsaid for at that moment the heavens opened and rain pelted down so hard that you couldn't hear yourself speak.

It rained, O'Rorke later told me, for a week. By the second day of the downpour the brewery resumed production and the Lumhammer came off the ration.

In recognition of my interest O'Rorke sent the Spotted Cow the first delivery of the new brew.

"It was a rare old plan," remarked Sam, the landlord, breathing into a spotless glass and giving it a final polish. "Though I'm not sure that we pumped enough water to do the trick. It was lucky that the rain came down when it did."

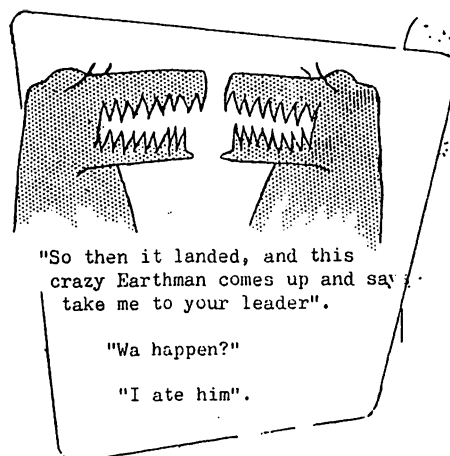
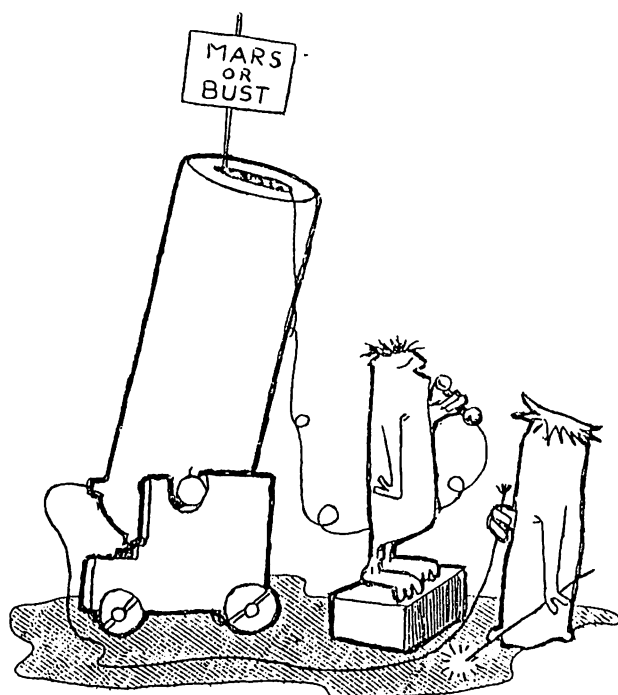
"Aye," cackled Old Tom, looking only half his ninety six years since his favourite tippie had come back on tap. "Funny sort of rain it were though. I heard it rained all around the brewery, but three miles away there was nary a drop."

We all agreed that we had been favoured by some beer-loving deity.

As we toasted the benevolent providence I happened to catch Flotsams eye. He blushed into his beer.

I wondered. I decided that I'd have to have a quiet word with the lad, but later, after closing time.

end.



"So then it landed, and this crazy Earthman comes up and says 'take me to your leader'."

"Wa happen?"

"I ate him".

70

"He says he's quite comfortable, and yes, he wishes to go through with it".

# THE FROGWOR AFFAIR

"He walked round the horses," I muttered, rather louder than I had intended.

"I beg your pardon sir?" said big eared Flotsam nosily.

"Sir Benjamin Bathurst, nephew to Lord Bathurst, was employed on the diplomatic service in Vienna. His coach stopped to have the horses changed at an inn, in the small German town of Perleberg. December 1809 I think it was. Anyway, Sir Benjamin got out to stretch his legs, strolled round the front of the horses, and vanished. Gone, kaput, never to be seen again, alive or dead."

"Oh," said Flotsam, nonplussed. "But then, as sir is wont to say, 'can't trust furrin parts'. But just how does this relate to the missive which sir is at this moment perusing?"

I passed the letter to him.

"Please note," I said, "that this here pub is called 'The Waggon and Horses'. Further, it says that someone went round the back of the pub, and vanished."

"I see," said Flotsam, though I'm not sure if he did.

"A touch of the deja vu, sir?" he asked.

"No, more like your cul-de-sac," I replied absently. "Come on, let's take a look."

The way was not much more than a wide alley. The pub was on our left. An old, tall Victorian house rose windowless on our right. Fifty feet up the alley it opened into a cobbled yard, roughly thirty yards on a side. At the back there was a thirty feet high wall, and above this a near vertical slope, sixty or eighty feet of it, reached up to the castle gardens.

There was but one door and one window at the back of the pub, and a toilet block along the left hand side of the yard. But the toilets were inset under an extension of the pub, with a blank wall above them.

I'd have said that it was pretty near impossible for anyone to vanish from the yard, not without some sort of a ladder. But, as I understood it, there had not been time for anyone to avail themselves of such an aid because his persuers had arrived on the scene only seconds behind him.

A pretty puzzle indeed.

"OK, Flotsam," I said, "let's get in out of the cold."

The inside of the 'Horses was warm and snug and crowded. I had a word with mine host and he called Andy Robson over. He shook hands and ordered a round of Old Peculier then took us over to a corner.

There were two more elderly gents sitting there, who Andy introduced as John Peters and Dave Needham. John was tall and grey haired, while Dave reminded me of Oliver Hardy, without the moustache.

"Your letter," I said when we were settled, "though interesting, is a bit short on detail. Maybe you'd like to enlarge on it?"

The old chaps looked back and forth at each other for a minute, then Andy spoke up.

"We're the FROGWOR," he said, with the air of one who has just explained the meaning of Life, Death, the Universe and everything.

I must have looked as baffled as I felt for he hastened to explain.

"It stands for FRIENDS OF God's WONderful Railway," he said, "You know, the old G.W.R."

"Ah," said Flotsam eagerly, "the old Great Western Railway as was."

I glared balefully at the wretch.

"You forget yourself, presumptuous minion!" I hissed, and caught him a good crack on the shin. This relieved my feelings but it hurt my toe.

"The G.W.R." I said, "Yes, of course. But your letter says nothing about the G.W.R., it only mentions the Severn Valley Railway."

"Ah, yes," said Andy. "You see, them and us have an arrangement, a sort of understanding, y'see. They'm mostly hobbyists, but we'm all professionals. We act like consultants, us having a good deal of hands-on experience, which you can't get out of any book."

"I see," I lied. I was not at all sure where all this was leading.

"The thing is," continued Andy, "there's always a few of us here, at the 'Horses, every night. And on Saturday nights practically everybody turns up, we have a meeting regular every first Saturday of the month."

"Keep listening," I told myself, "he'll get round to the nitty-gritty eventually. Meanwhile sup your free booze."

"This time of year," he rambled on, ( it was the middle of January ), "things are pretty quiet on the S.V.R. and we sort of keep an eye on the place. Every night one or other of us pops across the road about opening time, and again at chucking-out time."

"He just nipped up behind the 'Horses and vanished!" burst out John suddenly.

The interruption didn't please Andy.

"Look here John," he said, "I'm telling this yere tale. Youm getting us ahead of oursel's."

Somewhat abashed, and trembling a little, John subsided and sat muttering to himself.

"As I were saying," continued Andy, "I disremember when we noticed it first, the middle of December maybe. The lights went queer one night. We put that down to the cold and the fog."

"The funny noises, don't forget the funny noises!" butted in John again.

"And the smell of primroses," said Dave, maybe thinking he should contribute something.

"Yes, yes," said Andy testily, "I was just coming to then, all in good time."

Andy then proceeded to relate half a dozen or so weird and inexplicable incidents that had happened in and around the station.

"Well, we were all a bit mizzled like," said Andy, "but funny things do go on in railway yards, especially at night."

This last statement was accompanied by solemn nods from his mates.

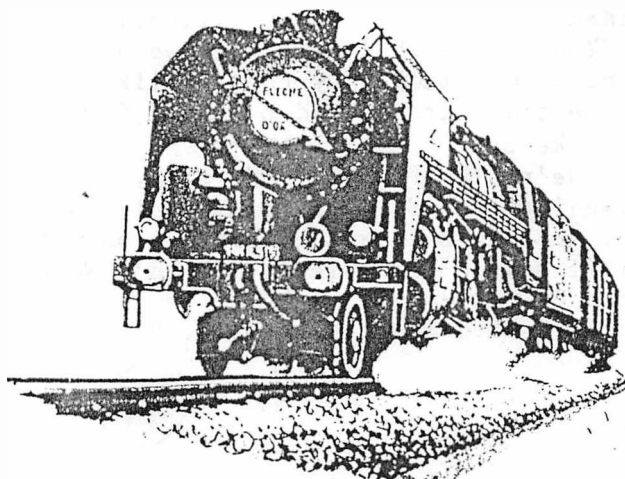
"You forgot the fire buckets," said John, and gazing earnestly at me he added, "two of them turned up in the gents toilets."

"And the barrow in the waiting room," said Dave.

"And things moved round in the shop," said John.

Andy sighed and took up the story again.

"Any road up," he said, "we kept a sharper look out after we realised that there





was something queer going on. Last Tuesday the three of us went up early, just after seven, and hid ourselves in the ticket office."

"Bloody cold it were too," grumbled John.

Andy gave him an extra special hard look, quelling him for the nonce.

"About ten past eight Dave saw someone on the platform,"

Dave opened his mouth to speak, saw the glint in Andy's eyes, and thought better of it.

"It were dark of course," Andy continued, "and what lamps were lit weren't much good, on account of the fog. But after a bit this bloke comes into the hallway between the ticket office and the shop. We reckoned we'd seen enough, so we rushes out to grab him. But he heard us coming."

"He'd 'a bin deaf if'n he hadn't," said Dave morosely.

Andy ignored him.

"We surprised the bugger though. Startled him. He dropped summat but, quick as a wink, he picked it up. We thought we'd got him then, but he bolted out of the front and down the drive. He could run faster than us, but even so we were close behind him when he got to the road. He nipped across smartish and scuttled up behind the 'Horses. Well, you've seen the back, Mr. Soames, there's no way out. We walked up the back, careful like, in case he turned nasty or tried to get past us. We weren't hardly a minute behind him but when we got to the yard there was no sign of him."

"You searched the yard? Looked into the toilets? Enquired if anyone had run in through the back door of the pub?" I asked.

The three of them looked insulted.

"We did all that, Mr. Soames," said Andy, "but we found neither hide nor hair of him." He leaned forward. "What do you make of it, Mr. Soames?"

I was flummoxed. I contented myself therefore with looking wise and saying.

"Singular, Mr. Robson. Very singular."

"Singular or doubular," said Dave belligerently. "What we wants to know is, what're you goin' to do about it!"

"What do you want me to do?" I hedged.

"Why," said Andy, "We wants you to stop this bloke playing silly buggers on S.V.R. property."

"I see," I said, thinking furiously. Stopping the bloke's activities might be easier than finding out how he'd managed his vanishing trick. I might be able to frighten the fellow off, with a little help from the intimidating Flotsam.

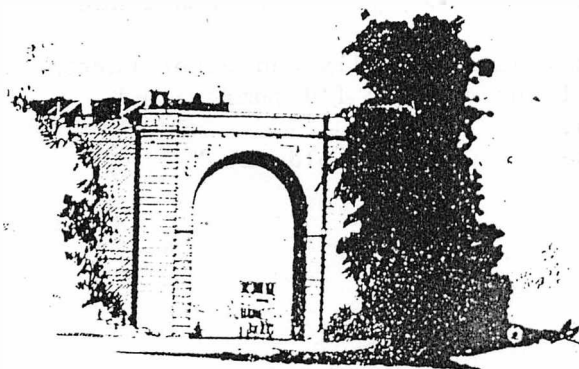
"Lifetime passes on the railway for you and your mate if you put an end to his capers," said Andy, as if he was offering me the Holy Grail or the complete Goon Show tapes.

"Still," I thought, "Lifetime passes. Could be useful. Some of those B.R. luggage racks are pretty uncomfortable."

"OK," I said, "I'm not promising anything, mind, but I'll give it a go."

The ancient trio let me finish my drink, just about, and then they hustled me and Flotsam over the road.

Essentially the S.V.R. property at Bridgnorth consists of a single storey Victorian railway station. You go through to the platform by way of a broad hall or passageway. The shop on the left, the ticket office on the right. The rest of the building had the usual waiting rooms, toilets, and so on.



We investigated all of these, but without result.

South of the platform, maybe fifty feet or so, was a signal box on stilts. If you started at the signal box and swept your eyes around clockwise you'd see half a dozen sets of tracks, water towers, engine sheds, and a good many trucks and carriages. Also several steam engines.

I could see right away that it'd take a small army to cover all that. I said as much to Andy.

However, I was committed. So it was arranged that me and Flotsam would come back that evening and keep watch.

"But I can't devote all my time to this," I said firmly, "my services are much in demand. We'll keep watch for one week, or until we catch someone, whichever is the sooner, after that, well, we'll see."

With that the FROGWOR perforce had to be content.

Flotsam whizzed us home on the trike.

"What we need, my dear Flotsam," I said, feet up, pipe on the go, "is some way of capturing the intruder."

A second later I found I was talking to myself for the minion suddenly dashed from the room. He rushed back again seconds later carrying a gigantic butterfly net.

"Would this do, oh noble boss person?" he cried enthusiastically. "some of those sheep are heavier than a person so the steel mesh should be able to restrain the trespasser."

"It will do fine," I said judiciously. "You will, of course, refrain from mentioning it's usual function to anyone."

"Oh no, sir!" exclaimed the lad. "Sir has fully explained the need for discretion in this matter. The embarrassment that surplus sheep cause the farmers, and sir's confidential arrangement with the Farmer's Union to secretly cull the animals."

"Good," I said, "Mum's the word."

I do sometimes wonder if Flotsam can possibly be as dim as he seems.

Feeling sorry for the wight I added kindly,

"Help yourself to another Eccles cake my boy."

At six thirty I climbed into my seat and Flotsam pedalled us off back to Bridgnorth.

By seven we were in the Waggon and Horses. I reckoned that we'd go up to the station about eight, so we had a fortifying pint or two, gratis of course, while we waited.

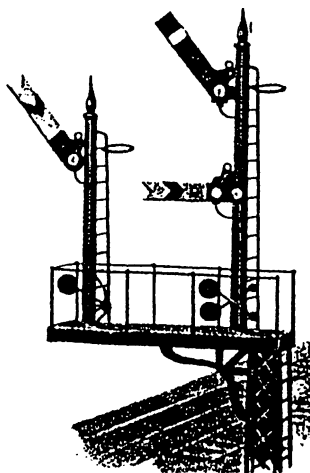
The pub was filled with FROGWOR members, most of them nattering about their working days. The main burden of the talk was how they, to a man, were of the opinion that they'd been made to retire far too early.

"Ah," said Andy, "there's years of work in us yet, years of experience going to waste."

"I hear as how they've still got steam trains in India and other furrin parts," said John wistfully. "I reckon if I wuz younger I'd pomigrate."

There was a thoughtful silence at this.

"No use," sighed Dave, "I bet they'd say we were too old too."



Flotsam and I set off a little before eight. We walked quietly and kept to the shadows, such as they were. It was another dark a foggy night and that hid us well enough.

The only sounds were the infrequent swish of tyres on the road as some unseen vehicle went by, and the drip, drip of the condensed fog as it fell listlessly from the trees.

The lights of the 'Horses were invisible as soon as we crossed the road. Up at the station there were lamps alight, and powerful sodium ones on high poles glowed through the fog. When the fog eddied we could see about fifty feet, but more often it was less than that. Everything was damp, with drips falling steadily from the fancy bits of the platform canopy. It wasn't very warm either.

Out in the yard the trucks and empty carriages, those we could see, lurked in the fog like strange prehistoric beasts, and the rails glistened like so many slug trails.

We crept down to the south end of the platform. From there, most of the time, we could just about make out the signal box.

"Merrie, aint it?" I whispered.

"Sir?" said Flotsam. The lad lacks imagination, amongst other things.

"All this," I said, "the fog, the dark, the silent rolling stock, the deserted station."

"Well sir," said Flotsam seriously, "it is January, one might expect the night to be cold and damp and dark."

I sighed. At least nothing seemed to be happening, and with a bit of luck nothing would.

"Flotsam," I said, "I will take up a strategic position on this bench. You go and have a scout around."

Nothing loathe the lad flourished his net and scuttled off across the tracks where I lost sight of him straight away.

Flotsam's bigger than me so I figured that if anyone was going to run into the mysterious intruder it would better be him than me.

I sat down, wrapped myself more closely in my duffle-coat, and tried to think warm thoughts.

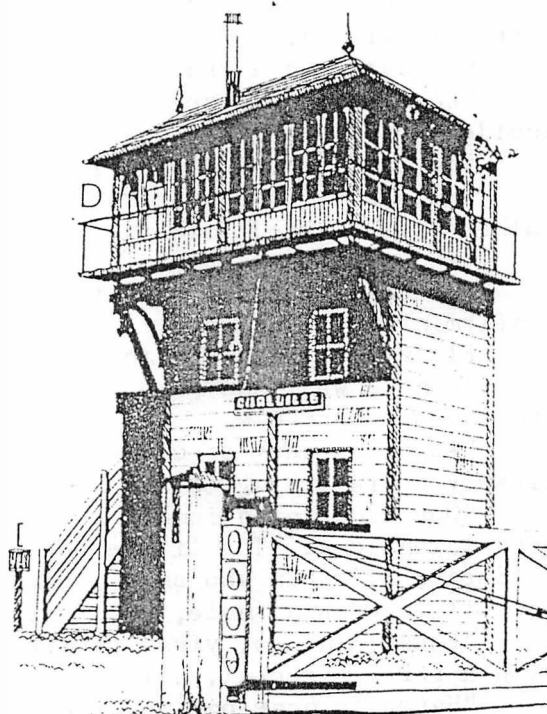
My feet were cold, but I was just beginning to relax and feel a bit more comfortable when I got this feeling that something was not quite as it should be.

I couldn't put my finger on it at first, but then I realised what it was. Or rather, what it wasn't.

The signal box, which should have been visible, was not there! The damn thing had gone, vanished!

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, probably trying to get away from the icy shivers that were dancing up and down my spine.

"Dear me," I thought. Or something like that. "trust Flotsam not to be around when I need him."



Suddenly, silently, without any fuss, the signal box was there.

There was also, I saw with some apprehension, a confusion of shadowy figures milling around at it's base.

The struggles abated and a dark conglomerate advanced towards the platform. I leapt to my feet and started to make hasty withdrawal.

"Sir!" rang out a familiar voice, "I have apprehended a suspicious character!"

"Oh well done! Thou good and faithful servant." I cried, "bring the miscreant over here under the light."

Flotsam put his burden down and disentangled it from his net, relieving it of some small object as he did so.

I scrutinised the captive closely.

"A queer looking cove, to be sure," I said. The chap's face was horribly twisted.

Flotsam gave a grunt of surprise, and pulled the prisoner's face off.

"Dear God!" I gasped, "the poor fellow must have suffered a terrible accident, no wonder he was wearing a mask."

The face revealed was flat, hairless, and scaley.

"Actually, O noble boss person," said Flotsam diffidently, "he's a rather distinguished looking Juganian."

"Ah, just as I suspected!" I exclaimed, "a foreigner!"

Our captive chose then to burst into a spate of gibberish, thus confirming my deduction.

Flotsam, typical of the swine, replied to this with seeming fluency.

Then he went and gave the little chap the object he'd so recently confiscated from him.

"As an earnest of our good intentions, sir," he said, "I have taken the liberty of returning to the gentleman his teleportation device."

"Our good intentions!" I cried indignantly, spluttering somewhat, "Our good intentions! The little perisher's been messing around on S.V.R. property, it's him who should be demonstrating the good intentions. By Jove and Little Orphan Annie, he's got some explaining to do!"

"Eggsplainings, yiss, permit myself I me to do," said the little chap, with a foreign accent, naturally.

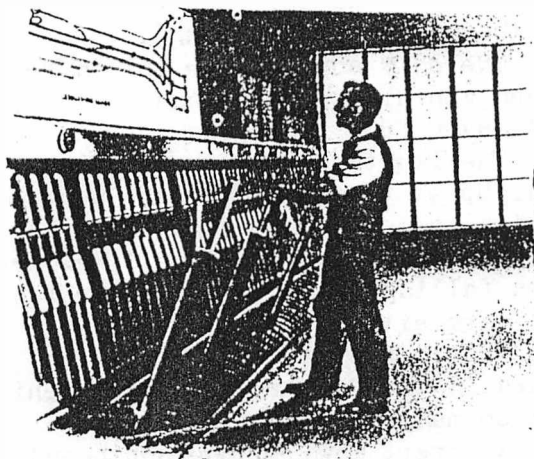
"Harms to nons-one meaning," he continued, "Nothing stolen, pilfered, half-inched have me, I, myself. Copied but only formed."

He fumbled in his clothing for a moment, found what he was looking for, and held it out to me. The poor chap, I couldn't help but notice, had but four fingers on his hand.

"Model, workingful of exactness," he stated, with what I sensed was more than a little pride.

Gingerly I took the object in my hand and examined it. The workmanship was very fine, magnificent even. It dawned on me that it was also an exact replica of the signal box.

"Very interesting," I said thoughtfully. "Be good enough to explain further."



I won't attempt to relate the conversation that followed word for word, but boiled down it seemed that the little chap; his name was something like Kerblitz; was dead keen on steam railways.

As a preliminary to building his own, full scale, railway at home; he must be loaded I thought, intrigued; he was somehow making tiny working models of all the S.V.R. equipment. Rolling stock, signals, buildings, the ruddy lot.

"Regrets me mostly much in home small interest finding," he confided wistfully. "So large an unknowings of, operating in lonesomeness, with the unsurpassable difficultnessess."

At that moment the idea sprang full blossomed into my mind. I recalled the recent moans of the FROGWOR blokes back at the 'Horses.

"Ahem," I ahemmed. "Need some help to get the old steam railway up and running eh? Well now, it just so happens that I might be able to help you there. Naturally my services don't come for nothing..."

"Ha," said Kerblitz shrewdly, "of the deals the doing of, yiss?"

"Could be," I said carefully. "What have you got to offer?"

It wasn't all that difficult to fix up a meeting between Kerblitz and the FROGWOR blokes. I don't know the details, exactly, but they came to some agreement. That was about a year ago.

I got a working model of a steam engine in this morning's post. That makes eight of the little beauties. They sell like hot cakes.

I placed the engine on the table, on top of the Bridgnorth Echo as it happened.

Right on top of the item headlined;

**EIGHTH EX-GWR MAN VANISHES!**

I allowed myself a little smirk.

"Flotsam!" I cried, "hurry up with the muffins, I'm starving."



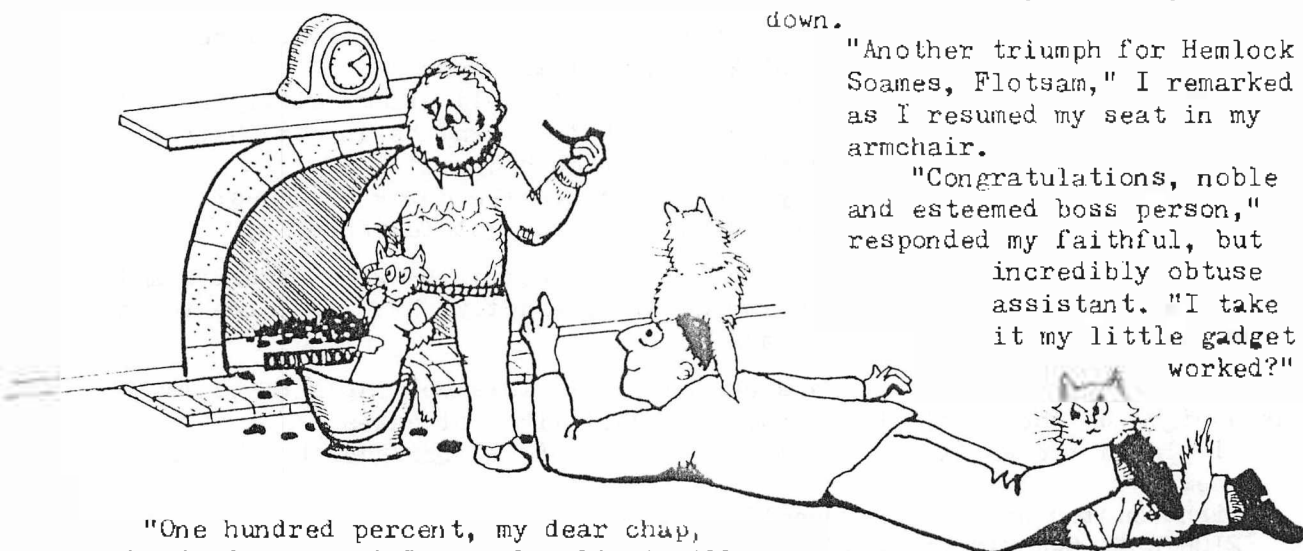
# A SLIP OF THE TONG

"Not at all, not at all," I murmured into the mouthpiece, "I was only too happy to be of assistance. Yes, I quite understand about the knighthood. That's OK, your highness, I don't mind waiting until your mother...."

Eventually I was able to still the grateful outpourings of my illustrious client and put the 'phone down.

"Another triumph for Hemlock Soames, Flotsam," I remarked as I resumed my seat in my armchair.

"Congratulations, noble and esteemed boss person," responded my faithful, but incredibly obtuse assistant. "I take it my little gadget worked?"



"One hundred percent, my dear chap, one hundred percent! Our noble client will no longer have to endure the snide, and putatively treasonable, remarks made about his royal lugholes."

*Slip of the Tong 1.*

Flotsam immersed himself in his book again. Sometimes I regretted that afternoon I'd spent teaching him to read. I leaned forward and peered at the title. 'The Charmingness of Quarks' it said. No doubt, I deduced, one of those self-help books, along the lines of 'How to make friends and influence people'. Really, the things those peculiar people at M.I.T. keep sending the lad.

The telephone conversation had left me feeling quite unsettled. Unable to contain my restlessness I leapt from my chair; much to the gratification of the moggie who had been in prior occupation. I gave a hop and a skip and threw my pipe into the coal scuttle. This last action was inadvertant.

"By Jove, by Jupiter, and by Spike Milligan!" I exclaimed in ringing tones. My head was still in the coal scuttle at the time, y'see, because I was looking for my pipe.

"This calls for a celebration, Flotsam!" I cried, "How would you like to dine out tonight, lad?"

"Oh goody!" cried the mentally deficient menial, his little face aglow, "Fish and chips twice in one month!" He sprang to his feet and enthusiastically tripped over one of the cats.

"Nay lad," I declaimed, tearing the agitated feline loose from my leg. "We can do better than that. We'll patronise that new Chinese place in the High Street...Run along and break open your piggy bank."

Thirty minutes later we were seated comfortably in an acove in the Ying Tong Chinese eatery, a diminutive waiter hovering nearby.

"Neat, that," remarked the irrepressable Flotsam, indicating the levitating Chinaman.

"Pay him no heed," I advised, "he's only doing it to attract our notice, it's all done with mirrors."



I looked at a menu. Flotsam looked at a menu.

"Not the Sweet and Sour," I mused.

"I'll chicken out of the Chow Mein," quipped Flotsam. I ignored his cheap witticism.

"How about Number 13?" I suggested, the Yatangi Hoipoloi?"

"Surely, Illuminated Master, you mean the Yata Nagi Hopi Loi?" ventured Flotsam, boldly.

"Insufferable wretch!" I cried in righteous indignation, "do you presume to correct my pronunciation!?"

"A thousand pardons! oh kindly and indulgent boss person," quavered the admonished skivvy, cringing servilely.

Slightly mollified I conceded,

"Possibly, just possibly, your version

might pass amongst the lower class of coolies in the back streets of Kowloon or Tiger Bay," I said, "But a purist could not accept anything less than 'Yatangi Hoipoloi'".

Emboldened by my misguided condensation Flotsam took it upon himself to beckon the waiter over, remarking as he did so;

"Shall we see what this fellow makes of it, sir?"

Flotsam fixed the waiter chappie with an unwavering eye.

"Two Yata Nagi Hopi Loi," he enunciated clearly.

Well, I wasn't about to be out done by a mere minion. I swiftly countered with;

"He means two YATANGI HOIPOLOI," I said very firmly.

The waiter turned an amusing shade of green and uttered a phrase not often encountered in polite Chinese society. He then suddenly, from some secret recess about his miniscule person, produced a singularly large and nasty piece of artillery masquerading as a hand gun.

He pointed this disagreeable object precisely at my left nostril and hissed, "Into the klitchen, flollen devils!"

As an English gentleman of considerable refinement I found the waiter's mode of address uncouth and offensive. However I did not wish to provoke the poor benighted, and possibly mentally disturbed, oriental to do something hasty and regrettable so I moved to comply with his inelegantly phrased invitation.

As Flotsam passed the waiter he mischievously shot forth a hand and squeezed the barrel of the pistol between his finger and thumb. This not only flattened the end of the barrel but it also upset the waiter.

I deduced that Flotsam's modification of the gun would seriously impair the effectiveness of the weapon. However I suppressed a twinge of sympathy at the fellow's agitation. After all, one can only put up with so much insolence from the servile classes. As a mark of my disapproval I deliberately refrained from chiding Flotsam for his impulsive action.

Arrived in the kitchen our conductor approached a venerable, distinguished looking Chinese gentleman. While he smiled benignly the waiter burst forth with a torrent of Tiger Bay Chinese, gesticulating wildly in our direction with the disabled pistol as he did so.

I affected indifference, out of good manners, but I observed the pair of them covertly.

I noticed that, as the waiter rattled on, the old gentleman's face became several shades lighter. Some of the other waiters, hurrying past in pursuit of their duties, paused to listen. This had an unfortunate effect that several

items of crockery were dropped to the floor as they waved their arms about and generally exhibited signs of agitation.

"Perhaps the Yata Nagi Hopi Loi is off," suggested Flotsam, aside.

The elderly gentleman, whom I presumed to be the manager of the restaurant, chose just then to approach us, with the original waiter in tow.

I smiled reassuringly. He ignored me.

"What have you been saying to Su Lung?" he demanded, unfriendly like.

"Su Lung?" I enquired, cocking a quizzical eyebrow.

"My waiter," said the manager irritably, "his name is Su Lung."

"Ah," I said, thinking to lighten the mood, "Su Lung, it's been good to know ya." Unfortunately my attempt at humour did not commend itself to the manager. Losing all sense of propriety he stamped his foot and screeched,

"Capitalist running dogs! What have you been saying to my waiter!?"

"As to that," I replied coolly, "We have nothing more than try to order one of your meals, to wit, the Yatangi Hoipoloi."

The manager's face stiffened into a porcelain mask.

"The noble boss person means Yata Nagi Hopi Loi," interjected Flotsam helpfully.

This contribution was plainly of no comfort to the old gentleman. His face went several shades paler still. His lips trembled, his cheek twitched spasmodically, his eyes blinked rapidly.

"I hope the old gent is not prone to fits," I thought apprehensively.

With a visible effort the manager took control of himself. He stood very still and scrutinised us both very carefully. After a considerable pause he shook his head and remarked,

"You occidentals, so blurry insclutable." He smiled nastily and added insultingly, "And you all look the same to me!"

Then, his poise much recovered, he rapidly uttered a string of orders to the assembled staff.

Flotsam and I were unceremoniously hustled into the middle of the kitchen where a substantial iron pillar rose out of the floor and vanished into the ceiling. To this pillar we were in a trice trussed back to back, like a couple of turkey dinners.

"Foolish fellow Flotsam," I whispered to the lackey, "your atrocious pronunciation has evidently caused these people to take umbrage. I do believe my evening is about to be ruined!"

Flotsam received the rebuke in a sulky silence.

Meanwhile the waiters were hurrying back and forth carrying piles of documents, tapes and other stuff. All of which they consigned to the kitchen stoves.

From the restaurant came the sound of raised voices, from which I deduced that, for some reason, the waiters were clearing their customers.

I shook my head sadly. This was no way to encourage trade, I thought disapprovingly.

A door slammed. There was a rattle of bolts. A bevy of waiters gathered together in the kitchen.

Coordinating my observations of these events I was drawn to the conclusion that all was not well restaurant-wise.





The manager chose that moment to approach us.

"If you can't manage the Yatangi Hoipoloi we will make do with some other dish," I offered conciliatingly.

"Do not be so impatient, flollen devils," he said unpleasantly, "soon you will be served out." And off he went, chuckling to himself.

Though the manager was in a good humour I wasn't altogether reassured.

"Perhaps, oh noble boss," suggested Flotsam, "it's early closing night."

I discounted this suggestion after a brief moment of thought.

The frenetic activity in the kitchen ceased. The staff formed themselves into a line. The manager harangued them briefly. Everyone bowed to the manager, he bowed back, then they broke ranks and filed out of the back door.

The manager, remembering his manners, raised his hat to us as he left.

There followed car door slamming noises, the revving of engines, the sounds of cars moving off, then silence.

"Flotsam," I said thoughtfully, "I don't think we're going to get served tonight, be a good fellow and get us out of these ropes."

"Indeed sir," he observed, "there doesn't seem much point in hanging around." He thereupon burst our bonds, tearing the rope as if it was just so much wet spaghetti. I hoped the manager wouldn't mind his ruining the rope, but anyway, I reflected, he had sort of asked for it.

As we were ambling away from the premises there was a sudden muffled bang. A whoosh of flame engulfed the whole building.

"Goodness me," I had to exclaim, "those careless fellows must have left the gas on!"

"Very careless boss, very careless," agreed Flotsam. "But then, they're not British, are they?"

"How very true," I said, then, "But the night is still young and we haven't eaten. Perhaps we could try that Indian place in Market Street."

"An excellent idea oh wise boss person," agreed Flotsam.

I could just about murder a large helping of Ran Din Go Cha."

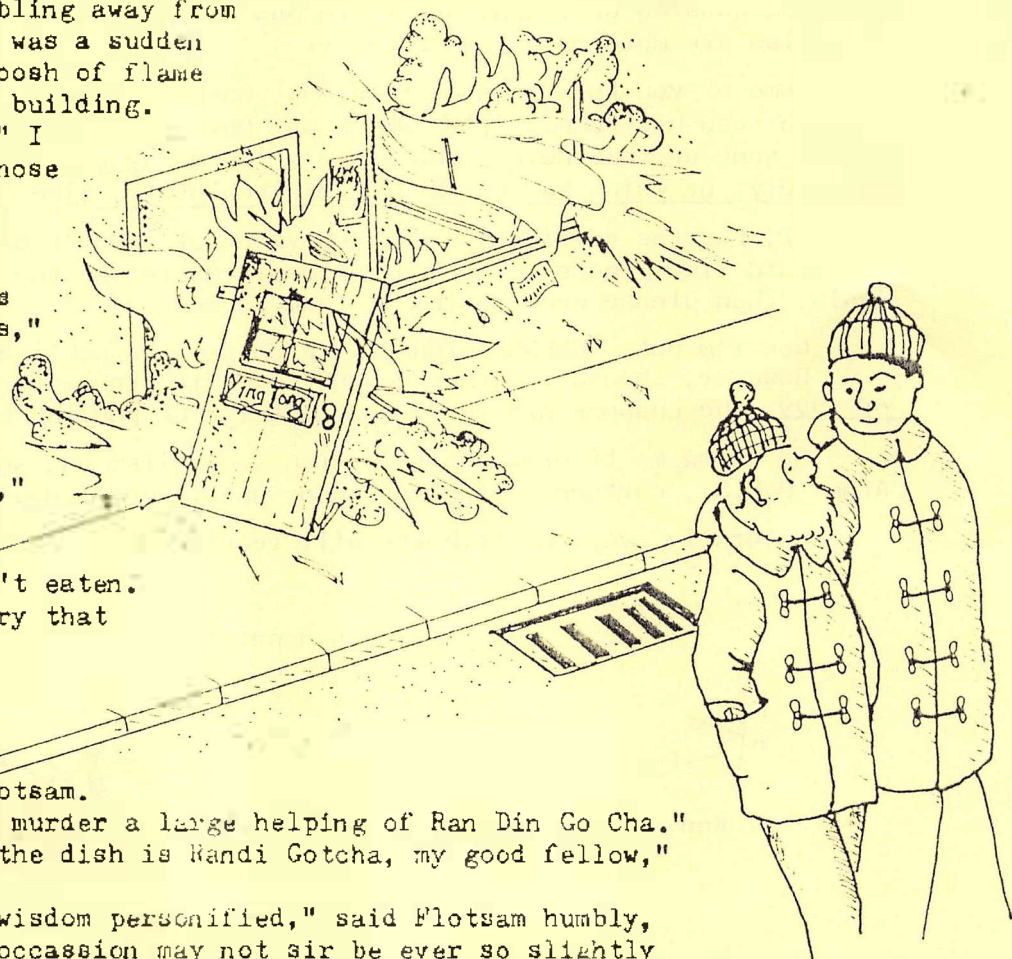
"The name of the dish is Randi Gotcha, my good fellow," I corrected.

"Surely, oh wisdom personified," said Flotsam humbly, "on this one rare occasion may not sir be ever so slightly mistaken about the pronunciation."

I restrained myself and administered only the one kick to the presumptuous lout's ankle.

We strolled on, the next stop the Gunga Jinn and Randi Gotcha.

(Ran Din Go Cha actually, Flotsam).





# Atom

## 2000

It's time there was another  
Atom anthology!

The Ella Parker collection and the tribute assembled by Vinç Clarke are both out of print. In any case the both of them combined represent only a fraction of Arthur Thomson's output.

Older fan's memories of Atom's work may have become less sharp with the passing of years, and there has arisen a generation to which Atomillos are more myth than reality.

Some of you folk reading this must have Atomillos, or you know of someone who has some...illos which may have been gathering dust for years; some of them never used, some of them maybe published only once, or rarely, or which had a restricted circulation, like in an APA.

If, for the edification and enjoyment of today's old and new fans, you would like these forgotten masterpieces to see the light of day again, then please send copies of them to me.

Now I'm not, UNCONDITIONALLY, promising to publish an Atom anthology. However, should I gather enough suitable Atom material by the OCTOBER of 1999, the chances are very good that I WILL publish such an anthology.

So allow me to urge you to search your files and send me a copy of any Atom B.E.M., cartoon, illustration or doodle you find.

Naturally every contributor will receive proper credit.

Yours hopefully,

Ken - ch.

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