

The
Adventures
of

Hemlock
Soames

(and Flotsam)

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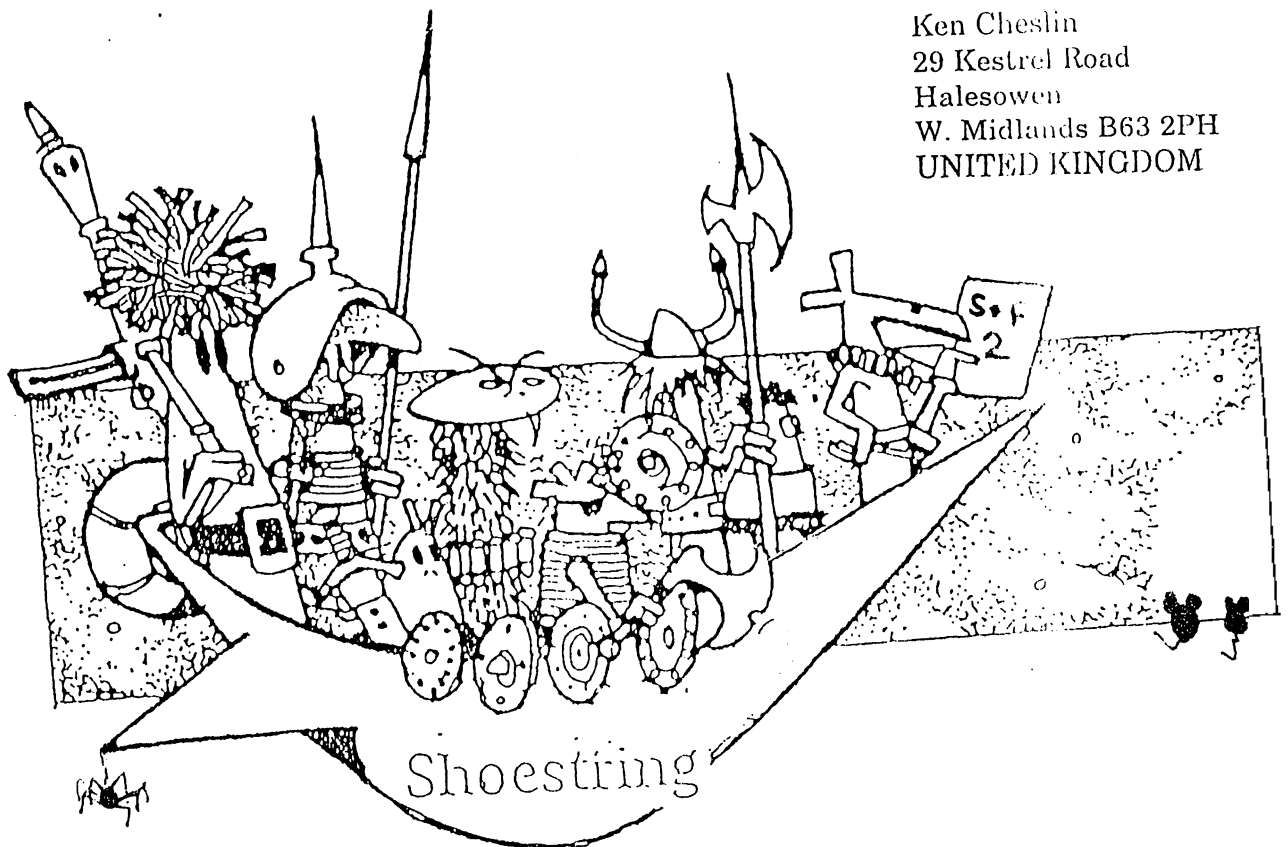
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This is volume 2 of THE ADVENTURES OF HEMLOCK SOAMES (AND FLOTSAM).

Volume 1 consisted of the adventures of the intrepid duo. This volume contains stories which are more nearly mysteries, or at least they contain to a greater or lesser extent an element of detection.

contents

The Black Bart Affair.....	1
The Case of the Careless Heart.....	6
The Game's Afoot.....	13
The Munster Mystery.....	20
The Norfolk Knickers.....	29
The Irkham House Affair.....	47
The Clobbered Cavalier.....	58
The Christmas Tree Caper.....	66
The Loch MacIntyre Monster.....	77

Vol.2. of The Adventures of Hemlock Soames (& Flotsam)
A SHOESTRING PUBLICATION.

MAY GHOD PRESERVE ALL WHO SAIL IN HER.

THE BLACK BART AFFAIR



I blame television, and films, and radio, and books. There is hardly a story featuring an Irish Roman Catholic priest which does not depict him as a merry, whiskey-loving fellow.

Small wonder then that when we were introduced to Father James by that low down, cunning sod Brian Jordan, editor of The Black Country Trumpet, that I eagerly, innocently, accepted the priest's invitation to visit the manse.

To my chagrin I soon discovered that the usual drink the good Father served was tea. Unless there was some special occasion; then he would dole out a glass or two of quite passable sherry.

Father James claimed to be an ex-Midland Champion chess player. (ah, has not the Master warned us against those who are addicted to the game?) But he couldn't have been all that good because Flotsam beat him in all the four games they played on our first visit.

Flotsam, the witless wight, was flattered no end by the enthusiasm which Father James showed for his supposed prowess. We were invited to the manse quite often after that. The priest would wheel out other putative chess wizards on these occasions, all of whom Flotsam defeated with little effort. I twigged what the idea was, of course. By inviting Flotsam to these chess evenings Father James was assured of my presence and was able to bask in my reflected glory.

On this particular evening Flotsam played eight of Father James's cronies simultaneously. For some reason they, most unsportingly, deprived the lad of his queens. It made no difference, the lad wiped the floor with them.

The sherry didn't last long so tea was served.

I was sitting gazing gloomily at my cup and wishing that it was a pint of Lumphammer, and paying no particular attention, when Flotsam asked;

"Has Bartholemew showed up?"

Father James shook his head. "No," he replied worriedly, "I'm begining to think he's been run over, or has fallen into the clutches of these cat-nappers."

"Cat-nappers?" I said unwaryily, "You mean kidnappers?"

"Oh no," said Father James, "cat-nappers. Bartholemew is a big black cat who lives at the convent. He's often away for days, but this time he's been missing for over a week, I fear the worst."

"I expect he'll turn up," I said uninterestedly, "you know what cats are like."

"I hope so," said the priest, "poor Sister Maureen dotes on the creature and she's driving the other nuns to distraction with her werriting."

"Perhaps I could make enquiries?" suggested Flotsam.

"Shouldn't be too hard to find a missing cat," I said incautiously.

Unfortunately Father James heard my low voiced remark and immediately siezed upon it.

"That's very good of you, Mr. Soames!" he exclaimed, "I'll 'phone the convent and tell them to expect you tomorrow morning!"

While I was casting about for some way to wriggle out of the silly assignment he dashed off.

"Bugger me!" I said crossly.

"I beg your pardon," Father Bond, Father James's sidekick, bearing a tea-pot, had silently appeared at my side.

I'm not normally a devious person, as is well known, but in view of the lad's tender years I thought it best to be tactful.

"I said, 'Bother me, is that the time!'"

"Oh," said Father Bond, and wandered off.

The next morning, it was a Friday, at the crack of dawn, well, about ten o'clock actually, me and Flotsam presented ourselves at the Union Street door of the convent.

One of the nuns, a flighty young thing owing to no more than about sixty winters, hight Sister Sarah, let us in. She led us to the visitor's parlour, where the Mother Superior and another nun awaited us.

I could tell at a glance which one was Mother Eunice. She was the one who was the dead spit of that Lady Livia from the I CLAUDIUS TV series.

The other nun, who looked for all the world like an overgrown Hobbit, I assumed, rightly, was Sister Maureen.

"Good morning, Mr. Soames, Mr. Flotsam," said Mother Eunice, in the sort of voice which makes one wonder if you've left your flies undone.

She actually smiled at Flotsam. A sort of last-rays-of-the-sun-on-a-glacier sort of a smile, but nevertheless, a smile.

"Sister Maureen, will you explain?" she said, making it sound more of a command than a request.

Sister Maureen's eyes were red. I rather suspected that the poor old dear had been crying.

"Bartholemew," said Sister Maureen bravely, "has a lovely nature."

Mother Eunice half closed her eyes and sent a shower of icicles in Sister Maureen's direction.

Sister Maureen hastily continued. "He's big, and black and," defiantly, "cuddly. Oh he's a bit of a rover, but that's cats for you. Tuesdays and Fridays, as regular as clockwork, he turns up at half past eleven, and usually stays until after breakfast the next morning. He came as usual a week ago last Tuesday but he hasn't been seen since." She stopped abruptly and touched her eyes with a soggy handkerchief.

"Tuesdays and Fridays?" said Flotsam. "Is there anything special about those days?"

"Special?" said Sister Maureen vaguely. "Not really. Tuesday is chicken day, and Friday, of course, is fish day."

"This cat," I thought, "is nobody's fool."

I added aloud.

"And what, exactly, does the missing feline look like?"

Sister Maureen looked blank.

"Black," she said, then, realising perhaps that this description lacked something, "Black all over, with a few white hairs under his chin."

"On his throat," put in Mother Eunice firmly.

The two sisters in Christ eyed each other warily.

"OK," I sighed. "so we're looking for a big black tomcat with a few white hairs on his





his chin or his throat."

"He is quite large," offered Sister Maureen.

"Fat," said Mother Eunice decisively.

"So," I said, "He's a tom cat? He hasn't, er, been attended to?"

Sister Maureen blushed. Mother Eunice didn't blink an eye.

"From my observations," she said drily, "I would be inclined to believe that the creature has not been neutered."

"Not a lot to go on," I observed when Flotsam and I were out on the street. "Seen one big black cat and you've seen them all. Still, I suppose we'd better go through the motions."

"House to house enquiries?" suggested Flotsam.

"Aye," I said, "house to house."

Through long, and sometimes bitter, experience I have developed a technique for house to house enquiries. Flotsam knocks on the door and I ask the questions from behind his back. Flotsam's undeniably impressive physique tends to instill an attitude of respect and cooperation in the interviewees.

The first few houses yielded sparse results. Either the occupants were not at home, or they had nothing to tell us.

We had better luck at number sixteen, 'The Aviary'.

"I didn't even know the nuns had a cat," said the brown-eyed lady of the house. "did you Steve?"

Steve, the spouse apparently, blinked his red-rimmed eyes and muttered a subdued "no."

"But Wednesday's missing," said the lady suddenly.

"Wednesday?" I said, wondering if I'd heard her correctly.

"Our own cat," said Mrs. Number Sixteen. "We call him Wednesday because he always comes home on that day. We hardly see him all the rest of the week. We always have oysters on Wednesday," she said reflectively, casting a shy glance at her knackered husband.

Mr. Sixteen smiled sheepishly went off into the back.

"I see," I said, "so now we have two missing cats. Maybe there are cat-nappers about."

"May I enquire as to the appearance of the cat Wednesday?" asked Flotsam.

"Oh," said the lady, "he's black. A big black tom cat."

At the next few houses we found some who had cats. But none of them was black, none of them was missing, and no-one had seen anything of the convent moggie.

There was a bit of a misunderstanding with Mrs. Twenty-seven.

"You're looking for Brian? He aint here. What? You're not looking for Brian. A big black tom cat? You mean our Tiddles? Well, he aint here either. Haven't seen the sod for a week."

She then slammed the door in our faces.

"Curiouser and curiouser," I mused. "It certainly looks as if someone is out to make himself a cat-skin weskit."

"Three missing felines," said Flotsam thoughtfully, "It does seem to be a little suspicious."

"Cat?" said the man at Thirty-six, shaking his shaggy head.

"Who's that at the door Darroll?" called a female voice from the nether regions.

"Some gents looking for a missing cat," said Darroll, "you know anything about a missing cat Rosie?"

"Try forty-one," said Rosie, "he's lost his cat."
We worked our way along to forty-one.

"Argggh." said forty-one, rolling his eyes horribly. "Swelp the barnacles, I don't know nuffink abart a nunnery cat, I'm a spider man m'self. But some bugger's pinched the wife's Fang."

"Pinched your wife's fang?" I said weakly, picturing a partly disabled female vampire.

"Aye matey," roared forty-one, "Fang, her big black tom cat. I reckon he's jumped ship m'self. Can't stand cats. Hasn't been aboard for a week. He's easy to tell, he's got a scar on his left ear 'ole."

"Right ear, my love," called a voice from inside the house.

"Get back in the galley, ye mutinous swab!" shouted forty-one, almost deafening us.

He added, as he closed the door. "Left ear 'ole mind!"

"Four," I said pensively. "All, strangely enough, black. It's more than a coincidence."

"We've come to the end of the street," observed Flotsam, redundantly. "Now what shall we do, oh noble boss person?"

"Union Passage," I said. "It backs onto the church property so it may well be part of Bartholemew's stamping grounds."

Well, I'm sure it was. But there were other cats living in Union Passage. Ginger, white, tabby, all accounted for and not one of them missing.

Then we got to Ivy Cottage.

Mr. Ivy Cottage wouldn't open his door. Conversation was therefore a little difficult. Also the occupant seemed to be under some stress.

In between such mystifying exclamations as, "mutinous dogs," and, "tip me the black spot would they!" we elicited the information that a large black tom-cat, when it felt like it answering to the name of Captain Flint, had gone missing.

We came at last to the sole remaining unvisited dwelling.

"No, I don't know about any missing cats. Yes, mine's black, name of Sidney. No, of course he's not missing."

"Would you mind if we came in and took a look at him, madam?" asked Flotsam in his politest voice.

"Well, all right," said the lady. "Just a minute while I close the other door."

A minute later the lady let us in. She carefully closed the front door and led us across the hall to another door, presumably her front room or parlour.

In the parlour there was a huge black cat sitting, where else?, on a mat. He was licking his naughty bits with a sort of glum and abstracted air.

"I've just brought him back from the vet's," said the lady cheerfully. "He was always off molling, for days at a time, so I took him to have his goolies whipped off, that'll cure him."

She smiled.

I don't really care for women who smile like that when they talk about, er, you know, cutting off..things.

"The cat is certainly black," affirmed Flotsam, unfeeling sod, and, examining the animal more closely he continued,

"he appears to have a few white hairs on his chin, and a scar on his right ear."





"Seen one black cat and you've seen them all," I said uneasily.

"Still, it does seem a bit odd, Sir," said Flotsam.

Flotsam drew me to one side.

"I'm sure Sir has been struck by the curious incidence of missing black cats," he said, "I wonder if sir has considered....?"

The penny dropped.

"Just testing, Flotsam," I said lightly. "It's really quite obvious. But anyway, well done lad."

Flotsam simpered gratefully.

I approached the putative owner of the emaciated black cat.

"I wish to borrow your cat. But first of all let me explain why.

The nuns," I said....

The convent had the biggest room so we held the party there.

"I began to suspect the truth," I explained to the attentive Father James, "when we found that a third black cat had gone missing. Oh, I know, some would say 'seen one black cat and you've seen them all', but this was too much of a coincidence. Being open minded I made allowances for the variations inevitable in all eye-witness descriptions. I became convinced that it was all the same cat. All of the 'owners' stated that they didn't see their cat for days at a time. I figured that Bartholemew was spreading his favours, so to speak. I reckoned that if something drastic hadn't happened to him he would be in some nearby home. As luck would have it we found him, alive and more or less intact. Actually quite a simple case."

"Not all that simple," said Father James admiringly.

I looked suitably modest. Well, I am modest.

Black Bart was sitting on Sister Maureen's lap.

"So who really owns him?" asked the good father.

I smiled. "I don't think anybody owns that cat," I said, "he's a law unto himself. I expect that he's too set in his ways to change much. He'll probably continue his wandering ways until he pegs it."

The party was going splendidly. Even Mother Eunice had condescended to take a glass of sherry.

"Well, nobody seems to be particularly worried," observed Father James. "It was a brilliant idea, getting all of his 'owners' together like this. You thought of it I suppose?"

I briefly considered taking the credit, but reflected that he was bound to find out.

"Not at all," I said generously, "it was all Sister Maureen's idea, and an excellent idea it was too."

Sister Maureen noticed that we were looking her way. She smiled contentedly.

"A regular Walter Mitty, that cat," said Father James fondly.

"Aye," I said, "I don't know about cats having nine lives, but we know Black Bart was leading at least six."



THE CASE OF THE CARELESS HEART

Flotsam woke me with the usual cup of tea.

"Finished the Monet?" I asked.

"Indeed sir," he beamed, "and it only took me until three o'clock this morning."

"Good lad," I said, tossing him a biscuit, "the dealer's due at ten." "I think," I said judiciously, "we might have a go at a few Turners next, or maybe a Gainsborough, they always go well."

"I was glad that Flotsam had taken up painting, I hoped that he'd stick with it for a while, it was proving rather lucrative. All open and above board of course. I sold them as copies. Could I help it if they looked so authentically old after Flotsam had put them through his machine?"

"Right then," I said briskly, "a spot of breakfast next and then we're off."

"Off, sir, to Hamley Hall sir?" enquired the lad eagerly.

"Breakfast first," I said firmly, "then Mr. Robson, then the bank, and then Hamley Hall. Don't worry, it's on all day."

It was not much after eleven o'clock when we got off the 'bus at the gates of Hamley Hall. The grounds were already crowded, and as it was a fine day, likely to remain so.

"The beer tent first," I insisted, "I am in need of refreshment after the journey."

The lad looked a bit downcast.

"Oh, all right," I relented, and extracted a couple of tenners from my wallet, (who says crime, or art, doesn't pay?). here you are, go and have a look round on your own, but meet me back here no later than two o'clock, mind."

"Sir is the soul of generosity!" exclaimed Flotsam happily, and off he marched in search of candy floss.

At this 'open day' at Hamley Hall, a fete I suppose one could call it, there were beer tents, tea tents, punch and judy shows, shooting galleries, roll-a-pennies, raffles, and lots of other 'side shows'. In addition there were the horse events and the 'battle'. This last was put on by The Sealed Knot and another Civil War society this year. Last year it had been Napoleonics.

All very interesting. But I'd come primarily to see the Civil War exhibition in the Hall itself.

Although this was billed as a Civil War exhibition, (the real Civil War, not that American affair), it actually covered a generation before and after the conflict.

We passed through the rooms where the furniture was displayed, and a little more slowly through the arms and armour section, and the clothing, and everyday items of the time. There were costumed dummies set in dining rooms, drawing rooms, kitchens, dairies, a smithy, and so on.

The diarama's of various battles were very good, and the section devoted to illustrating the escape of the future Charles II. As Holbeache House is near, and Boscable not so far away, they were both featured.

There were maps, illustrations, and a printed account of the fugitive prince's adventures in our local area. All very interesting of course, but I had come to see the Dud Dudley material.

The Ward family, which had connections with Dud Dudley, the nature of which I'm not sure; he was a by-blow of the Earl of that time, had much material which was rarely or never on view to the public. This year they had generously agreed to exhibit many unique documents. To my mind this was an opportunity not to be missed.

"A remarkable chap, Dud Dudley," I informed the attentive Flotsam, "Not only was he a great and inventive iron-master but he also fought for the king in the Civil War. As I recall he was captured at Worcester and sentenced to death. He escaped there, was recaptured and imprisoned in London, from where he made an extraordinary escape. He was on the continent with the king for a while, then he returned to England and lived secretly near Worcester for a time. After the Restoration he resumed work as an iron-master, though in straitened circumstances. He wrote a famous book about this time, but apparantly died in poverty and obscurity."

"One would have thought that so gallant a gentleman would have attracted his royal master's favour," remarked Flotsam.

"Indeed," I agreed. "But the king was in a difficult position after the Restoration. Dud Dudley was not the only loyal follower that the king could not save from ruin."

Hello," I said, "here's something I've not seen before."

The case we had come to bore the caption, 'Miscellaneous Papers'. In the middle of the display there was a sheet of thick, browning paper. On this, in an elegant hand, was written;

Where yester eve becommeth today
In tymes long shadow Careless lay
Careless ye head he over ruled
And by ye heart betimes was fooled.

"Not great verse," I remarked, "but it does have a certain air. Rather remeniscent of the Musgrave Ritual."

"Interesting, isn't it?" said a cultured voice at my elbow.

It startled me for a moment, the old gent had come up so quietly.

"Ah, yes, indeed," I said. "A strange fragment to be found amongst the relics of Dud Dudley."

"Quite," said the old gent. "I'm not entirely sure that it really belongs here, though tradition has it that it was found amongst his effects."

"Really?" I said politely, "and where should it belong?"

"Probably in the queen's collection," he replied pensively.

"The queen's collection?" I enquired, surprised.

"Very possibly," said the old gent. "Dud Dudley is supposed to have won it from the king while playing cards."

I scrutinised the sheet of paper more closely.

"It hardly looks like a valuable stake," I mused.

"Well," said the old gent, "the king apparantly thought it was. The story goes that the king wouldn't explain why it was valuable, probably he



was peeved at losing. He's supposed to have said that if Dud was so clever he'd work it out, but as far as we know he never did."

"Obviously it has something to do with Boscable House," observed Flotsam authoritatively.

"Obviously? Boscable?" said the old gent, puzzled.

"Oh, very obviously," I said. "er, you explain Flotsam."

"Certainly sir," replied Flotsam, gratified. He assumed his lecturing voice and went on.

"The word 'Careless' occurs twice, and is capitalised. This is most significant when we recall that it was a certain William Careless who sheltered the prince, later king, at Boscable. It is quite possible that the rhyme is intended to draw our attention to that location."

"Amazing!" cried the old gent.

"Elementary my dear sir," I lied smoothly, "the clue is so very obvious that even my obtuse assistant noticed it."

Then, dammit, I pushed my luck. I get these mad urges from time to time.

"No doubt the sense of the verses would become clear upon some further scrutiny."

"A visit to Boscable would be advisable in that case," suggested Flotsam.

"Oh yes," I bumbled foolishly.

The old chap had become quite excited. "You really think that the riddle could be resolved!?" he asked.

"Oh, indubitably, indubitably," I agreed.

A smartly dressed young chap came up just then.

"Ah, there you are, Your Grace," he said.

I did a double take.

"Here Harry," said the old gent, His Grace, "this chappie has solved part of the Dud Dudley riddle!"

"Really?" said Harry, looking more wary than impressed.

"What's more," continued His Grace, "he thinks that he can solve the rest of it!"

I groaned inwardly and decided that it was time to make myself scarce.

"Ah, well, Your Grace," I said, "It's been nice meeting you. Must be off now, nearly tea time y'know."

"Nonsense my dear fellow," said His Grace, grasping my arm surprisingly firmly, "I can't let you escape so easily!"

Escape was rather on my mind.

"We'll take tea at Boscable, I insist!" said His Grace and, addressing Harry he went on, "Harry, order the blue Rolls and 'phone Jimmy at once and tell him we're on our way."

Still clutching my elbow His Grace hauled me off, remarking, "And Glover can drop you off at home afterwards."

Another fine mess that idiot Flotsam has got me into I thought as I was dragged protesting all the way to the car.

A genuine butler opened the door for us. He took my coat and Flotsam's without blinking an eyelid at our decidedly plebian appearance. He then conducted us all, with old fashioned dignity, into a high ceilinged room not much smaller than the whole ground floor of Gas Lane Cottage.

Here 'Jimmy', another aristocratic fellow, much younger than His Grace, was waiting for us.

"Dear me," said His Grace, "I whisked you off so precipitately that I clean forgot to ask you your names!"

"Think nothing of it, Your Grace, I said, graciously. "I'm Hemlock Soames, and this is my assistant, Dr. Don Flotsam."



His Grace did the honours.

He was Walter, fourteenth Duke of Duggley. Harry was Harry Warner, His Grace's private secretary, and 'Jimmy' was Major James White, Baron Wombourne. We were indeed moving in exalted circles.

Shaw, the butler, re-entered just then, ushering in a pretty young maid wheeling a rather gigantic tea trolley thing.

"Now," said His Grace eagerly, quite neglecting his tea and the rather delicious eccles cake, "to the riddle."

"Oho," I thought, then, inspired, I said, feigning regret, "we seem to have neglected to bring a copy of the doggerel with us."

"No matter," said His Grace brightly, "I know it off by heart," and to prove it he recited;

Where yester eve becommeth today
In tymes long shadow Careless lay
Careless ye head he over ruled
And by ye heart betimes was fooled.

"There!" he said triumphantly, and added, "Can you get a copy made for Mr. Soames, Harry?"

"After tea we can get on with solving it, can we?" asked Jimmy, twiddling excitedly with his spotty bow tie.

"Impossible." I said firmly.

"Impossible!" cried His Grace, Jimmy and Harry in unison. Shaw, attending the cake stand, never moved a muscle.

"How am I going to get out of this?" I thought in quiet desperation.

Flotsam spoke.

"What sir, with forgivable impatience, has not explained," he said gravely, "is that the riddle cannot be attempted during the hours of daylight."

"What! What!" and similar exclamations were made by our hosts.

"Precisely my meaning," I declared confidently.

"What has daylight got to do with it," asked Harry.

"Why, everything," I said. "It's extraordinarily simple. Flotsam, be good enough to elucidate, my good fellow, I find explaining the obvious so very tedious."

"As Sir wishes," responded the lad eagerly.

I mentally crossed my fingers.

"May I draw your attention to the first line?" said Flotsam unctuously...

'Where yester eve becommeth today'

"This plainly indicates that the correct time to attempt the cryptogram is at midnight, when one day shades over to the next. In all probability it would be a night when there was a full moon."

"A full moon?" enquired Jimmy.

"Quite so sir," said Flotsam, "otherwise there would be less likely to be enough light for, 'Tymes long shadow!'"

"Well put, lad," I said warmly.

"Brilliant!" exclaimed His Grace, with terrifying fervour.

"How extremely fortunate," remarked Harry, the swine. "There happens to be a full moon tonight."



Under my breath I cursed Harry and prayed for rain.

"Then you must stay for supper," declared Jimmy, "and at the appropriate time we can continue."

I glared at Flotsam. He was taking all this with irritating calmness.

"Well," I said, "I'm not promising anything. The riddle has been easy enough so far, but.."

"Easy enough!" cried His Grace admiringly. "Easy enough! My dear chap, you've made more progress in the last three hours than the family has made in the last three centuries!"

"We shall see what we shall see," I said judiciously.

Darkness fell. The moon rose. There was not a cloud to be seen. The full moon illuminated the terrace.

"Half past eleven," said Jimmy enthusiastically.

"Better make a move then," suggested Harry.

"Ah, yes," I stalled. "What we need now is..hmmmm" I scratched my beard and shot Flotsam a meaningful glare.

"A sundial," said Flotsam happily.

"Exactly!" I said adamantly. "We've got to have a sun dial."

Puzzled looks flashed around.

"Tymes long shadow", explained Flotsam, "obviously a sun dial."

"There is no sun dial," said Jimmy, shaking his head.

My spirits revived wonderfully.

"Got to have a sun dial," I said stubbornly.

"Ahem," said Shaw, the interfering butler.

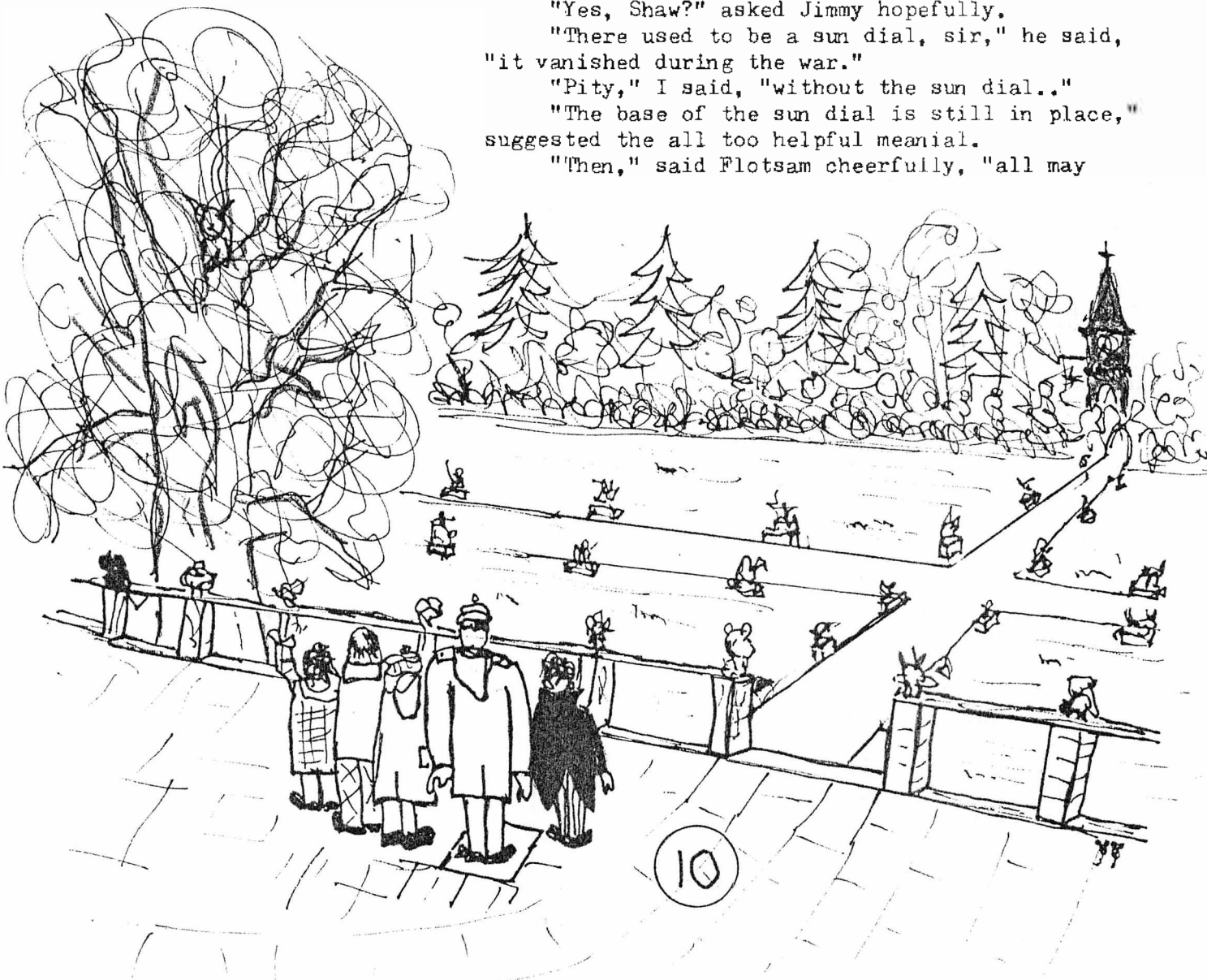
"Yes, Shaw?" asked Jimmy hopefully.

"There used to be a sun dial, sir," he said, "it vanished during the war."

"Pity," I said, "without the sun dial.."

"The base of the sun dial is still in place," suggested the all too helpful meenial.

"Then," said Flotsam cheerfully, "all may



yet be well."

Shaw led the way out onto the terrace. There was little difficulty in finding the place where the sun dial had been.

Flotsam stood on the spot, the moon casting his shadow ahead of him.

"Bugger the moon," I muttered.

"Eh?" said His Grace.

"Nothing," I said, "just working things out."

Flotsam pointed along his shadow. The terrace was fronted with a stone bulestrade, along which at regular intervals were placed stone heads.

"The third one to the left of the steps would seem to be the one indicated by the line; 'Careless ye head he over ruled' he observed.

We examined the head.

"Now what?" said Jimmy.

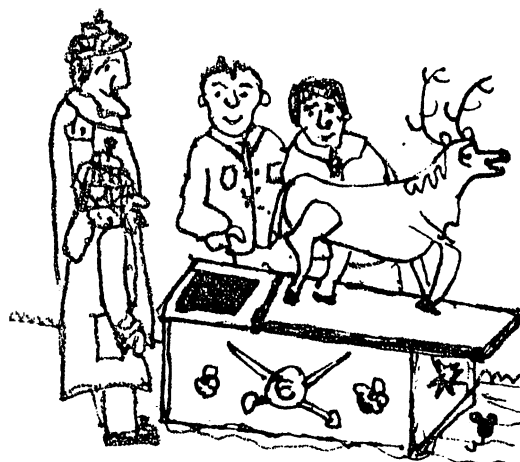
"I dunno," I said, "stone heads aint in my line."

"Oh sir!" simpered Flotsam, "how may one hope to follow the intricate workings of your mighty brain!"

"Er, quite." I said.

"What are you on about?" said Harry impatiently.

"Sir," explained Flotsam, "has deigned to give me a hint."



He returned to stand where the sun dial had been and pointed.

"We must," he said, "project a line from here, through the head, and out into the garden."

"Which should bring us to the heart, as in, 'And by ye heart betimes was fooled'." I said.

We left Shaw standing on the base of the sundial and went down into the grounds. The gardens were large and formal, and stretched away to the boundary wall. The main paths formed a cross. The paths were wide and set on either side of them were statues of animals of various kinds, each on a plinth. Nothing resembling a heart though.

Flotsam shuffled about until he got Shaw's head lined up with the stone head. This proved a little awkward because a statue of a deer kept getting in the way.

"You're supposed to be looking for a heart, not a deer," I observed.

Flotsam looked startled.

"Oh sir is in a jocular mood this night!" he exclaimed, "Of course! Not a deer, a hart!"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed His Grace, "I see! A hart! A play on words. H E A R T and H A R T!"

"Just as I suspected," I said modestly.

The deer, or hart, was not particularly large, not much bigger than an Alsatian dog in fact. It stood up on a plinth which was about three feet high and about two feet by four on the top.

"Is this it then?" asked Harry. "There must be more to it than this."

I took out my trusty magnifying glass and examined the hart from nose to tail. I then examined the plinth as closely. Not a sausage.

I straightened up.

"As I thought." I said soberly.

"What! What!" quacked His Grace.

"Just a minute," I said huffily.



"Flotsam," I instructed, "take a look at that there."

While Flotsam was inspecting the statue I stood about wearing a faint, but superior smile.

Flotsam turned. "Sir, as usual, is right again. The top of the plinth comes off."

"The top comes off," exclaimed Jimmy, then, "Not easily it won't, not after all these years."

I nodded to Flotsam. He moved round to the back of the hart and gave the top of the plinth a sharp shove. That did the trick. The statue moved forward and a cavity was revealed. In the cavity was a small, blackened by age, oak chest. Flotsam was deputed to carry it up to the house.

We had to force the chest open. There were the remains of wrapping inside but that mostly fell apart when His Grace attempted to unwrap it.

There was no sign of gold, or jewels. Only a couple of old books. I was very annoyed at the poor result, and after me working my fingers to the bone, as it were, to find the damn thing.

"This one's a diary," said Jimmy.

"So's this," said His Grace. "And look here!"

We looked. Jimmy checked his find. We looked again.

Both of them were inscribed, 'Charles, Prince of Wales'.

"Mine starts in January 1635, ends December 1639," said Jimmy.

"1640 to," he turned the pages carefully..."just before the Battle of Worcester," he said.

"Priceless!" gasped Jimmy.

"Priceless?" I said, cheering up at once.

"As historical documents," said His Grace, "But by rights they belong to the queen. She will certainly want such unique relics.

"Not even treasure trove?" I enquired mournfully.

"I'm afraid not," said Jimmy sympathetically.

"Never mind," said His Grace, "Her Majesty is sure to express her, well, appreciation."

"In any case," said Jimmy, a gent if there ever was one, "your efforts certainly deserve some financial reward, eh, Your Grace?"

"By all means," agreed His Grace warmly. "After all, even Sherlock Holmes wasn't above accepting a fee."

I blushed. To be mentioned in the same breath with The Master! What a compliment.

I banked the cheques His Grace and Jimmy sent to me without troubling Flotsam with the details, naturally. He has no head for finance.

H.M. the Queen was less generous. I suppose that's why she's a very rich woman.

She did send me a rather ornate letter of thanks, signed by some underling. I gave that to Flotsam. He was happy enough.

Well, it takes all sorts.



THE GAME'S AFOOT

I was sitting in the Spotted Cow, minding my own business and enjoying a well deserved pint of Lumhammer, when Brian found me.

"Just the bloke I want to see," said Brian, with the sort of restrained enthusiasm of one who has discovered that someone has pissed in his ash tray.

"I know nothing about it!" I countered, "It's my belief that it's them mice."

"Mice?" mumbled Brian, getting that glassy eyed look in his eyes that marred so many of our conversations.

"Mice." I said authoritatively, "It's well known that the little buggers have a partiality for the hard stuff. I reckon they've figured out a way of extracting the cork."

"Ah," said Brian, eyes narrowing, "You were up at the office last Thursday, weren't you?"

"As it happens," I said smoothly, "I did pop in for a moment, on the off chance of catching you in."

"I was out Thursday," said Brian, "I'm out most Thursdays, a fact you well know. I thought the whiskey bottle looked rather emptier than it should."

"Them mice are clever rascals," I offered hopefully.

"They certainly were," agreed Brian sarcastically, "they even managed to put the cork back."

"You buying then?" I suggested, cleverly changing the subject.

Brian sighed.

"OK," he said, "what'll you have?"

"I wouldn't mind a...". Brian positively glared at me. "a pint of Lumhammer," I said tactfully. This was no time to mention whiskey.

"Mean sod." I thought.

Brian came back, set the glasses down, and sighed heavily. He took a long pull at his pint.

"What's up?" I asked, knowing damn well that the editor of the Black Country Trumpet wouldn't deign to socialise with me unless he had a good reason for doing so.

Brian flushed. "Not my bloody idea," he said resentfully, clearing the ground like. "It's the Duke. The silly sod thinks the sun shines out of your...."

I interrupted swiftly.

"Please!" I remonstrated, shocked. "There are infants present!" I nodded towards Flotsam.

"So," I continued, "The Duke sent you, did he? Some little problem His Grace wants me to exercise my investigatory talents upon, eh?"

"Not exactly," said Brian. "It's some mate of his, or rather his mate's son, that he wants you for."

Flotsam was pretending to do The Times crossword. He's been doing that ever since he read some of the Morse books.

"Put that down and pin back your lug holes," I instructed.

"Now, Brian old mate, 'what's it all about?"

"Not here, not now," said Brian. "I don't know the story. I'm just supposed to take you to Friary House."

We got to Friary House around two o'clock. The house stands back twenty yards from the road that goes from the Stewpony to Kinver. It's large but not enormous, and well proportioned. The sort of house that would have made a comfortable family home for some moderately well off squire. It was constructed of old style red bricks, the windows glazed with genuine old diamond shaped panes, and in the middle of the frontage there was an attractive, large, oak and iron door. There were twelve windows in sight, six below and six above, on either side of the door. At the back, I saw later, there were a couple of acres of walled garden.

Brian rang the bell. The door opened.

"Here he is," said Brian shortly, and immediately made off.

"Funny chap," remarked the bloke in the doorway.

"Suffers something chronic from piles," I said confidentially.

"Do come in, Mr. Soames," said the gent.

He was a bit taller than me, and maybe twenty years younger. He was wearing comfortable tweeds, which looked as if they'd been expensive when new. My impression was that he dressed to suit himself and wasn't too bothered about putting on a show. In that respect he reminded me of His Grace.

We were conducted through a tall, moderately sized hall of pleasing proportions. It was somewhat marred by a large number of animal heads and there 'trophies'. The library was similarly festooned with dead beasts. There were, amongst other things, a lion's head, and a tiger's, a bear's, even a stuffed gorilla. Their expressions ranged from puzzled to downright indignant.

We sat down. It must have been obvious that I was looking somewhat in askance at the 'trophies'.

"I'm Ron Gemmel," said our host. "The mangey menagerie belonged to my father," He gave a grimace expressing distaste. "If I inherit the damn things will go."

"Ah," I said, quick as a flash, "and what do you mean by, 'if I inherit?'"

"I'll have to go back a bit so's you'll get the whole picture," replied Ron.

"My father, as you'll have guessed, was a keen big game hunter. Now that's not my cup of tea. In fact I'm wholly opposed to hunting for 'sport'. After university I got a job with the Jersey zoo, where I'm now pretty senior. Though we disagreed about hunting my father and I rubbed along well enough until about four years ago. It was then that we had a falling out. As a result of that my father told me never to darken his door again, and made a new will in favour of my cousin, Charles Connor."

Ron paused, reflecting a while.

"Two months ago," he continued, "the old boy had a heart attack. I suppose that got him to thinking things over. Anyway four weeks ago he wrote to me, offering me the olive branch.

Well, blood is thicker than water, and he wasn't such a bad old stick. I was very fond of him actually. So I dropped everything and flew over right away. The old man was pleased to see me, and I was pleased to see him.





When I got here Ian Bambro was present. You know, Bambro and Boal?"

"The solicitors in Worcester Street?" I said.

"That's right," agreed Ron. "My father was about to make a new will you see. Cousin Connor, a drunken, floozie chasing sailor, had nothing to recommend him except his kinship and father had come to regret ever making him his heir. The new will was going to leave everything to me.

I'm not badly off, but the estate would come in handy, besides I'd rather see it go to a cat's home than to my rascally cousin.

The new will was in fact drawn up that day. Fergusson the butler and general factotum, and Miss Parker, dad's fierce Scottish nurse, both benefitted under the new will so we got a couple of chaps from the farm across the road to witness it. I expect cousin Connor got to hear of the changes through them. They weren't sworn to secrecy so I suppose you can't blame them.

Dad, perhaps foolishly, locked all the copies of the will in a drawer of this desk here.

Well, Ian went off and I, the next morning, flew back to Jersey. I had things to clear up you see, but I intended to return in a few days.

As it happened Ian 'phoned me about a week later to say that dad had died during the night.

I came back at once. Ian met me and we came up to the house together. The next week was taken up with the funeral arrangements, but when things got a bit straighter we looked for the will. But there was no trace of it."

"Forgive me if I'm being tactless," I said apologetically, "but was your father's death a natural one?"

"I don't think there can be any doubt about that," said Ron, "he was, after all, eighty seven years old."

"So," I pressed, "no sign of the will?"

"Not a dicky bird," Ron assured me, "Ian and I turned the whole house over, but we found nothing."

"And the servants?" I asked, "are they trustworthy?"

"Been with us for donkey's years," said Ron, "besides, although they benefitted under the old will they got more under the new one."

"Ah," I said, "so what is the situation now?"

Ron shrugged.

"Ian is delaying as much as he can, but Connor is pressing for the will to be probated, the old will that is. If we can't find the new one he'll get everything."

"A pretty pickle," I observed.

"Are you sure that your father left you no clues as to where he might have put the new will?"

"No," he said, "he left no clues....unless." he said thoughtfully.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"Well, when Miss Parker found my father he had a book in his lap. That was probably a coincidence of course, but it's title was 'The Legend'"

"A book in his lap eh?" I said, and, "that's not very strange. Do you attach some importance to it?"

"I do, sort of," admitted Ron, "this house is called Friary House you see, and there's a story, a legend you might say, that it's haunted by an Austin friar, one of those Henry VIII had turned out of the rock houses."

"And you think the legend has some bearing on the will's disappearance?"

"Possibly," said Ron. "You see, I don't believe in ghosts, but Fergusson swears he's seen a hooded figure in the grounds. My guess is that it's cousin Connor. I wouldn't put it past him to have sneaked into the house and pinched the new will."

I sipped my sherry and thought.

"If Mr. Connor is still lurking around," offered Flotsam, "it suggests that he was not able to find the new will."

Ron sat up hopefully.

"Do you really think so?" he asked.

"Flotsam tends to jump to conclusions," I lied. "Nevertheless he might be right in this instance. I think it would be advisable for my assistant and I to conduct another search of the premises. If you would be so kind as to show Flotsam up to your late father's bedroom he can search up there, I meanwhile will search this room."

"I hope you have better luck than Ian and I had," said Ron sincerely. "You'll need the keys to the desk?"

"That would be helpful," I agreed.

Ron handed the keys over.

"They were on my father's bed-side table," he said. "The will, the last time I saw it, was in the bottom left hand drawer. We looked there first of all."

Ron took Flotsam away upstairs and I sat down at the desk.

I took the precaution of fortifying myself with another glass of Ron's quite excellent sherry.

The desk was a solid piece of furniture probably much older than Ron's dad had been. There were three drawers on the left and two, larger, drawers on the right, plus a shallow drawer over the knee hole.

I turned all the drawers out in turn. I looked into them, under them, behind them, and poked into the spaces they had occupied, but I found nothing. I then considered the book shelves. A search through all of the

books would be very time consuming, and I didn't fancy that. When I came to examine the shelves I found that, though the fronts had been dusted, the thick patina of dust on the books themselves proved that they hadn't been disturbed for some time. I crossed the bookshelves off my mental list.

I continued my search and even checked to see if the carpet was loose, but it was firmly nailed down. I began to feel convinced that where ever the missing will was it wasn't in this room.



When Ron and Flotsam returned I had to own that I hadn't found anything. Flotsam reported in his turn.

"I conducted a careful search, Sir," he said, "and I feel that had the will been in the bedroom I would have found it."

I believed him. There's not much that misses the minion's beady little eyes.

I sighed. This was going to be a sticky one, I thought.

"We'll have a look in the garden," I said.

"The garden?" said Ron doubtfully.

"The friar, or cousin Connor, was supposed to have been seen lurking there," I said, "it wouldn't hurt to rummage around a bit."

The garden was square. A path ran along under the French windows at the back of the house, and around the garden about ten feet from the walls. Two further paths divided the garden into four equal squares.

I saw at once that if someone had been standing outside of the French windows he wouldn't have left any footprints on the slabs.

At the far left corner of the garden there was a row of low spruces, behind which I found a compost heap, and a door in the wall.

"The hinges are well oiled," observed Flotsam.

So they were. The door opened quietly and easily. While Flotsam and Ron examined the door and door frame I went a little way down the path outside.

"There's a footprint here!" cried Ron excitedly.

It was one of mine actually. But who am I to interfere with a client's harmless amusement?

"Aha!" I said, and stooped over to examine the 'mysterious' print. "I had noticed in fact, I was just looking to see if there were any others further down the path."

"Is it a clue?!" asked Ron eagerly.

I considered. There was a collection of family photographs in an album in the desk. One showed a jaunty looking bloke, dressed in naval uniform, standing with a horse. Cousin Connor, no doubt.

"Well," I thought, "he probably deserves his reputation, so..."

"I can't make much of it," I confessed modestly, "except that it was made by a seafaring gent who's associated with horses, and who is about six foot tall and heavily built."

"Amazing!" cried Ron, "that sounds exactly like Cousin Connor!"

"There are minute fragments of a rough brown fibre on the right doorpost," offered Flotsam helpfully.





"Dammit!" cried Ron frustratedly.
"Do you think he's got the will?"

"I doubt it," I said, "as I said earlier, if he's still lurking around disguised as a ghostly friar then it's odds on that he's still looking for it. Come to that," I added, "maybe your father discovered that someone was skulking around, and that's why he hid the will."

"It's possible I suppose," said Ron thoughtfully.

I wiped my muddy hands on Flotsam's donkey jacket.

"We've done enough out here," I said, "We'll go back inside and do some thinking."

We returned to the library. I sat down and lit my pipe.

"The only clue we've got," I ruminated aloud, "is that book that he,

your father, was reading. Or at least was holding. If it is a clue of course. Now I'm inclined to think that it is. It is possible that your father felt another stroke coming on. Maybe there was nothing he could use to write a message. Maybe he couldn't have held a pen anyway. It may be he used the book in some way hoping to give you a clue as to where he'd hidden the will."

All this high powered mental activity agitated me. I sprang up and paced up and down in front of the fire place.

"The Legend," I muttered, and, "THE Legend. The LEGEND..."

"His Grace," remarked Ron wistfully, "was very sure that you would be able to find the will."

Distracted by this almost petulant interruption I stubbed my foot against the fire furniture filled elephant's foot. I glared angrily at the offensive article while I fumbled for some suitable response.

"Aha!" exclaimed Flotsam jubilantly, "I do believe, by the way that Sir is eyeing yonder pacydermal appendage, that he has solved the mystery!"

I concealed my astonishment with practised ease. I nodded wisely and fixed the elephant's foot with an intimidating stare.

"No doubt," burbled Flotsam, "Sir is hesitant about upending the foot upon this fine carpet."

Ron sprang forward.

"Bugger the carpet!" he cried, "Fergusson can clean up."

And so saying he tipped the fire implements out. Jammed in the bottom of the foot we found a stout, rather crumpled, manila envelope.

In a trice Ron had siezed this and torn it open and, there was the missing will!

"This is it all right," chortled Ron. Then, "But where do the friar and cousin Connor and the book fit in?"

"I could kick myself," I said ruefully, "it's all so simple. In fact," I said cunningly, "it's so simple that even Flotsam can explain it, now."

Flotsam simpered. "So kind, Sir," he said.

"OK, OK," I said, "I've given you your chance to shine. Just get on with it."

"Well," lectured Flotsam happily, "When cousin Connor got to know about the will, and found out that after your father's death that the will had gone missing, he presumably decided to try and find it, no doubt with the intention of destroying it."

The 'friar' disguise not only concealed his identity, but it was also intended to frighten off the superstitious servants.

Your father cleverly provided an authentic clue as to the hiding place, perhaps not a too obvious clue, but the best he could manage in the circumstances."

"I still don't get it," said Ron, somewhat exasperated.

I smiled composedly.

"Carry on, Flotsam," I said grandly, "you're doing fine so far".

Flotsam blushed with simple pleasure.

"The title of the book was the clue," he said, "'The Legend' or, by a simple play on words, 'The Leg end'. That is, the elephant's foot!"

"The Leg end!" exclaimed Ron, suitably amazed.

"Some of us have it, some of us don't," I said modestly.

"Brilliant!" said Ron, "positivly brilliant!"

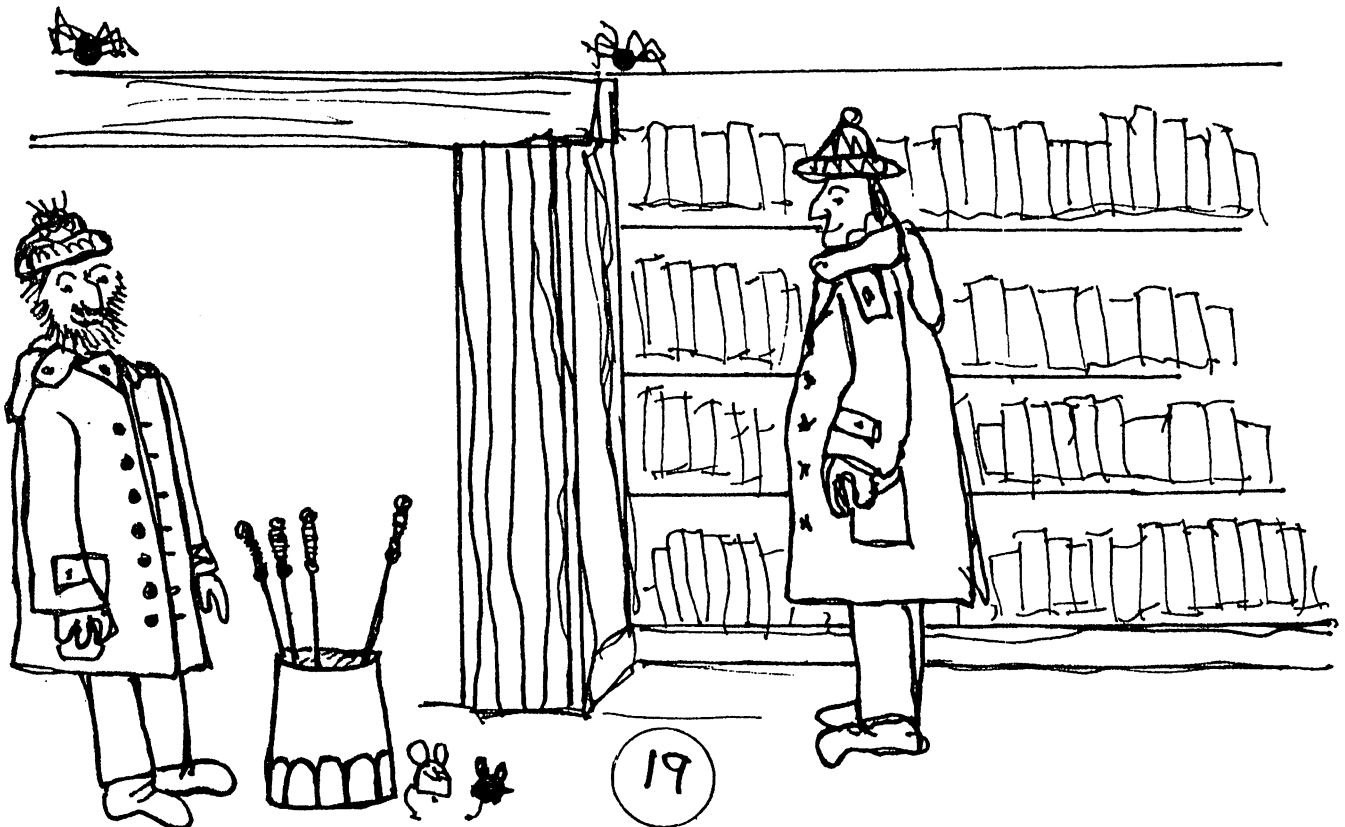
"We aim to give satisfaction for our wages," I hinted, "speaking of which, there is the small matter of my fee."

"How would you like a free pass to every zoo and wildlife park in England?" he suggested.

"How about a year's free beer at every 'Little' pub in the Black Country?" I countered.

"Welllll...." said Ron carefully.

I sighed and reached for the sherry. I could see that we might be in for a long negotiation.



THE MUNSTER MYSTERY



Don't get me wrong, I like lions. They are warm and cuddly and they laze around in the sun like overgrown pussy cats. Still, there's a difference between seeing them on the telly and being in the same cage as one.

"Flotsam," I called, just the least bit nervously, "Put the poor sod down and come back here!"

Flotsam reluctantly released the lion from his fond embrace. The lion, in a state of some confusion, tottered away, presumably to think things over, regarding the relationships between kings of the jungle and humans.

"He's just a big pussy cat," said Flotsam wistfully.

"Forget it," I grunted from the safety of the tunnel mouth, "You bloody well can't have one. Why, the cost in cat food alone would be utterly prohibitive."

We rebolted the gate, which couldn't be seen from the lion pit, it being concealed by trailing vegetation, and returned up the tunnel.

Now you might be wondering what me and Flotsam were doing in the lion enclosure at Duggley Zoo. Well, it happened this way.

His Grace, Walter, fourteenth Duke of Duggley, who we had first met in the case of the Careless Heart, bethought himself that the family archives were in less than an organised state. Also, it's my surmise, it might have occurred to him that something interesting, like the Careless cryptogram, might be lurking amongst the musty files.

Now the Duke ain't short of a bob or two so he went and engaged the services of a noted historical researcher, one Theodore Ross of Oban Celtic University, and his assistant, Jenny Glover, to generally sort out and catalogue the various books and documents.

To cut a long story short, the Prof had found an old bible which had distinct possibilities. The bible had been published, in Latin, at Douay, in 1626. This was quite interesting in itself of course, but even more interesting was the message concealed amongst the Births, Marriages, and Deaths list at the back of the aforesaid tome.

The message was somewhat ambiguous so, naturally, His Grace decided to enlist my aid.

I peered at the page. "Unfortunately," I said, "I seem to have mislaid my reading glasses."

Fortunately, or foresightedly, on the receipt of His Grace's letter the week before I'd instructed Flotsam to learn the language. Under my expert tuition he had become extraordinarily proficient.

I handed the bible to Flotsam.

"Here lad," I said, "do something to earn your daily porridge. Find and translate the message."

"Ah," said Flotsam, after a mere minute or two, "I see. A simple but quite effective method. After certain entries a word has been inserted, such as, 'Francis Towner Laney, born July 4th 1627, the'"

"OK," said I, "but stop messing about and get onto the nitty gritty."

"As the noble boss commands," said the minion humbly.

"An approximate rendering would be," he announced presently, "The pay is buried under the vault in the old chapel."

"We've got that far," said the Prof irritably, "but what does it mean?"

As it happened just then I discovered my glasses tucked away in an odd pocket.

"Let me take a look," I said. I took a look.

"Not bad, Flotsam lad," I said, "that's a pretty fair translation. You done good."

The lad preened himself. Nitwit.

"You're holding the book upside down," said the Prof caustically.

I gave him a withering stare.

"You can hardly expect me to do it the easy way," I said loftily, "that's for lackeys and other incompetents."

Anyway," I continued, turning to the front of the bible, "I have not yet finished my examination."

My eye was immediately caught by the superscription. Written in moderately large round letters, in English, was;

'To my Beloved Sonne Herman Munster, ye Twenty Fifth Daye of December, in ye yeare of Oure Lord Sixteen Hundred and Twenty Sixe'

I had to laugh at the incogruity of seeing one of my favourite TV characters named in the old tome.

"By Cracky!" I exclaimed, "Herman bloody Munster..ho,ho,ho, etc.,"

Three sets of eyes showing expressions ranging from astonishment to the darkest suspicion, (that was Ross), stared at me.

Flotsam however wore a look of awe.

"Brilliant sir! Brilliant!" he cried.

"What? what? what?!" ejaculated His Grace.

"I don't understand. What's it all about?"

I stifled my merriment. I thought fast.

"Flotsam," I said cunningly, "as you've twigged it you may elucidate."

Flotsam beamed. "Thank you sir," he said happily. He continued.

"I deduced, sir," he said, "from sir's evident amusement, that he was delighted by the incongruity, and the appropriateness, of finding the name, 'Herman Munster.'"

This statement was greeted with blank looks.

I sighed theatrically. "It's no use Flotsam," I said patrenisingly, "You'll have to belabour the obvious."

Flotsam appeared to be quite astonished.

"Why," he said, "everyone knows that 'Herman Munster' was a favourite alias of Sir Charles Harris, the English Don Juan, and illegitimate son of the then Duke of Northampton!"

"Not quite everyone," I said, casting a sly look at Ross.

Ross squirmed and went red. I nipped in before he could think of a response, and to keep him, as it were, on the hop.

"The implications, needless to say," I declared, "are obvious."

"Implication?" said His Grace, "Implications?" spluttered the Prof.

I assumed a long suffering expression and smote my brow.

"I'm afraid that our obtuseness is a sore trial to Sir," said Flotsam worriedly, "Fortunately, in my own plodding way, I believe I see what Sir



is driving at."

Amid the general agogment, my own concealed by a superior smirk, the great lummoX continued.

"Herman Munster," he said, "is believed, by some authorities, to have been associated with the Paymaster General of His Majesty's armies."

A thoughtful, and indeed respectful silence greeted this statement.

"Well done my boy," I said. I scratched my beard. And indulging in my propensity for a little devilment I asked.

"And why, do you think, this information be of interest to us?"

"Could it be related to the message about the pay?" wondered Jenny.

"I don't quite see how exactly, but..."

"Aha!" I exclaimed, "light begins to dawn.

How do you see it, Flotsam?"

Flotsam wrinkled his brow, a sure sign of deep thought, or constipation.

"Could it be, oh most astute of Sirs," he said, "that you remind us of the unsubstantiated story which has Major Munster present in Duggley Castle when it was under seige by the Parliamentarians?"

I smiled smugly.

"At the seige?" said His Grace speculatively.

"Pay chest?" mused Ross, aloud.

"I do so admire a man with brains," simpered Jenny.

The Prof winced. "But," he said, "what about 'the vault' in 'the chapel', there's no chapel at Duggley Castle."

"There used to be a chapel," said His Grace thoughtfully, "up against the curtain wall, opposite the Great Hall."

"Which was demolished in 1650," I said, with a silent 'thank you' to the castle guide I'd boned up on the last week.

Naturally everyone was impressed by my obviously extensive knowlege.

"The chapel, or it's foundations, may well have been visible at the time of the seige," suggested Flotsam.

"They were still to be seen at the time of the great fire, a century and a half ago," I said.

"I do have a certain amount of influence with the Zoo authorities," mused His Grace.

This was a modest piece of understatement rather on a par with Conan Doyle saying he'd scribbled a line or two.

Work, in fact, on clearing the site, started the very next day. By the week-end, behind a tall anti-sight seer fence, the turf had been stripped away. The zoo staff readily assisted us in this stage of the work but when the floor began to show they were thanked and sent away. This was partly because the digging would be more delicate now, but mostly in the interests of secrecy.

All the staff except Steve Sneyd that is. Steve looked after the lions and the other big cats, but he'd had previous 'dig' experience with Manchester University. This was evident from the meticulous way he worked. After some discussion Steve was sworn to secrecy and told the real object of our excavations.

We soon got down to a surface which seemed to be the original floor of the chapel. It was laid with tiles, quite well preserved, with here and there great stone grave slabs. One of these, it seemed a fair assumption, covered the entrance to the vault.

It so happened that at this point His Grace was obliged to go off to London to do his bit in opposing some legislation to do with Death Duties.



He was reluctant to leave of course, but he left instructions that we were to contact him at his club, the Drones, if anything interesting turned up.

We stood in the morning sunshine. Rosy fingered dawn had done it's springing several hours ago.

"Lifting all these slabs is going to be a lot of work," said Jenny doubtfully.

"I make it eleven of them," put in the Prof, "and it could be any one of them. Or none."

I considered the situation. The floor was uneven, true, but after so long it was not possible to tell if this was natural subsidence or if it had been a result of a slab being raised in Civil War times.

"Perhaps we could tap them," suggested Steve, "one of them might sound hollow."

"They're too thick I think," I said, "not that I want to pour cold water on the idea..."

"Ho, ho," chortled Flotsam. "Sir will have his little joke. What an elegantly simple solution!"

"Well, of course I was flummoxed. But I put on an air of kindly amusement.

"You've caught me out, Flotsam, you clever devil," I chuckled. "Get on with it then."

Flotsam galloped off. I smiled mysteriously and refused to answer any questions.

Presently the lad came back, with a fifty gallon cask of water and a somewhat smaller bucket. He filled the bucket and proceeded to pour the water carefully over one of the slabs. Flotsam, and the rest of us, watched. The water did nothing but lie about. Flotsam, undiscouraged, moved to another slab and repeated the process. Of course I had no idea what the lad was up to, but neither did anyone else. While they stood around looking puzzled I concentrated on looking confident and knowing.

At the fourth slab the water seeped away.

"Aha!" cried Flotsam, "just as sir deduced. The water is draining away, therefore it is likely that it covers a hollow space."

"The vault?!" cried Jenny, bouncing interestingly with excitement.

"Well done, faithful minion," I said kindly, much relieved, "for this sterling work you get chip butties every day for a whole week!"

"Oh, greathearted Sir!" cried Flotsam, beside himself with pride and joy. The silly twisted boy.

"We still have to raise the slab," pointed out Ross, "we'd better see about getting some lifting tackle."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," I said. "What about it, Flotsam, d'you think you can manage?"

"Certainly Sir," beamed the over-muscled lackey, "No trouble."

So saying Flotsam dug his fingers into the ground either side of the slab. He gave it a heave, there was a sort of tearing sound, and up it came.

He laid the slab to one side and we gathered round to look at the hole. It was round, a bit less than three feet across, and lined with cut stone down as far as we could see. It was dark down there. Of course.

"In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit," quoted Jenny.

"Also," I thought, "rats and spiders and creepy crawlies".

"Ladder," I said, "we need a ladder."



At my suggestion, I'm nothing if not practical, we measured the depth of the hole using a length of string with a brick tied to it. The thirty foot ladder took a little finding.

I let Ross have the honour of being first down. He descended, bicycle lamp in hand, followed by Flotsam, Steve next, then Jenny, and last of all myself.

A hubbub broke out as I was halfway down, excited initially, then it sounded baffled. As nothing horrible seemed to be happening I completed my descent.

There was a chamber below. It was ten foot high, apart from where the shaft came through the roof, and twenty feet across. Three tunnels broke the walls at irregular intervals, each about four feet wide and seven high.

Everyone was standing on one side of the chamber so I went over to see what they were doing.

Half buried in the floor was an old chest, about the size of a hop picking trunk, but made of wood, oak I supposed. It was partly filled with reddish brown roundish lumps about the size of apples.

"Somebody's beaten us to it," said Steve, his voice ringing with indignation.

"What's that there then?" I asked, my usual impeccable diction failing me in my agitation.

"Balls, Sir." said Flotsam.

"I beg your pardon!?" I cried, aghast.

"Cannon balls," explained Ross testily, "iron cannon balls."

"Covered with centuries of rust," added Steve.

"Curiously enough," observed Flotsam, "the chest seems to have been unburied quite recently."

"What!" I exclaimed, "has some thieving bugger beaten me to the money!?"

"I don't think so," said Ross thoughtfully, "the chest has been disturbed recently, but it looks as if the cannon balls have been there for a long time. If the pay was ever in the chest I think it must have been removed centuries ago."

We emptied the chest and checked the cannon balls anyway. Nothing.

"Who ever got here before us didn't come in that way," suggested Jenny, indicating the ladder.

That gave us pause for thought.

"But why are there cannon balls in the chest?" asked Steve.

I shrugged. "There could be any number of reasons for that," I replied.

"Such as?" said Jenny.

"Well," I said. "It's not beyond the bounds of possibility that Munster pinched the gold himself, and put the cannon balls in to fool folk."

"Fool what folk?" asked Steve.

"I can think of two sets of people off the top of my head," I said.

"The chest must have been heavy, I wouldn't mind betting that Munster had help carrying it down here, maybe as many as three men."

"And they came back and stole the gold!" exclaimed Jenny.

"Not so fast," I chided, "the other obvious robbers would have been the Roundheads who captured the castle."

"So," said the Prof, "we have at least three possible solutions to the mystery of the missing pay."

"At least three," I agreed.



"Maybe..." suggested Flotsam.

"Yes?" I said.

"Well, Sir," he said, "suppose Major Munster did have three men to help him. Suppose he was worried in case they gave the secret away, or might come back and steal the gold. Perhaps he feared the Roundheads might find it. It is possible that Munster, having all this in mind, came back himself, and hid the contents elsewhere, and then he himself filled the box with the cannon balls."

"Ah, but," said Jenny, "the message clearly says that the gold was buried under the vault."

"True," I admitted, "but maybe Munster wrote the message when the pay chest was first hidden, then he transferred the gold to another place, but never had a chance to alter the message."

"An interesting speculation," said Ross, "but have you anything which might support it?"

"Possibly," I said. "Munster was wounded in a minor skirmish near Netherton less than a month after the castle surrendered. He died of his wounds at Russell's Hall two days later."

"Then it is possible that he didn't have time to change the message," said Steve thoughtfully.



"The gold, or a clue to the gold, might be at Russell's Hall then," said Jenny. "That's not more than two miles from here."

Flotsam was fidgeting. I recognised the signs.

"We'll think about that later," I decided. "Meanwhile I suggest that we check these tunnels. We may find a clue as to who has been grubbing about down here, and, who knows, Munster might have hidden the gold somewhere near at hand, after all he might not have been able to carry it very far."

My plan was adopted with a minimal of discussion. Steve took one tunnel, the Prof and Jenny another, and me and Flotsam went down the remaining one.

When we were out of sight, and earshot, of the the others I allowed him to divulge the idea he was bursting with.

"I've been thinking of the actual words of the message, Sir," he said, in particular the "buried under the vault" part. It seems to me, oh noble boss person...."

"hmm," I hummed when he was finished. "I did think of that myself, of course, but I said nothing. It's best if you and I check it out first, so keep it under your hat."

We continued up our tunnel for about two hundred feet. The tunnel ended in a narrow and steep flight of steps, sixty or more treads, at the top of which we found ourselves on a sort of ledge. Above us, easily forty feet up, a rectangle of light showed. Below us, fifteen feet or so, daylight was flooding in by way of a large opening at one side of the 'pit'.

"It's a ruddy chimney!" I said.

"Very likely, Sir," agreed Flotsam, "I suspect that this is the bakehouse chimney, we saw it the other day, next to the gatehouse."

"Ah," I said. "Now this could be the way the unknown intruder got into the vault. I wonder how he got up here though," I added, looking down.

"There appear to be footholds, Sir," observed Flotsam, "though of course he could have used the rope ladder."

I blinked. "Rope ladder?" I said, "Rope ladder?"

"It's in the alcove, next to the metal detector," said the nincompoop brightly.

As the ledge was quite narrow and my footing precarious I had to content myself with verbal rather than physical admonitions.

We poked around for a few minutes then, Flotsam carrying our finds we returned to the vault.

"Roof fall a few hundred feet along," reported Ross, "the tunnel's completely blocked, lookslike it has been for ages."

"There was a great oak and iron door at the end of my tunnel," said Steve, "it seems to be rusted fast, or locked, or both. Anyway I couldn't get it open. Oh, and there were only my footprints in the dust."

I had Flotsam show the others the rope ladder and the metal detector, and gave them an account of our explorations.

"It seems pretty obvious," said Steve, "our mysterious visitor got in by way of the bakehouse chimney."

"It must have dismayed him to find the chest filled with rusty old cannon balls," remarked Jenny.

"Gold is a non-ferrus metal," observed Flotsam.

"Eh?" said Steve, for us all.

"What do you mean by that?" I enquired.

"Well, Sir," said the lad, "it may be that the detector would react to the cannon balls, even to the iron locks and bands on the chest. But I'm wondering if it could detect gold."

"A good point," said Steve. "If that were the case then....?"

"Exactly," I said, "the gold could still be here. Flotsam!"

Obediently Flotsam recited.

"The pay is buried under the vault in the old chapel".

"Huh?" said the Prof, "But we're here in the vault, there's the chest, I don't follow."



"Ah, indeed," I said. "We are indeed in the vault. But the message reads under the vault."

By god, they were thick.

I explained.

"If I'm right," I said, "Munster exercised diabolical cunning. He anticipated a search for the pay. He expected that, if the chest with the cannon balls were found, that the finder would deduce that the pay had been removed to some safer place. Which place, it would seem obvious, would be at some distance from the original burial site. In fact he pulled a fast one, and only moved the gold a few feet. Under, right under, the vault!"

"Where the ladder is," said Flotsam.

And there it was, only a couple of feet down.

"What do we do now?" asked Steve, his eyes and the gold gleaming in the torchlight.

"We contact His Grace," declared the Prof.

"And leave this lot unguarded?" exclaimed Jenny.

"A good point," I said. "Has anyone any suggestions?"

Steve spoke up. "I've been thinking," he said, "it's been here long enough undisturbed, a few more hours, or another day, won't make much difference. Why don't we leave it here until His Grace gets back? If Flotsam puts the slab back nobody will be able to get in that way, and if Mr. Soames and Flotsam would consent to guard the bake house entrance no-one will be able to get in there either."

"Not a bad plan," agreed Ross. So that's what we did.

Except that, after they had all gone off leaving me and Flotsam in the bake house we made our way down to the vault and made our way up the tunnel Steve had searched. There was a strong door at the end, but it was oiled and not too hard to open. Another few yards along the tunnel we came to a gate of iron bars, beyond which was the lion pit.

That's how Flotsam made the acquaintance of Harold, the lion.

I took up station in the bake house. Flotsam was otherwise engaged.

The next day His Grace arrived. We all descended into the vault. Consternation ensued.

"The gold!" screeched the Prof, "It's gone!"

"Pray do not distress yourself," I said soothingly.

"The thief must have evaded you!" exclaimed Jenny.

"Evaded Hemlock Soames?" I chided, "Come now, you know better than that."

His Grace, even his deep faith in me wavering, was moved to remark.

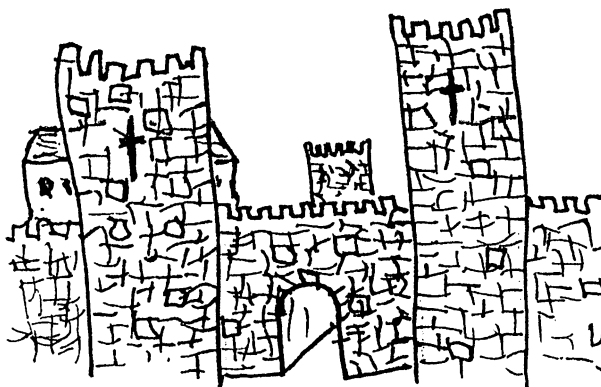
"But my dear Soames, where is the gold?"

"Over our heads, in the chapel ruins," I said, "covered with a sheet of tarpaulin, and quite safe."

"Then what is the meaning of this charade!" demanded Ross hotly.

"Ah, I'm glad you asked me that," I said. I put on my after dinner speaking voice.

"Let me tell you a tale," I said. "We must suppose that Herman Munster did indeed have others to help him. Let us also suppose that, unknown to his helpers, he returned secretly to the vault and changed the hiding place of the gold. That would mean that they, the other blokes, would be under the impression that the gold was still in the chest. Perhaps none of them were dishonest, or perhaps none of them was able to return to



the vault. But suppose one of them did what Herman did, that is, he left a message for his posterity. This may have been written or verbal, it hardly matters which, but the gist of it was that there was a pay chest full of gold hidden in the vault under the old chapel in Duggley Castle.

It was not until quite recently that this story was acted upon by one of the descendants of Herman's helpers. I imagine that he thought he had as good a right to the gold as anyone. So he looked up the old records and somehow finds out about the tunnels under the castle. He gets himself a job at the zoo and in his spare time he haunts the tunnels weilding his metal detector, an obvious tool, the chest was bound to have iron parts."

Pennies began to drop as I spoke. Every eye turned to Steve.

"One thing more," I said, "Switch off your torches."

They obeyed like zombies.

Flotsam turned on his other lamp, the ultra-violet one.

The hole where the gold had been glowed. So did Steve's hands, the knees of his trousers, and bits here and there on his clothing. Flotsam switched off, the other torches switched on.

"Simple," I said. "I guessed Steve might have a go at the loot when I found the tunnel he went up led to the lion cage. Hence the removal of the gold and the sprinkling of the hole with ultra-violet dye, with the results you see."

"Fair enough," said Steve, "but I still think that by rights some of the gold should be mine."

"Actually," said His Grace thoughtfully, (he was a decent old stick, for a Tory), "I expect that the gold will be counted as treasure trove. In that case, as you were present when it was unearthed, I rather think that you should be entitled to a share."

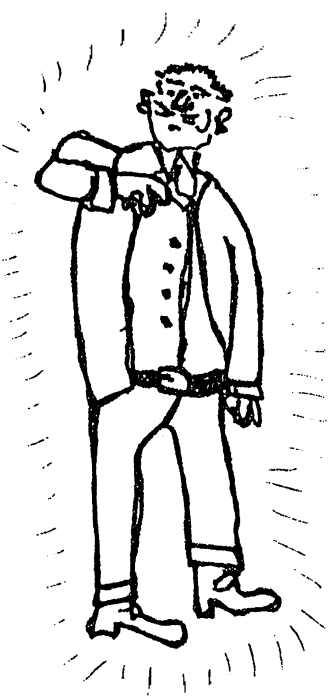
This floored Steve, and it shook the Prof and Jenny too.

They didn't know His Grace as well as me and Flotsam of course.

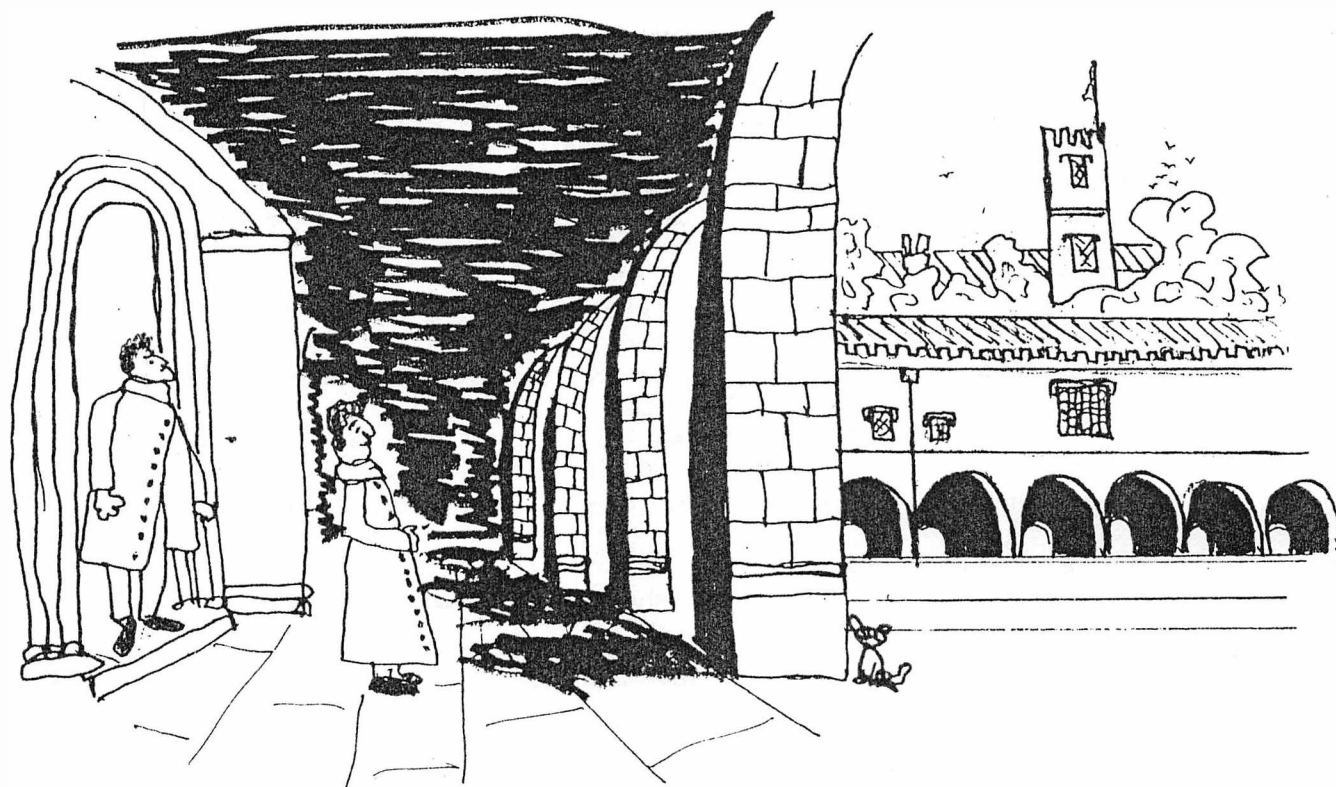
Anyway, that's the story of the Munster gold, another triumph for Hemlock Soames.

Except. The last I heard of Steve was that the Duke had fixed him up with a job with the archaeology department of Abergogolwith University, of which His Grace just happens to be a prime benefactor.

Steve's doing well too.



THE NORFOLK KNICKERS



"Knickers?!" I exclaimed, surprised, aghast, non-plussed.

"Briefs, actually," said the Dean solemnly, "flimsy, saucy little scraps of almost nothing."

"Let's get this straight, your reverence," I said, "someone, somehow, has been getting into vicarages and planting pairs of knickers in parsons bedrooms?"

"In a nutshell," replied Dean Bulmer.

I scratched my beard thoughtfully and cast an enquiring glance at His Grace, Walter, the 14th Duke of Duggley. He raised one noble eyebrow in return, and shrugged.

"OK," I said. "Flotsam, you take notes...Your reverence, please start at the beginning, and take it slowly."

"Well," said the dean, "it happened last week. No, It actually started some time ago, but I only found out about it last week."

I smiled encouragingly.

"You see, I'm a Rural Dean, and as such I oversee a part of the diocese of Norwich. It is my custom to meet with one quarter of my incumbents once a month, that enables me to see all of them in the course of four weeks or so. On Wednesday the 25th of May, after the formal part of the meeting was over, we had the usual afternoon tea. This gives us an opportunity to relax and socialise, parish priests live rather isolated lives you know.

We had not been chatting for more than a few minutes when Langford, the vicar of St. Boniface at Cobbler's Green, dropped a bombshell."

The dean paused reflectively. "A sound young man, Langford, but a bit of an innocent.

'A funny thing happened last week' he said, 'I woke up on Friday morning last week and found a pair of ladies knickers on my dressing table'.

You may imagine the consternation that ensued. There were one or two giggles, hastily suppressed, and also a distressed cry, halfway between a protest and an accusation. This was uttered by one of my senior incumbents, the reverend Rhind of St. Paul's, Waterloo.

'You too!' he choked.

'You too, what?' asked young Langford, puzzled.

'Much the same thing happened to me three weeks ago,' said Rhind, 'I have been sore troubled ever since.'

'Ho, ho,' said young Langford, 'did you think your sins were about to catch up with you?' Silly ass, so tactless.

'That'll be enough of that,' I said sternly. It was plain that old Rhind was upset.

Then Dodd spoke up. 'Now there's a funny thing,' he said, 'I was speaking with John Abbott only last month and he told me that he'd had something similar happen to him. He put it down to some tasteless practical joker. It's a rough parish, is St. Mary's.'

Things couldn't be left there. I called for attention, not that it was really needed, and asked if anyone else had suffered from the same sort of outrage, or had heard of anyone who had. There was a general murmur and a shaking of heads.

I instructed everyone to say nothing about these revelations and retired to my study with the three vicars who had spoken up.

I questioned them closely, but I learned very little more. Langford had found black briefs on his dressing table. He had no idea how they got there. He disposed of them, oh, and the accompanying card, before his domestic help arrived."

"This card," I asked, "What sort of a card, what was written on it?"

"That was another puzzle," said the dean, "It was just a piece of white card, about four inches square, and there was nothing at all written on it."

"Singular," I muttered, and, "Please do go on, your reverence."

"Rhind's case," continued the dean, was very similar. A blank card and a pair of briefs, scarlet in his case. They had been placed on his bedside table, under his bible.

Dodd had even less to say. All he knew was that Abbott had found some briefs in his bedroom.

That evening I consulted my bishop. He and I talked things over and he authorised me to make discreet enquiries throughout the diocese. As a result another five cases came to light."

"And no-one has any idea who the perpetrator of these outrages might be, or any inkling of a motive?" I asked.

"No idea at all," said the dean, "it's a complete mystery. We did contact the police then, in confidence of course. They did turn up something which may be significant. Not all of the victims had destroyed the, er, the evidence. The garments were traced back to Marks & Spencers in Oxford. By a stroke of luck they found an assistant who remembers selling four boxes of three briefs in March. She recalled the sale because the purchaser appeared to be a navy padre. Further than the the police have not got. They tell me that they're still working on the case but it's my opinion that they're stymied."

"And now you wish to consult me?" I asked.

"I remembered the tales that cousin Walter told me of your exploits, when he visited us last Christmas," said the dean. "It inspired me to hope that you might be able to help."

"What do you say, Soames," said His Grace, "will you take it on? I'll pay your expenses of course."



"Well..." I said doubtfully.

"Generous expenses," offered His Grace, "and, naturally, there will be a substantial fee."

"See here dean," I said, "What exactly do you want me to do? A case like this is News of the World material. I might uncover a can of worms, as it were."

"A good point," admitted Dean Bulmer. "It rather depends on what you find out of course. If it seems that it might cause embarrassment to the Church...I would be content to leave it to your discretion. It would be enough if you could assure me that these outrages had ceased, for good."

That sounded more like it. I've found that it's often easier to scare off miscreants than to catch them.

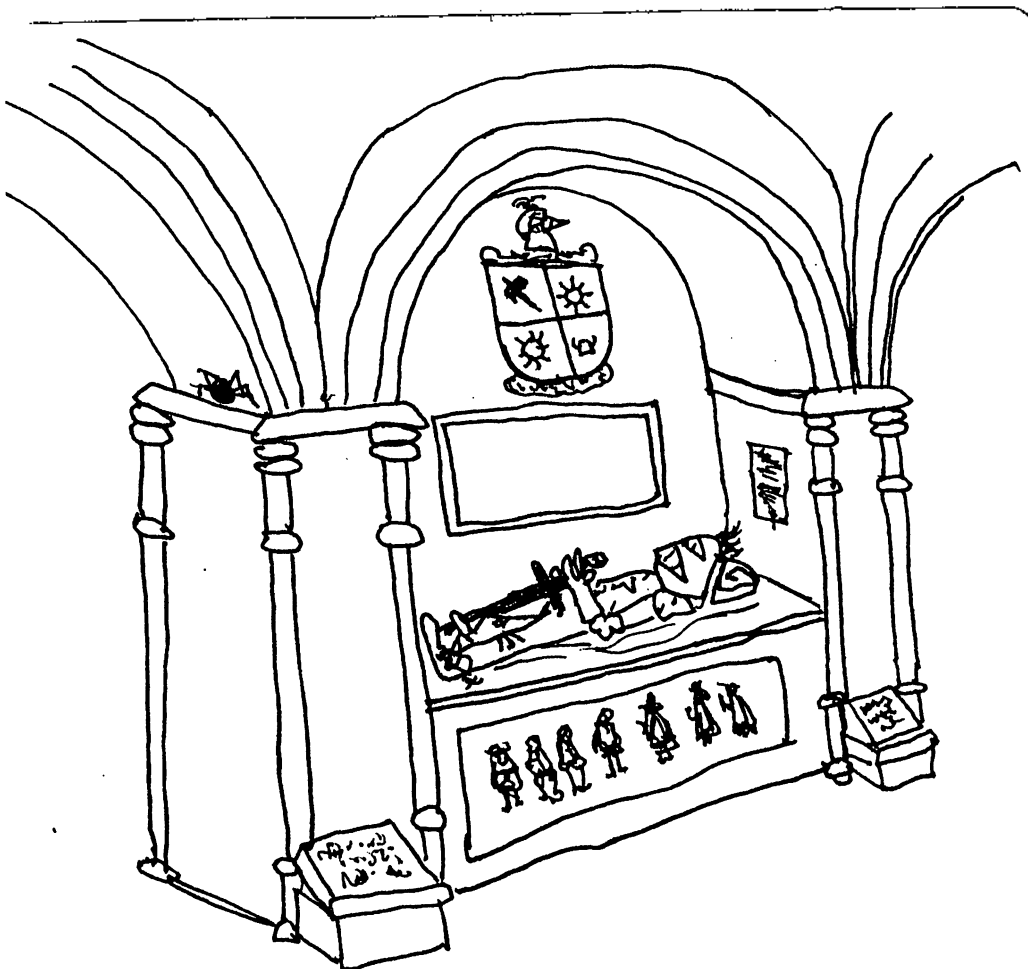
"OK," I said decisively. "I'll give it my best efforts...Now, your reverence, you can help. I'll need details. A list of all the parsons involved for a start, and their locations. Then I'll need some sort of an authorisation, something firmly worded so that I get the fullest cooperation from all the clergy I interview. Also, I don't think it would be wise to advertise our connection, so have you perhaps a private phone number I could ring in case I need to contact you?"

"I have an unlisted number," said the dean, "which very few people know of, would that suffice?"

"That would do very well," I said, "and just to make doubly sure I'll use the name 'Sherringford' when I call you."

"Gracious!" exclaimed the dean. "You can't be suggesting that someone in my own household might be involved in this?!"

I shrugged. "Not much chance of that," I conceded, "but why take the chance?"



I thought of something else.

"One thing more, your reverence, can you suggest somewhere we can stay in Norwich, some small place, preferably a pub?"

"I know the very place," said the dean, "'The Old Coot'. It's owned by a parishioner of mine, known him years, he knows how to keep a confidence. I could 'phone him from here, today."

"That should do very well," I agreed, "and the lists, the details?"

"I'll be back in Norwich tomorrow, I'll mail them to you at 'The Coot', you should get them the next day."

So it was arranged. The dean 'phoned Mike Higgs at 'The Old Coot', His Grace made a handsome advance for expenses, and Flotsam and I went off to Gas Lane Cottage to pack.

By the evening of that day, having left a trail of astonished motorists eating our dust, Flotsam was parking the trike in the back yard of 'The Old Coot'.

It looked like being an interesting case. Profitable too. And the beer at 'The Old Coot' was excellent.

We spent Monday looking around Norwich and making purchases of guides, maps and so on. I directed Flotsam to put these on our list of expenses, and our food and drink of course. He shyed a bit when I insisted that we buy ourselves new outfits. But, as I told him;

"His Grace will appreciate that it is necessary for us to blend in with our surroundings, therefore he will approve of these excellent tweeds."

"But the camera, Sir, and the binoculars!?" protested the lad feebly.

"They are an essential part of our disguise as simple tourists," I said firmly.

We waited in the next day. The package promised by the dean arrived at nine-thirty. The letter of authorisation had a fine bold heading and an impressive seal. It was worded in such a way that it would ensure the cooperation of the most recalcitrant parson. The list of victims was set out in chronological order, with the names of the parsons, their churches, and their locations, which were mostly in very small villages.

"Get the map out, Flotsam," I ordered, "we'll mark these down."

"We're starting a little late today," I mused, "and it'll be later still after we've had our lunch. We'll just do the three to the south today, do you think you'll be able to find them?"

"It should be quite easy, Sir," replied the lackey, "I have committed the map to memory."

I believed him. Flotsam might not be very bright but the lad has a photographic memory.

Our first objective was St. Mary's in the village of Tavishall. We sped down the A140 and half an hour later turned off right. To say that the village was small would be to exaggerate it's size. The church was easy to find. We checked the notice board and sure enough there, in faded gold letters we read, 'The Rev. John Abbott'. The vicarage was round the back of the church. We rang the bell and a tall pleasant faced young parson opened the door.

"Mr. Abbott?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "what can I do for you, gentlemen?"

I handed him the dean's letter. He read it. It set him back a bit.

"You'd better come in," he said anxiously.

He led the way, pausing at the kitchen door to pop his head round and say, "I have some visitors, Mrs. Boal. Please see that we're not disturbed," then we carried on to his study.

When we were sitting comfortably I began.

"Mrs. Boal," I said, "does she live in?"

"No," said the vicar. "I live alone. Mrs. Boal comes in a few times a week to cook my lunch and to do the cleaning."

"I see," I said. "So most of the time, and always at night, there is nobody but yourself on the premises?"



"Well, not exactly," said the vicar, "I can usually expect one or two visitors every day. The verger, or a churchwarden, the ladies who do the flowers. And of course there are the christenings, the weddings and the funerals, but those are rather infrequent."

That was more or less what I'd expected.

"Have there been any strangers around, I mean, in the village, in the days leading up to the incident?"

"Not a one," said Mr. Abbott firmly. "A stranger in the village is something of an event, one would be noticed instantly. In fact I bet tongues are wagging right now about you and your assistant."

"So," I said, "No visitors."

"We do get the odd one or two," said the vicar, "but none around that time, April's too early in the season."

"Now then," I said, "about what happened."

"Nothing much to tell," said Mr. Abbott. "I woke up as usual at six am. I keep my slippers under the chair by my bed and I drape my dressing gown over the back. When I went to reach for my slippers, there they were, on the chair."

"Your slippers were on the chair?" I said.

"No, no. The briefs, and the card.."

"Please try to be more precise," I said. "What colour were the knickers, what did they look like, how were they laid out, describe the card."



The vicar flushed. "The, er, garment, was made of some very flimsey purple material," he said. "almost transparent. They were laid out on the chair, with the card on top. There was nothing remarkable about the card, it was white and about do big." He made a shape with his hands about four inches square.

"So," I said, "What did you do?"

"Obviously," said the vicar, "I didn't want Mrs. Boal to see them, there would have been all sorts of rumours flying round the village. So I went downstairs and put them on the kitchen fire, and stirred the ashes until there was nothing left."

"And you told no-one about this?" I asked.

"I did confide in Alan Dodd," admitted the vicar. "He and I attended the same seminary, I knew that he wouldn't spread it about. But apart from him I didn't tell another living soul. I was mortified when the Dean contacted me about the incident, I had to tell him the details."

"I'd like to take a look at the bedroom," I said.

The vicar took us up. There was nothing special about it. Two windows and a door, underfurnished and neat.

There were bolts on the windows and a bolt and a lock on the door. I had Flotsam look at them but he detected nothing of interest.

"I never lock the bedroom door," confided the vicar, "I do lock the front door and the kitchen door the last thing at night."

We had a look round the other upstairs rooms, nothing, and then went downstairs. There we inspected all the windows and doors while avoiding Mrs. Boal. It was only when she took the vicar his lunch that we could get at the kitchen door.

"Possible" said Flotsam. "Some faint, newish marks, as if made by a key that didn't quite fit. The lock is sturdy enough, though rather old and simple."

"About what I expected," I said, truthfully. "I think we've about done here now."

We took our leave and headed back up the A140, right along the B1335, and right again into Cobbler's Green, another tiny hamlet. The church was in the middle of the village, which was a couple of dozen houses sitting round an acre or so of unkempt grass. The church and the houses were quite pleasant, red brick and flint and looking as if they'd grown out of the earth rather than had been built. The Rev. Langford's vicarage was slightly larger than the other houses and had the look of a building that had been bigger at one time, but had had part of it knocked down. I guessed that that's exactly what had happened to it, Victorian vicarage, built for a large family, too big for modern times, so chop a bit off. Very common.

The Rev. Langford was more talkative but no more informative than Mr. Abbott had been. He too lived alone and had a lady come in daily. No, there had been no strangers about. The knickers, black ones, had been laid out on his dressing table with a blank white card on top of them.. That had been on the morning of Friday the 21st. No, he had no idea who might be behind it all, and he couldn't show us the evidence because the police had taken it away..

The police had found no clues, said 'young Langford', at least, not as far as he knew. Oh, they seemed to think that the intruder had got in via the back door. Flotsam was of the same opinion. The lock was another big, old affair, very similar to the lock at St. Mary's.



"The church authorities probably bought a job lot," I commented gloomily, "I wouldn't be surprised if any one of the vicarage keys opened all of the others in the diocese."

Langford was a jolly sort of a fellow. "Call me Matthew," he said, and plied us with drink. Well, one pint each actually, the chap was probably poorer than his own church mice. He regaled us with stories of his cat, Sampson, and tales of life as a country parson, some of them positively hair-raising, like the one about Tobias Baird the headless gardener. We spent more time there than I'd intended and we departed eventually with some reluctance.

"One more today," I reminded Flotsam. "This Hansen chap at Lodden. The church is called All Saints. We could do with a spot of divine intervention."

Lodden is off the A146 and is a respectably sized village boasting half a dozen streets, a couple or three pubs, shops, including a small supermarket, and a Methodist chapel. The chapel was a plain brick built structure that looked more like a warehouse than my idea of a place of worship. But All Saints was a gem.

"Built on wool, as they say," confided Mr. Hansen proudly.

"I have something of an interest in local history and this village dates back at least to Roman times you know."

I steered him away from his hobby horse and asked him the usual questions. He had been the second recipient of the naughty knickers, purple

ones, and he'd found them, appropriately enough, on top of the chest of drawers in his bedroom. That was on the morning of Wednesday April 7th. Apart from the colour of the knickers it was the same story all over again, even to the signs that the back door had been opened by a key.

We returned to Norwich and 'The Old Coot' in plenty of time to sink a pint, or two, before our evening meal.

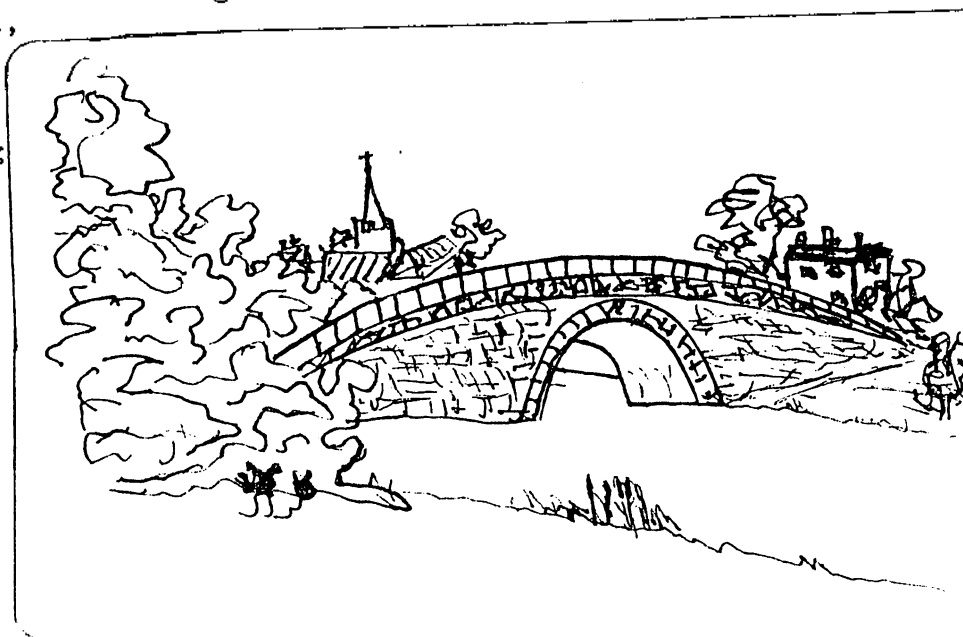
"It's early days yet," I observed to the lackey, "but a pattern is already beginning to emerge."

"Indeed, Sir," replied the lad, "The modus operandi to all intents and purposes identical in every case."

"Tomorrow," I declared, "we'll interview a few more parsons, a MO we might have, but no clues so far as to the perpetrator."

We were on the road by nine-thirty the next morning, first to St. Paul's at Waterloo.

From the dean's account I'd imagined that Bartholemew Rhind to be a frail old gent. Old he might have been, pushing sixty perhaps, but he was far from frail. He looked very like one of those ageless hill farmers you see up in the Yorkshire Dales, weatherbeaten and wrinkled but as hard as



nails. Actually he spoke with a distinct Welsh accent.

"It took me all aback," he confessed, "I was brought up Chapel you see, all fire and brimstone and the perils of the flesh. I've never quite got over it."

We got along famously after I'd broken out the medicinal brandy I'd had the forethought to bring along.

"I'm not a drinking man," he averred, "but, as St. Paul says, 'a little wine is good for your stomach', or words to that effect."

Mr. Rhind's story was so much like the other accounts that it was positively uncanny. Oh the briefs were red in his case, and put in a slightly different place, but still in the bedroom. And he too lived in the vicarage by himself.

"Can't abide women," he admitted, and launched into a fulmination about women priests and what the church was coming to. But he was very positive that there had been no strangers in the vicinity around the critical period. He listed the usual cleaner cum cook, the church officers and the flower ladies, and so on.

We left him the unfinished bottle of brandy and moved on.

Horsham-St.-Faith, the church of St. Edward the Martyr, and it's incumbent, the Rev. Thomas Jeeves, was only a few miles up the road.

"I blame it all on those damn socialists," was his contribution.

We agreed that he couldn't see how they had managed to leave a pair of ladies purple flimseys in his bedroom, or why, but he was sure that they were involved.

"I did entertain, oh fleetingly, the thought that Mrs. Glover might have put them there, but I dismissed the idea instantly. Apart from anything else she's not the right age and, well, her figure..." He moved his hands descriptively.

Again we found that no-one else lived in the vicarage, and noticed the subtle signs on the back door lock.

"Our villain repeats himself," I mused as we set off again. "The victim lives alone, the entry is made using a duplicate key, and so on."

"Whoever it is he seems to be familiar with the domestic arrangements of an unusual number of the clergy," observed Flotsam thoughtfully.



"I had noticed," I lied, "and of course that could mean...?"

"Someone connected with the Church?" suggested Flotsam.

"It's a possibility to bear in mind," I said, "and why I made the arrangements with the dean."

"Very perspicacious, Sir, if I may say so," said the lad admiringly.

'It's also kept the dean keeping too close an eye on my activities' I thought.

The name on the church notice board of St. Hilda's, Coltishall was the Rev. James James.

"If he was a canon," I joked, "he'd be a double barrelled one."

It took Flotsam a while to work that one out.

We went through it all again with the Rev. James. The knickers had been black, and the date of the outrage was Friday April 17th., but apart from that it was the same old story. Well, almost. The Rev. James was married.

"But," he said, "My wife had taken the children off for their annual visit to their Aunt Pamela in Wells. They go every year without fail for the first two weeks in April.

I told her all about it when she got back. She was inclined to blame Mrs. Pardoe, the organist." he smiled nervously.

'A possibility?' I mused. But it didn't fit.

"Silly really," said the Rev., "Mrs. Pardoe is a little, er, gushing, but... Anyway when we heard about the others..."

We didn't get to meet Mrs. James.

"The Mothers Union meeting." explained her husband.

We stopped for a late lunch in Drayton and then triked on to our next port of call., over to the west in a little village called Primrose Green.

Peter Ashley was the vicar of St. Chad's there. His case was more or less identical. Red knickers on his dressing table, the morning of March 11th, no strangers around, lock opened with a key. Parson Ashley didn't live alone but his sister, Margaret, was, as he put it, "As deaf as a post and sleeps like a log."

I don't know if Flotsam was tired of pedalling the trike, but I was beat. I decided to call it a day.

"Back to Norwich," I ordered, "A shower, a pint or two, and then tea."

As we stepped through the door of The Old Coot we were met by Mike Higgs, the owner and landlord.

"You-know-who has been trying to get you since ten o'clock this morning," he said conspiratorially. "He wants you to ring him back, urgent like."

I sighed. 'No rest for the poor old working man' I thought.

"Sherringford here," I said.

"Soames!" The dean sounded agitated. "He's struck again!"

After his first outburst the dean restrained himself and gave a coherent if sparse account of the happening.

"It was Skelton of St. George's, Spooner Row, this time." he said.



"black knickers and a white card. He 'phoned me first thing this morning. I told him to touch nothing. I couldn't get hold of you so I thought it best to inform the police. They sent Inspector Snow and Sergeant Padstow along within the hour. The inspector called me back not twenty minutes ago. He didn't say in so many words that they were baffled, but reading between the lines..."

I was reluctant to go out again but I figured that I ought to show willing.

"It's just about two o'clock," I said, "we'll grab a bite to eat and then we'll be off. It would help if you could 'phone the Rev. Skelton and tell him that we'll be with him about half three."

"I'll do that," agreed the dean. "Have you made any progress?"

"Too early to say, your reverence," I said, "but I've one or two ideas that I'm following up, might have something in a day or two." This was stretching the truth a little, but one has to keep the clients happy. Privately I thought that he was expecting a bit much, me being on the case such a short time.



We ate a hasty meal; well, not too hasty, and whizzed off to Spooner

Row. We arrived in the hamlet a bit after three fifteen.

Thaddeaus Skelton had nothing new to offer. An examination of the premises yeilded only what I'd expected.

This parson also had a wife. But she was away on a training course in Leeds. It was general knowlege, the vicar admitted, the arrangements had been made several weeks ago, and a Mrs. Marriot was coming in every other day to look after him. That was general knowlege too.

"Well," I said to Flotsam, "now we're out we might as well go and see the other two victims."

"The Rev. Gittins of St. Botolph, in Morley St. Botolph, and the Rev. Pickersgill of St. Christopher, Sparrow Green, Sir." said Flotsam.

St. Botolph's was only a few miles away. The Rev. Gittins, a slight figure with inkstained fingers, was younger than he looked. He wasn't married. Engaged though.

"This whole affair has been very upsetting," he said. "It could have been very awkward. Ethel was quite put out. It was a relief when the dean informed me that there had been similar incidents."

We asked the by now routine questions and made the by now routine examination of the premises. It was a carbon copy of the other cases.

Next, and finally, we went to Sparrow Green. The Rev. Pickergill was a modernist. He wore his hair long, was in favour of women priests, and waxed enthusiastic about church music.

"The church must move with the times," he declared. He certainly did. His vicarage, which he refered to as his 'pad' was furnished 'trendily', and his conversation was interspersed with 'mans' and 'digs' and other colourful expressions.

It emerged in the course of conversation that the vicar was very popular. 'Eligable too' I thought. He had so many of the parish ladies vieing for the job of looking after him that he'd had to institute a roster. However none of them lived in, officially or unofficially.

"Most of them are not my type," he confided, "oh, good ladies all, but inclined to be a bit, well, you know, 'squareish'"

We learned nothing new here either and after consuming a couple of bottles of Newcastle Brown we returned to Norwich.

I thought it prudent to 'phone the dean. The substance of my report was, "I've now interviewed all of the victims and I'm working on it."

After dinner we went up to Flotsam's room.

"We have the list the dean supplied," I said, "but I'd like you to make out another one. The dean didn't include anything about how the intruder got in for instance, nor did he mention that each and every one of them was alone in the vicarage at the time, or as good as alone. Include those facts and anything new we've found out, no matter how trivial."

"I'll get on to it right away, Sir," said Flotsam eagerly.

"You do that," I said, "When you've finished you'll find me in the bar."

I sat at the bar with my pint and wondered what to do next. Clues were a bit thin on the ground, in fact, I admit, I was baffled.

By and by my attention was drawn to a little group of four sitting in a corner. They were an incongruous quartet.

One was tall, well built and youngish and was wearing a fisherman's dark blue jumper. Next to him was a smaller, dark haired chap dressed in a denim jacket and jeans. Number three was an older man, sunburned and grey haired. He looked like a prosperous farmer. The fourth man was wearing what looked like a post man's jacket.

"Funny looking bunch, them," I remarked casually to Mike the landlord.

A burst of laughter erupted from the corner where the four had their heads together.

"Them?" said Mike. "Come in often, three or four times a week. All well known locally. Now you mention it they are a mixed lot."

"Can you put names to them?" I asked.

"No trouble," said Mike. "The fisher man's jersey is Chuch Connor, our local computer expert. He runs his own business from Sildan House, down Wissett way. Started it when he left the navy, doing well at it too.

The dark haired one is John Madracki the artist. I wouldn't be surprised if you've run into him on your travels. Goes everywhere does John. Paints wildlife and fenland scenes, windmills, churches, things like that. Got a gallery in Pottergate which he runs with a mate. He's doing well too.

The tweedy chap is Harry Turner, he's a local chap, born in Norwich. He's in agricultural supplies, got his own business. Semi-retired now, but he still gets around.

The postie is Mike Siddall. Driven a van for years, delivering and collecting mail from every little sub-post office in the county. Knows every little village and back lane like, well, like the back of his hand."

"I wouldn't have thought that they'd have much in common," I said.

"You wouldn't think so?" said Mike. "As a matter of fact they all belong to some sort of a literary club. Funny club, it hasn't even got a name.



I've heard them laughing about it, it tickles them for some reason."

Mike moved off to serve another customer and I was left alone with my thoughts.

Flotsam was quick. I'd hardly finished my second pint when he came into the bar.

"Finished already?" I asked.

"There was not much information to work with, Sir," he said, and handed me a few sheets of paper.

I tucked them away in the inside pocket of my new jacket.

"Not here," I said, "You never know who might be watching. Get us a couple of pints, we'll go upstairs and look at them later."

"Well," I said, laying the dean's list and Flotsam's down side by side, "not much new. The mode of entry, the colours of the knickers.. you did notice that there have been four reds, three blacks and three purples? As they were sold in sets of three that means there's a black and a purple still to come."

"The days of the week differ, Sir," said Flotsam, "but there is something of a pattern in that the 'burglar' limits himself to just the one outrage per week."

'Bloody clever clogs' I thought.

"Somehow the villain must know when any particular parson will be alone in his house." I mused.

"An inside job, Sir?" suggested Flotsam. He reads too many mystery stories and picks up the jargon.

"Could be," I said non-committally.

I examined the two lists again, comparing the information.

"The only other thing is that the dean gives only the parson's initials," I said thoughtfully, "But I notice that you've put in their christian names."

Flotsam stiffened. The swine had noticed something.

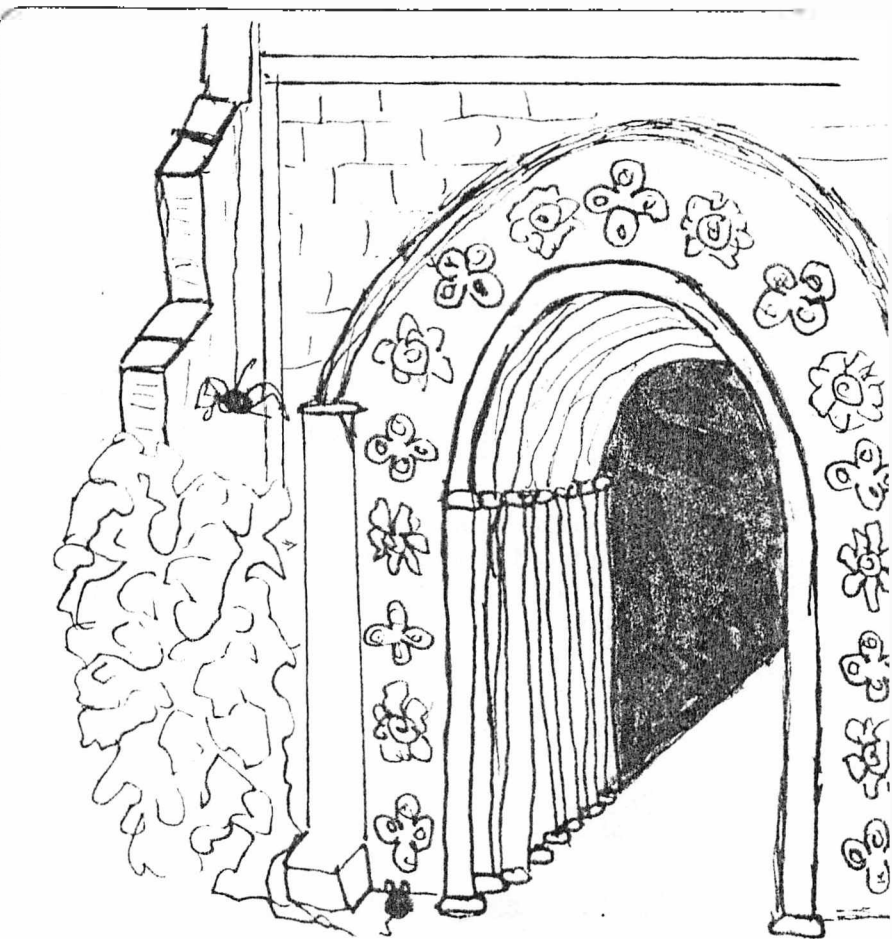
"It's just as well that you did," I improvised, "otherwise I might have missed it."

"Oh, Sir!" exclaimed Flotsam chagrined.

"What?" I said, affecting surprise, "you think you know what it is?"

Speechless in his eagerness Flotsam could only nod...like one of those plastic dogs uncouth folk put in the back windows of their cars.

"You've come a long way since I took you under my wing," I said judiciously....



"Go on then, tell me what you've deduced and I'll tell you if you've got it right."

"Sir!", cried Flotsam, "They're all Apostles!"

I concealed my bafflement with the ease of long practice.

"Obviously," I said, "To wit?"

"PETER Ashley, Andrew Hansen, JAMES James, JOHN Abbott, PHILIP Gittins, BARTHOLOMEW Rhind, THOMAS Jeeves, MATTHEW Langford, JAMES Pickersgill, and, today, THADDAEUS Skelton!" recited the lad with unseemly triumph.

"Well done lad," I said, and in my Socrates voice I added, "And what conclusion can we draw from this?"

"It seems to me, Sir, that it is highly probable that two more of these outrages are contemplated, over the next two weeks, and the victims will be clergymen bearing the christian names 'Simon' (that would be 'Simon the Less') and 'Matthias'."

"St. Barnabas has also been called an apostle," I said, "but there seem to be only twelve pairs of knickers involved. And Judas, who Matthias replaced, I consider unlikely. Not impossible mind you, just unlikely."

I considered. It was not too late, the dean might still be up. I telephoned.

"Sherringford here," I said.

"You have news?" exclaimed the dean.

"Making progress, your reverence," I said, "making progress. But I need a bit of help."

"Anything!" cried the dean. "What is it you want?"

"To further the investigation it is necessary that I have a list of all the incumbents in the diocese who have the christian names, Simon, Matthias, and Judas," I said, "oh, for good measure Barnabas too."

"I'll get on to it right away," said the dean, and hung up.

Blow me down if, as we were having a last before closing drink in the bar, the dean didn't ring back.

"That was quick," I said.

"No trouble," said the dean. "Since Mr. Connor installed the computer system we can call up information in minutes."

He read out the list, I copied it down. I thanked him and fended off his questions.



"So there we are," I said as we inspected the list. "No Judas, one canon called Barnabas, five parish priests named Simon, and a single Matthias."

"It does narrow it down, Sir," said Flotsam. "But it's going to be difficult to cover them all."

"I think we'll discount the Barnabas," I said. "Meanwhile we have the rest of this week to figure something out."

"Perhaps some sort of an alarm, Sir?" suggested Flotsam. "Or perhaps a camera?"

"I don't want to scare him off," I said, "so no alarm. But could you rig up something in the way of a camera, perhaps a video camera?"

"I would have to purchase some equipment," said Flotsam,

"That's what the expenses are for," I said.

"In that case, Sir," said Flotsam thoughtfully. "I could rig up both. A silent alarm which would show only on our receiver, and which would trigger a night-vision video camera at the same time."

"Excellent," I said, and yawned. "give some thought to what you'll need and we'll go out and get it tomorrow."

Flotsam went off to make his purchases the next morning. Meanwhile I'd been thinking.

I rang the dean again. I asked him what sort of information they kept in their computer system.

"Oh, all sorts of things," he said "salary, length of service, how long in various posts, qualifications, marital status, and lots more."

"Would that include details like Mrs. James's annual holiday, and the Rev. Ashley's sister being deaf?" I asked.

"Well," said the dean. "Things like the spouse being away would be, we'd have to have a record so that we could see to the payments for someone to go in and look after the domestic arrangements, but I don't think we'd make a note about Ashley's sister being deaf, but we might do."

"Hmmm." I said. "But I imagine that the fact would be known in the village?"

"Bound to be." said the dean, "they probably know that she snores too."

I thanked the dean and rang off. I was just wondering...

"How long will it take you to fix things up?" I asked Flotsam.

"I've planned a route," said Flotsam, "and taking into account that there are six vicarages, I expect to be able to complete all of the installations in a day."

"OK," I said. "But don't do it today, tomorrow or over the weekend will do. Tonight I want you to take some photographs. The object is to take them without the subjects knowing, and the light will not be perfect."

"I'm sure I can manage that, Sir." said Flotsam.

"Right," I said, "Now this afternoon we will stroll around the city, I want you to take a couple of dozen photos of people I will select."

In the evening, after dinner, we resorted to the bar. Luck was with me. The odd foursome came in a little after eight o'clock.

"That's them," I said quietly, "Can you do it?"

"No problem, Sir." replied Flotsam. "The camera is concealed under my jacket and, as I have made one or two minor alterations, the pictures will be of excellent quality, no matter the quality of the light."

He was right. The photos turned out to be splendidly clear.

"Now," I said, "tomorrow you have two important missions. In fact it might take you the day after as well. First of all you go and bug the six vicarages. Secondly, but just as important, you are to take all of the photographs, the ones we took on the street and of the four blokes in the bar, and go and see all of the parsons who have been victimised. You are to ask them if they saw any of them in the week before the incident. Don't draw particular attention to and of the photos, but remember anything that the parsons might say. Got that?"

"Sir's instructions are admirably clear and consise," said the lad. "I



will carry out my mission with discretion and despatch!"

It took Flotsam until the afternoon of the second day to carry out his tasks. We retired to his room to consider his report. He had set it out like this;

VILLAGE	SUBJECTS SEEN THERE THE PREVIOUS WEEK.			
Primrose Green.	Madracki.	Siddall.	Turner.	
Lodden.			Turner.	
Coltishall.		Siddall.		
Tivitshall.	Madracki.		Turner.	Connor.
St. Botolph.			Turner.	
Waterloo.		Siddall.		
Horsham.		Siddall.		
Cobbler's Green.			Turner.	Connor.
Sparrow Green.	Madracki.		Turner.	Connor.
Spooner Row.			Turner.	

"The villages where Mr. Siddall was seen are all on his postal route." said Flotsam. "And Mr. Turner was visiting some of his outlets. Mr. Madracki, one presumes, goes where his fancy takes him in pursuit of subjects to paint. It is not obvious exactly what took Mr. Connor to any particular location."

"Still, it's interesting." I said.

"Of course, Sir," remarked Flotsam, "it is possible that one or more of the gentlemen may have visited a village and not been noticed."

"Quite so." I agreed. "On the other hand it would appear that between them they had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with all of the relevant villages, and to discover the domestic arrangements and habits of all of the parsons."

"And our next move, Sir?" asked Flotsam.

"We do nothing." I said firmly. "Next week I expect to have photographic evidence of at least one of the suspects when he breaks into one of the Simon's vicarages. After that, well, we will have to see."

I 'phoned the dean later that day.

"Yes, your reverence," I said. "I have made considerable progress. No, I don't wish to put a name to the perpetrator just yet, in fact I think it would be wise to avoid naming names altogether. Quite so. But I'm afraid that you must resign yourself to two more. Yes. Sorry, but it can't be helped. Oh, yes, definitely, the twelfth one will be the last."

I put the 'phone down.

"Well, Flotsam," I said. "We must wait patiently. We need not waste our time in Norfolk however. The knicker fiends strike only during the hours of darkness therefore, during the daylight hours, I intend to see something of the fenlands. There is, for instance, the Roman town at Caister, Grimes Graves, and Sutton Hoo. We will visit those and any other places that sound interesting while we have the chance."

"On expenses, Sir?" asked Flotsam.

"Naturally." I replied. "Valuable background, and educational too."



Most of the next week passed without incident.

There was no need for me to lose any sleep of course. Each night I left Flotsam to monitor the alarm with instructions to wake me early, but not too early when one of them went off.

I was not too surprised then when Flotsam woke me up at eight o'clock on the Thursday morning.

"The alarm went off at two am, Sir," he said. "The one I set up at the Rev. Simon Scott's vicarage. That's St. Cuthbert's, Crowshill."

"Right," I said, as briskly as I could at that ungodly hour, "where's that?"

"It's about eighteen miles west of Norwich, Sir," he replied.

We were standing on the vicarage doorstep by nine o'clock.

"I did as you asked," said the Rev. Scott. "I've touched nothing and I've informed no-one."

"Excellent," I said. "Don't concern yourself. I'll contact the dean. Meanwhile let's go up to your bedroom."

There was a blank card and a set of black knickers on the chest at the foot of the vicar's bed. We took possession of the evidence and Flotsam removed the camera and the alarm.

"You can collect the others from the other Simon's later." I told Flotsam. "Now back to Norwich."

I had to tell the dean what had happened of course.

"Please contain yourself, sir," I said soothingly. "I did tell you that I expected this. No, it still goes. One more, next week, and it'll be all over, for good. Certainly, you have the word of Hemlock Soames for it!"

"The dean is unhappy, Sir?" enquired Flotsam.

"He'll keep." I said dismissively. "Meanwhile I've a fancy to see Bury St. Edmunds."

When Monday came round I changed our tactics. There was only the one Matthias, at St. Augustine's in Briston. I 'phoned the vicar and that evening we snuck into the vicarage.

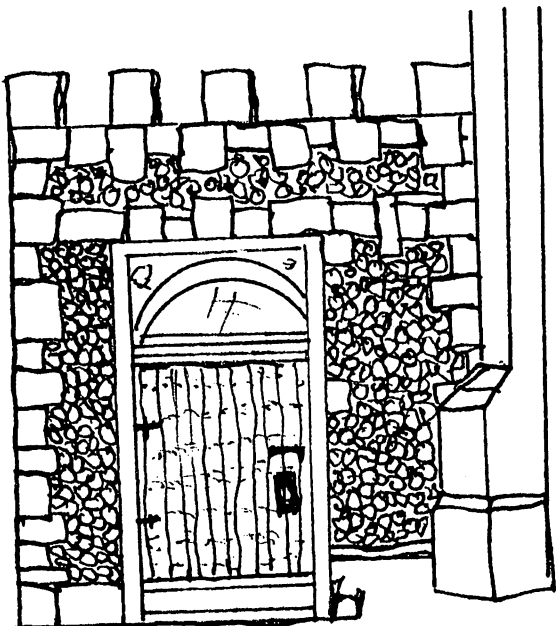
"While your daily is in the house." I said, "we will lock ourselves in your study. At night we will occupy your bedroom, you will sleep in the spare.

Now remember, and this is of prime importance, on no account, I repeat, on no account whatsoever, are you to leave that room. My assistant and I will take care of everything."

The Rev. Tudor was not too happy about this, but I waved the dean's authorisation at him. He was much mollified when Flotsam cooked our meals. They were a damn sight better than the poor parson had eaten for years. Naturally, having in mind the frugal fare we'd encountered in other vicarages we'd brought along our own supplies. On expenses.

Monday night passed without anything happening. I was not very worried, I was prepared to wait all week if necessary.

Tuesday night however....



I was awakened by Flotsam to find the light switched on and a trussed up figure wriggling on the carpet. It glared at me around it's gag.

"Sir slept through it all!" complained Flotsam.

"A sound constitution and an easy conscience." I responded. "Besides, my boy, I knew I could rely on you."

Flotsam, flattered by my confidence, beamed happily. The silly lad.

I had Flotsam collect the camera and so on and then carry our captive down to the parson's study.

"Plonk him in the armchair." I ordered, "and remove the gag."

"It's a fair cop, guv." whined the prisoner. "I mean't to go straight, strewth I did. But the wife, the nine kids, me poor old white haired mother."

"Come off it Chuch." I said cheerfully. "And I suppose you just happened to have a pair of your wife's knickers on you, for good luck, and this." I waved a piece of somewhat crumpled white card at him.

"Nothing on the card. No name. Ergo, The Nameless. Such a very obvious clue, to me anyway."

"Soames!" gasped Connor. "By the great stone balls of King Twelve Rabbits! I thought there was something familiar about you. But your clothes?"

"Neat, ain't they?" I said, "Bit of a change from the old duffle coat."

"Very nice." agreed Chuch. "er, what happens now. You wouldn't turn in an old mate...would you?"

I shrugged. Chuch paled.

"No." I sighed, "I don't suppose I would. But this has got to stop you know, now, for good."

"This was the last one, tonight." said Chuch.

"I'd guessed as much." I said, "you having worked through all of the twelve apostles."

"You got that too?" asked Chuch.

"Elementary." I said "There's not much that escapes the eye of Hemlock Soames."

"So what now?" asked Chuch.

"Now." I said, "we untie you and you go home. But. I want to see you and your nefarious pals tonight, eight o'clock at Sildan House. I want to hear the whole story."

"Fair enough." said Chuch. "the whole works."

Chuch left. I went back to bed. Next morning after breakfast - we left the balance of our food with the vicar - we returned to The Old Coot.

"Yes dean. All cleared up. No, no more outrages. No, no names, it would only cause trouble" I didn't say for who it would cause trouble.. "Yes you can tell. Not at all, glad to have been of service."

"That's that." I remarked to Flotsam. "We'll see Chuch tonight and then it's all wrapped up."

Sildan House is a rambling old mansion that looks as if it had once been an inn. The very picture of a pirates den or a rendezvous for smugglers.

The first thing I noticed when we were conducted into Chuch's den was the picture over the fire place.

"Good lord!" I cried, "if that ain't Norman G. Wandsborough!"

"Our mascot and inspiration." said Chuch proudly. "But let me introduce you around."



"It all started when we were discussing the perfect crime." said Chuch. "all of us are avid mystery fans. Naturally we agreed that the perfect crime was one where nobody realised that there had been a crime. But we agreed that there was no thrill where there was no possibility of being found out."

"Well," I said, "You were found out. I'm not sure what you could be charged with, but you could have been in deep trouble."

Chuch shrugged.

"We didn't really think of that until we'd done a couple." he said. "and by then it had sort of got hold of us."

"Chuch's right." said John. "it was out of boredom. Norfolk is a bit of a dead hole, especially in the winter. Oh, it's senic, peaceful, but damn unexciting."

"We just wanted to see if it could be done." said Mike, absently stroking the black and white cat that he always took with him.

"Harry thought of the apostles," said Chuch. "I bought the knickers. I installed the computor system in the cathedral you know. I've got access to all the records so we knew the names of the parsons, who lived alone, and so on. Of course we also picked up information at village pubs. It was easy."

"Just as Sir deduced." put in Flotsam admiringly.

"And who got the keys?" I asked.

"I got them." said Harry. "It was my firm that supplied the locks for the whole diocese, must have been thirty years ago. I still have the masters and I cut copies for us all."

"It took us no time at all to get organised." said Chuch. "We shared out the knickers and the cards and sorted out the targets in the middle of March, and then we were away."

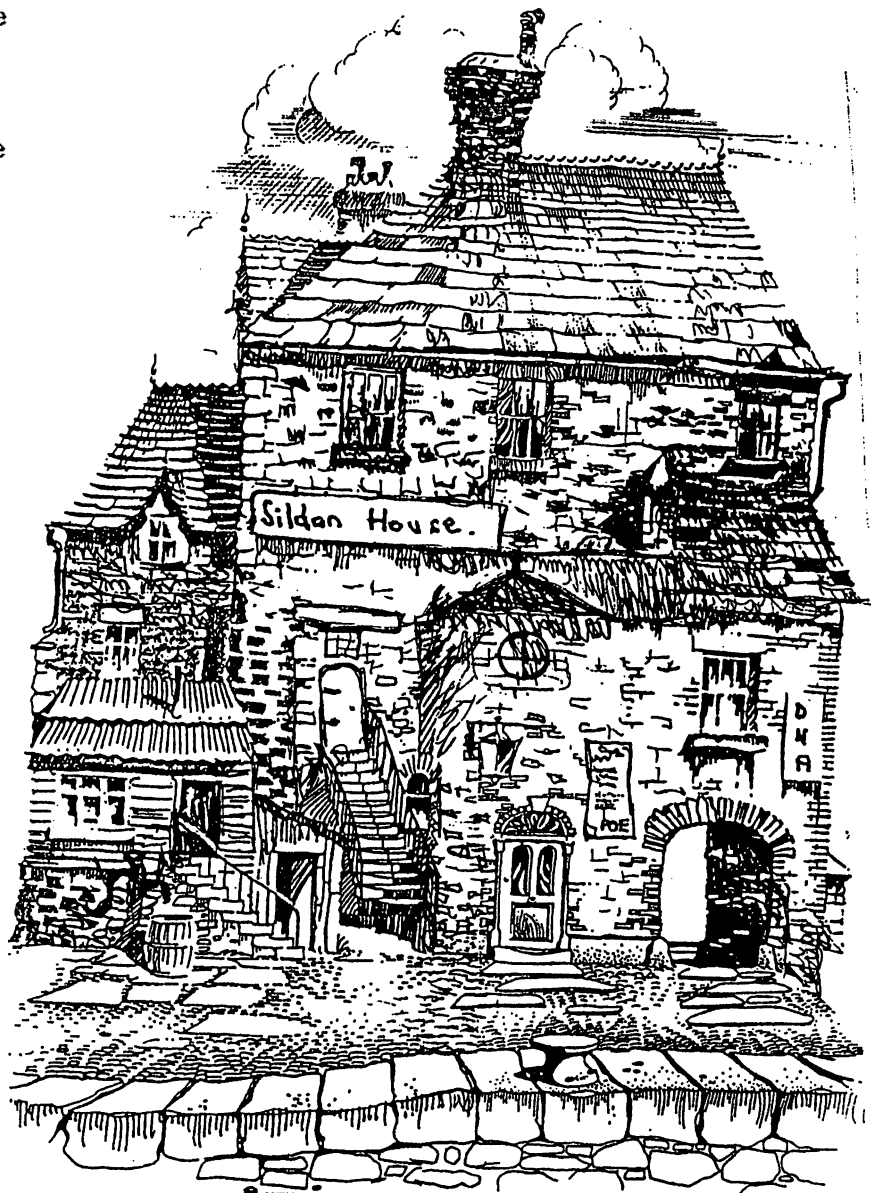
"But no more." I admonished. "It wouldn't be me the next time. Find some other way of amusing yourselves."

"I guess you're right." sighed Chuch. "Pity, it was good fun. Why, I remember the time I got into the vicarage at..."

"Y'know." said Chuch as we left. "I quite liked that idea of yours, inventing scandalous stories about MPs and putting them out over the network. I could fix it so nobody could ever trace them."

"Oh no!" I groaned.

"Flotsam, let's get out of here!"



THE IRKHAM HOUSE AFFAIR

5-20-11

"Sir Lewis Smith-Wesson," His Grace related, "has spent most of his life overseas, in one or another of our consulates. Last January Sir Lewis's uncle Petard passed away. Sir Lewis thereupon retired, under the impression that he and Lady Margaret would be able to live out their declining years comfortably in their ancestral home, Irkham House.

Regretably, what with these cursed Death Duties and one thing and another, he found that very little money remained to the estate.

However over the years the family has acquired a large and varied collection of antiques. Sir Lewis decided to have these valued, with a view to selling some of them off and so obtaining some ready cash.

Sir Lewis's secretary, Enfield, found a chap to do the job, a certain Luger Lee. The problem is that neither Sir Lewis nor myself are entirely happy with Lee's valuations."

"I see, Your Grace," I said, "But in what capacity exactly do you wish to retain my services?"

"Why," said His Grace, "As you have so amply demonstrated on a number of occasions an expert knowledge of these things we wish you to make a second, and confidential, evaluation".

I squirmed mentally. Visions of big fat chickens coming home to roost fluttered across my mind. 'But then', I thought, 'There is always Flotsam'..."

"Only too glad to be of help," I lied confidently.

"Stout fellow! cried His Grace beamingly. "I'll pick you up in the Rolls on Tuesday evening at six."

I collected Flotsam from the servant's hall and went home.

"Flotsam, old bean," I said expansively, "do help yourself to another of these delicious crumpets."

The menial cringed and eyed me fearfully, no doubt wondering which of his many sins I'd discovered.

"Fear not, faithful lackey," I continued kindly, "I merely wish you to pop along to the library or where ever and bone up on antiques. You know, furnishings, paintings, pottery, plate, and so on. Learn who made what and when, how much they're worth, and how to tell the real things from the fakes."

"Like the Antiques Road Show Sir?" asked the lad, brightening up and showing interest.

"Precisely," I said. "And, mind, particularly what they're worth."

I added ingenuously.

"I'm doing a little job for His Grace next Tuesday evening which involves such knowledge. This is, as you know, a subject upon which I am something of an expert. It occurred to me that this might be an opportune time for you to improve your knowledge of the field. Learn all you can and when we visit Irkham House I will test how much you've absorbed by having you assist me in the valuation."

"Sir is a thoughtful and generous master," said the idiot gratefully, "I'll get to work at once."

"You do that." I said encouragingly, "You've got until six o'clock on Tuesday night, no slacking now!"

Irkham House is a modest red-brick Georgian, well mostly Georgian, the foundations are older, mansion. It is built on a low ridge with it's face to the Malverns. A mile to the south east, on another low ridge, is situated the ancient Dymlow Minster, a country church of formidable antiquity.

In the shallow vale between the two buildings Lewis's forebears, utilising the talents of Something Might Be Managed Robinson, had caused a long narrow lake to be made. The pinched centre of the lake was spanned by a brick built three arched bridge.

The Rolls turned off the main road shortly before Dymlow Minster and plunged through a narrow belt of much overgrown woodland. As we emerged into the sunlight we were assailed by the scent of newly mown grass.

The drive poured down the slope, across the bridge, and swept up to the house. Two cars were already parked on the forecourt. One was a land rover, the other an old but immaculate Lagonda.

The door was opened by an elderly servitor wearing a black suit, a scarlet waistcoat, and an expression rather like that of a spaniel.

On discovering His Grace at the head of our little party this venerable apparition's face broke into a sudden, quite brief, but most charming smile.

"Master Walter!" he creaked. "Sir Lewis is in the Orangery. He's been expecting you."

"Good evening, Gatling," said His Grace warmly and, evidently considerate of the butler's advanced decrepitude, "We'll make our own way down."

Gatling tottered off, followed by His Grace's chauffeur, while we followed His Grace down the hallway and turned east along another wide corridor. At the end of the corridor was the door to the orangery.

Sir Lewis was, is, a tall, robust, thickly grey-haired gent. His forehead is high and broad, and a great beak of a nose thrusts out over a wide mobile mouth.

He was sitting in an old and comfortable armchair with his slippered feet propped up on a padded stool. He was half lost in an enormous old and scruffy tweed jacket, with a fat ginger cat on his lap and a 'bent' pipe in his mouth. I warmed to him at once.

Sir Lewis removed his pipe as we entered.

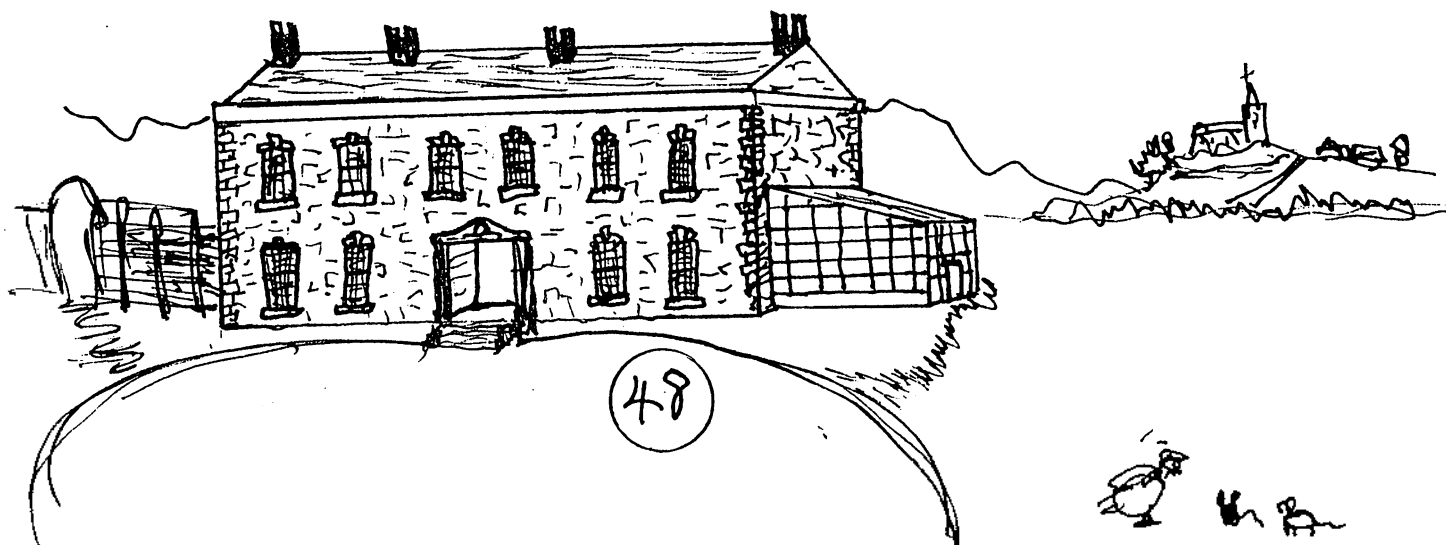
"My dear fellow," he boomed, struggling to his feet and coming forward to grasp the Duke by the hand. The cat retired with outraged dignity.

His Grace introduced me, and Flotsam.

"So you're the detective and antique wallah Walter's been telling me about?" he said.

I was constrained to answer, modestly, that I was.

Then, the grand old boy having got us all seated, he plied us with drink.



"I've gotten rid of the mem-sahib," Sir Lewis confided, "sent her off to visit that dotty old cousin of hers in St. Mary Mead, thought it best y'know, in case there's any unpleasantness."

"Quite so," said His Grace, nodding sagely.

"My secretary and Lee won't be back for an hour or so," Sir Lewis continued, "I'll take you along to the library when we've finished our drinks and Mr. Soames can cast his eye over the knick knacks. If Lee's valuations are correct, y'see, no more need be said."

On the other hand...well."

A little later we went to the library. Sir Lewis strode along with such energy that we tailed along behind him like the tail of a comet.

The library shelves were half empty, which surprised me to the extent that I remarked upon the fact.

"My uncle Petard had some rather peculiar tastes in books," explained Sir Lewis, "he collected science-fiction and pornography with equal enthusiasm. The first week we got home I had Gatling clear them all out, told him to burn the damn things."

I came over faint for a moment. But then I took hold of myself, er, metaphorically speaking of course.

I observed that the room was absolutely packed with the family collection. So much so that it was difficult to move around without bumping into things. This quite suited me though.

"It would be best if you and His Grace were to remain here in the doorway," I suggested, "while I conduct the examination."



I whipped out my note book and, with Flotsam close behind, I started round the room.

"We will begin the test now," I informed the eager Flotsam. "For instance," I gave a particularly ornate table a smart kick on one of its silly legs, "this thing here."

"Ah," said Flotsam, "genuine Chippendale. One much like it fetched £24,000 at Sotherby's just last month."

I carefully stepped back from the lovely table and made a note.

"OK," I said, "what about this little thingy?"

"Meissen," pronounced Flotsam unhesitatingly, "should fetch about £30,000."

We continued around the room, me selecting items at random and Flotsam identifying them and pricing them. My note taking hand became increasingly unsteady as we progressed. When we had seen a couple of dozen objects the strain became too much for me so I called a halt.

"That'll do for now, Flotsam," I said, "You didn't do at all badly. But remain alert, I may wish to test you further."

"Sir is too kind!" beamed the happy moron.

I approached Sir Lewis and His Grace note book in hand.

"You've got some good stuff here, Sir Lewis," I said confidently as I handed him the list.

Sir Lewis's face grew redder and redder as he read down my list. His Grace, shamelessly peering over his shoulder also showed signs of growing indignation.

"Are you sure of these figures?" demanded Sir Lewis incredulously.
"Perhaps you might care to ask His Grace if I've ever been wrong."
I suggested.

His Grace shook his head.

"Believe me, Lewis," he said, "the chap's a marvel. He knows everything about anything. If Soames says these are the proper values then I'd stake my coronet that they are."

"I see," said Sir Lewis grimly. He thought for a moment.

"What we'll do," said Sir Lewis, "is to get Lee in here and..."
he explained his strategy.

"So, Mr. Soames, if you and your assistant would be so kind as to remain here I'll go and see if Lee and Enfield have returned."

Sir Lewis and His Grace then left, their heads together.

"It's a damn shame," I said, "all those books thrown out, lost and gone forever."

There was a discreet cough from behind us. Old Gatling had come up un-noticed.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the ancient retainer, "but I couldn't help overhearing."

"Eh?" I said.

"The books sir," said Gatling, "the old master fair doted on those books, sir. When Sir Lewis instructed me to dispose of them, well, I hadn't the heart, sir."

"What!?" I exclaimed. "What happened to them then?"

Gatling looked about him furtively and his voice dropped to a whisper.

"I telephoned an old friend of the master's," he confided, "and he came and took them all away."

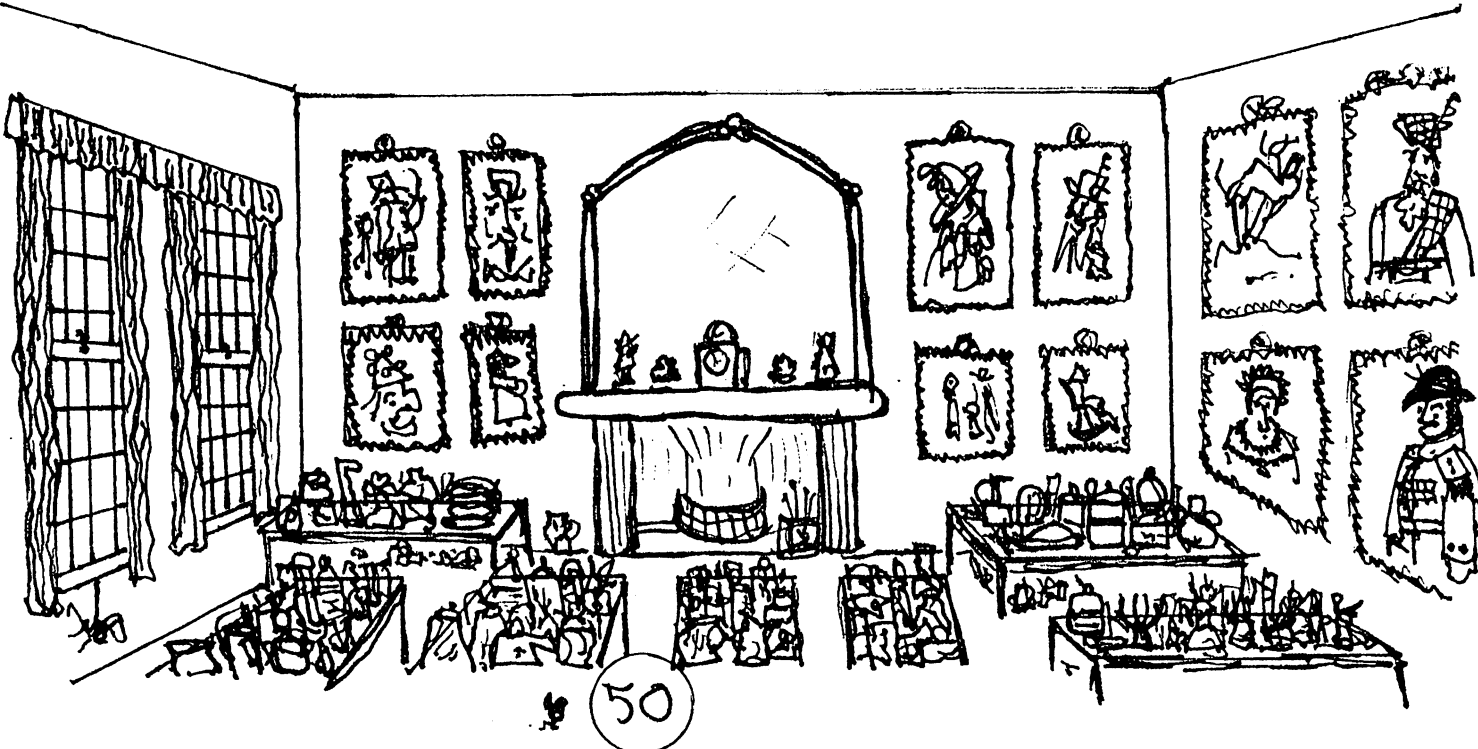
"Aha!" I said, "and what might be the name of this evident connoisseur be?"

"A gentleman by the name of Harris, sir, Mr. Charles Harris of Northampton," he replied.

"As I live and breathe!" I said wonderingly, "Chuch Harris!"

"Sir is acquainted with the gentleman?" enquired Gatling hopefully.

"I am indeed," I said warmly, "But say nothing of this to anyone, not even to your wife!"



"Heavens, no! sir!" he exclaimed, horrified, "Not a word to Betsy, or anyone." With that he scuttled off.

Sir Lewis and His Grace returned accompanied the secretary and the antiques expert.

The secretary, Enfield, was slimly built, about thirty years of age, with fair hair and a mustache, and an honest, open face.

Lee was a wizened old chap who must have been getting on for seventy. He was an alert and lively 'senior citizen' though, far from being in his dotage. He had an irritatingly ingratiating smile and was just a little too overdressed to be described as elegant.

"Ah, Mr. Soames," said Lee oilily, "I hear you've a junk yard over in Stourbridge, and are by way of being an expert on antiques!"

"Oh, I don't know about that," I said, allowing just a suggestion of a whine to creep into my voice.

"Come now, my good fellow," said Sir Lewis brusquely, "that wasn't the impression you gave me a few minutes ago."

I said nothing, but I licked my lips nervously and contrived to look shiftily.

"I don't doubt your expertise for one moment," Sir Lewis continued, exuding disbelief from every pore. "But it would be quite interesting to compare your valuations with those of another expert.

Don't you think, Mr. Lee?"

Lee wasn't all too happy with this idea, but I practiced my rag-and-bone-man-getting-above-his-station look, and Sir Lewis insisting, plainly intent on showing me up as a fraud, well, he didn't have a lot of choice.

The exercise took about twenty minutes. Flotsam pointed out the item's he'd...I'd...valued, not saying anything but an occasional "This one", and Lee gave a description and a price. Sir Lewis had my list and as we went round, he noted Lee's replies.

We gathered in the corridor outside the library; I did mention how crowded the library was: and Sir Lewis addressed us. Particular Mr. Lee.

"Dear me," said Sir Lewis mildly, "there does seem to be a considerable disagreement between the two evaluations. I'll read out the results."

He did, and they went something like this.

Mr. Lee.		Mr. Soames.	
object	valuation	object	valuation
Brownleigh	£8,000	Chippendale	£24,000
Gulver	£12,000	Hepplewhite	£36,000
van Rickett	£20,000	Holbein	£62,000
Cawthorne	£11,000	Turner	£38,000
Je Ferry	£40,000	van Dyke	£150,000
Coalport	£10,000	Meissen	£30,000
Stafford	£5,000	Worcester	£17,000
Ugandian	£23,000	Benin	£73,000
H'nang	£54,000	Japanese, various.	£275,000
Wittermung	£15,000	Breeches bible	£46,000

and so on, and so on.



As Sir Lewis proceeded down the list his voice became harsher and more remote.

Lee became paler and paler until by the time Sir Lewis stopped reading he was a deathly white.

"Well?" said Sir Lewis, looking straight into Lee's eyes.

"Preposterous!" blustered Lee, rather feebly, "It just goes to show that the junk man hasn't a clue about antiques."

No-one looked very convinced.

"We could get other opinions," I suggested. "Flotsam, who could we consult?"

"Clarke for the books," said Flotsam, "Gammel or Thompson for the paintings, Green specialises in brasses, McVeigh for the furniture, Plant or Shibano for the Japanese stuff, Connor..."

"I think that'll be enough to be going on with," I interrupted.

Lee, yellow rather than white by now, suddenly clutched at his chest and, gasping, "My heart, my heart!" slid to the floor.

"The blighter's faking!" exclaimed Sir Lewis angrily.

"Very probably," agreed His Grace, "but it might be genuine. I think we should send for a doctor."

Reluctantly Sir Lewis agreed.

"While I'm 'phoning for the doctor," he said grimly, "I'll get onto the police."

We carried Lee into the next room and sat him in an arm chair.

Sir Lewis and the Earl hurried away.

Enfield looked worriedly at the gasping Lee.

"I wonder if a spot of brandy would do any good?" he suggested. Adding, "I bet you could do with a drink yourself, Mr. Soames."

I considered briefly. Enfield was a strapping young man. Lee didn't look as if he was going to be any trouble. Sir Lewis's brandy was very good.

"A good idea," I said, "I'll go and get some."

Intent as I was in obtaining succour for Lee I trotted off down the corridor without noticing that Flotsam, not having been told otherwise, was following me.

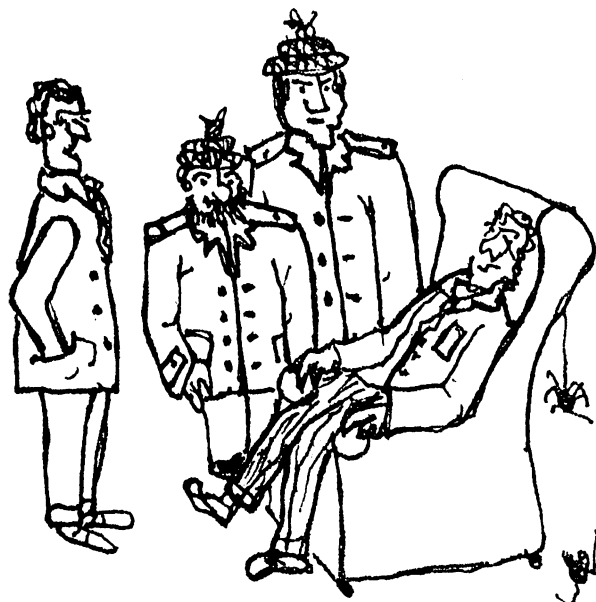
The brandy was good. I tested it and then refilled the glass and set off on my errand of mercy.

We had scarcely started back down the corridor when I heard the sound of a car revving up, followed closely by the screech of tyres. An awful thought struck me. I rushed to the front door just in time to see the land rover hurtle across the bridge and vanish up the hill, into the trees and onto the main road.

Sir Lewis, His Grace, and old Gatling too, appeared moments later.

We stared at each other in wild surmise and then, as one, we dashed down the corridor.

Enfield was sitting on the carpet holding his belly and gasping for breath.



"The little swine!" he wheezed, "The little swine!" he panted. "And to think it was me who hired him!"

"Not your fault," growled Sir Lewis, "he had excellent credentials."

"Quite possibly forged!" said His Grace indignantly.

"What happened, Enfield old chap?"

The somewhat recovered Enfield described what had happened.

"No sooner had Mr. Soames and his assistant left the room," he said, "than Lee started moaning something awful. I bent over to look at him and the bugger kicked me in the stomach, with both feet!"

We got Enfield into the chair lately vacated by Lee. I had inadvertently drunk the brandy I'd been carrying, so I sent Flotsam off for the bottle, for Enfield, of course.

The doctor came not long after. He was a sprightly old Scottish gent, Hotchkiss by name, who lived just up the road in the village. He examined Enfield carefully.

"Aye, it's a nasty bruise right enough," he pronounced, "but it'll do ye no lasting harm."

He prescribed aspirins, took 'a wee drappie' and went on his way.

As he left the police arrived.

Sir Lewis explained to Inspector Henry Winchester why there was no-one for him to arrest, so after he and his sergeant, Thompson had taken statements, they left too.

We ate a delayed dinner and retired before midnight.

The earthquake which woke me up turned out to be Flotsam gently shaking my shoulder.

"By heck!" I exclaimed blearily, "It's still dark! What time do you call this!"

Flotsam is inclined to take things literally, a trait I sometimes forget.

"I believe it's called three fifty six am, Sir," he said, perfectly seriously.

"Oh no!" I groaned. "Why on earth are you waking me at this ungodly hour!?"

"I'm sorry Sir," the lad said diffidently, "but it occurred to me that Sir might wish to be informed of the burglary."

"Burglary!" I spluttered, more or less leaping up. "What burglary?"

"The one that was taking place a few minutes ago, Sir," he said, "at least I assumed that it was a burglar who opened one of the library windows."

I struggled out of bed and began to haul on my trousers.

"Get dressed pronto," I ordered, "Then run round outside the library. Be ready to grab anyone who tries to get out while I rouse the household."

A few minutes later, clutching a formidable walking stick, Sir Lewis threw open the library door. His Grace was a step behind Sir Lewis and I guarded our rear.

It was pitch black in the library until Sir Lewis switched on the lights. There was no burglar to be seen, but one of the windows was wide open. I made my way over to the window through the cluttered room and put my head out.

"Anyone come past you?" I asked the waiting Flotsam.



"No-one has emerged since I took up my post, Sir," said the minion.
 "Come back in then," I said grumpily.
 Sir Lewis and His Grace were gazing helplessly around the room.
 "Such a damn confusion," said Sir Lewis, "I can't tell if anything's missing or not."
 Flotsam, who had come in quietly, overheard the remark.
 "Nothing is missing, sir," he said, "except the netsuke and the other Japanese objects. They are the most portable, and negotiable, of the antiques."
 We were still stewing over this information when Enfield appeared in the doorway. He was out of breath and dishevelled. His clothes were covered in grass cuttings and the bottoms of his trousers, and his trainers, were soaking wet.
 "What's happened to you!? Where have you been!? We've had a burglar!" cried Sir Lewis.
 "I know," said Enfield, "Iv'e been chasing him."
 Gatling, in a startling dressing gown, ghosted up.
 "Get onto the police again, Gatling," ordered Sir Lewis, "tell 'em we've been burgled."
 Gatling tottered off and the rest of us went down to the orangery.
 "Now then," said Sir Lewis, after we'd flopped down and a bottle had been opened.
 "Well, sir," said Enfield earnestly, "I couldn't sleep, not after all the excitement. I tossed and turned for ages. Finally I decided that a breath of fresh air might do some good, so I threw on some clothes and came down. I was just at the foot of the stairs when I got this funny feeling. I don't know why. But anyway I walked down to the library and opened the door. There was someone in there. He bolted through the window and I, never thinking to call for help, rushed after him. He knew I was chasing him and he shot across the bridge like a bat out of hell. I nearly had him though. But halfway up the other slope the begger suddenly turned round and swung some sort of a bag at me. I was knocked flying and by the time I'd got to my feet and run up the hill it was too late. I heard the sound of a car driving off, and that was that."
 "Was it Lee?" demanded Sir Lewis.
 Enfield hesitated. "I don't know," he admitted. "He wasn't a big chap, and he had something over his face. I wouldn't like to swear to it."
 I couldn't put my finger on it but I got the feeling that there was something not quite right with Enfield's story. I excused myself and beckoned to Flotsam to follow. We went up and stood in the doorway of the library.
 "Flotsam," I said, "Enfield's story doesn't ring true. I have, of course, noticed certain discrepancies. I'd like to give you a chance to tell me if you've noticed them too."
 "Oh, joy!" exclaimed the idiot. "If I do well will Sir let me have the Junior Detective badge?"
 "Well," I said, "that depends. Start talking lad."
 "Well," said Flotsam, "Mr. Enfield stated that he saw someone go out of the window. That is just possible I suppose. Although the room must have



have been in darkness because Sir Lewis had to switch on the lights."

"Quite," I said, "though the burglar could have had a torch Enfield didn't. He didn't mention that, or switching the lights off or on. Hmmm. Carry on lad."

"Thank you, Sir," said Flotsam. "That brings up another point. The library is jam packed with all manner of objects, we had to move carefully amongst them even with the lights on. Yet Enfield claims that he 'rushed' to the window. I can't see how he managed to do that, in the dark, without knocking something over."

"So," I said. "You see, Flotsam, there was no burglar. Enfield faked him. He must have stolen the Japanese stuff himself."

Ah, but how did he dispose of the loot?"

"It is possible that he carried out the robbery earlier, Sir," said Flotsam, "and has hidden it in or around the house. On the other hand it may be that Sir and myself disturbed him, and that he has been forced to conceal the stolen objects somewhere in the grounds."

"Not bad thinking lad," I said, "I'm inclined to go for the grounds." My brilliant brain went into overdrive.

"What we want," I declared, "is clues."

"Clues, Sir?" asked Flotsam eagerly.

"Clues," I said firmly. Now then Flotsam, the first thing I want you to do is to get hold of Enfield's trousers and trainers. Any excuse will do, say that you're taking them off to be cleaned up. Pinch them if you have to! There might be marks on them, or seeds or something. Seeds can be clues," I added airily.

"Next, borrow a torch from old Gatling and have a rummage round the grounds. See if you can follow Enfield's tracks, that might lead to something".

'What else?' I thought. Ah, the obvious!

"When you have carried out my instructions," I said with emphasis, "report back to me. Only me. In private. Got that?"

"To hear is to obey, oh noble boss person!" cried the simple soul, his little eyes aglow.

I loaned him my magnifying glass.

"There," I said, "just like a proper sleuth hound!" Aquiver with joy the minion rushed off.

Flotsam reported back just after the sleepy-eyed policemen put in their appearance. We retired to my room.

"Now lad, let's have it," I said. "No, not the magnifying glass you cretin, the report!"

"Sorry Sir," said Flotsam, very little abashed.

"*Phalaris arundinacea* and *Typha latifolia*!" he announced.

I considered striking the idiot with some heavy blunt object.

"In plain English," I sighed. "My patience is wearing thin."

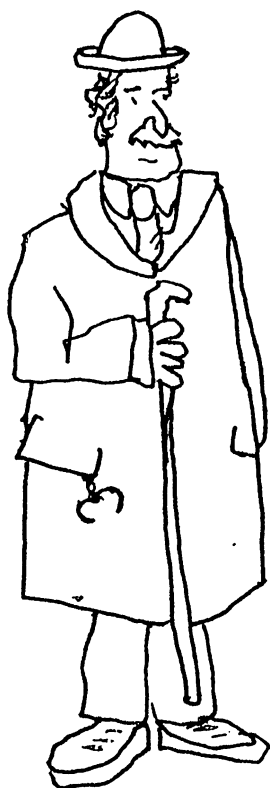
Flotsam started again.

"Following Sir's instructions," he said, "I first of all obtained the suspect's nether garments and his footwear, these I subjected...."

"You done good, Flotsam," I said when he had related the full tale.

"Now then, the constabulary have arrived. They're just now taking statements, again. We'll go down in a minute. I wan't to see that Inspector. And mind, you keep your mouth shut unless I actually order you to speak."





Flotsam, his lips pressed firmly together, nodded vigorously.

With Flotsam carrying Enfield's trousers and trainers in two separate plastic bags I led the way down the stairs.

I found the Inspector alone with His Grace, which was a bit of luck.

I explained what I had discovered and deduced and, with His Grace backing me up, I persuaded the Inspector to let me wind up the case in my own way.

I had everyone assembled in the drawing room with Inspector Winchester and Sergeant Thompson sitting as unobtrusively in the background as possible.

I took up a position in front of the fireplace.

"It is my professional opinion," I declared, "that Lee and Enfield were in this together from the beginning."

Enfield leapt to his feet.

"I say!" he cried indignantly. "This is a bit thick! You can't say that! It's a damn lie! He can't go around throwing out wild accusations like that, can he, Inspector!?"

"At the moment," said the inspector mildly, "Mr. Soames is merely offering an opinion, I think we should hear what he has to say."

"I will give you the opportunity to contradict me," I said to Enfield.

Enfield looked around but found no support, His Grace having already spoken to Sir Lewis, so muttering, "Damn cheek!" he sat down again.

"To continue," I said. "I think that further investigation will reveal that Enfield brought Lee in to value Sir Lewis's collection with the intention of defrauding him.

When Lee is caught, as I've no doubt he will be, I rather suspect that he'll be only too willing to implicate Enfield. Especially when he finds out that Enfield has tried to frame him for the burglary.

When I exposed Lee he faked a heart attack. Once they were alone Enfield and Lee cooked up the assault on Enfield so that Lee could escape. This suited Enfield because Lee could have implicated him in the fraud. It also suited Lee because Enfield probably promised to persuade Sir Lewis that, as no harm had been done, it might be better not to carry the matter further.

Lee never did return to Irkham House. Enfield, being a bold fellow, hit on the idea of the burglary which, by judicious hints, he blamed on Lee. He calculated that Lee would lie low for a while, at least until he discovered whether or not a hue and cry had been raised for him. Or it may be that Enfield figured that Lee would remain at large, and therefore not be able to 'squeal' on him, long enough for him to steal the Japanese objects and flee the country.

May I also remind everyone that Enfield said that he 'rushed' across the library in pursuit of the burglar. You know how cluttered the library is, and how dark it was until Sir Lewis switched on the lights. Does anyone really think it possible that Enfield could 'rush' across the room in the dark and not knock something over?

I concede, for the sake of argument, that Enfield might be able to see like a cat in the dark. However.

Enfield also told us, and he repeated this in his written statement to the police, that he followed the burglar down the hill, across the bridge, and up the other side. He said nothing about going near the lake."

"The lake?" said Enfield, looking mysified.

I ignored the interruption and continued.

"Then we come to Enfield's trousers and trainers," I said, "I got my assistant, Flotsam, to obtain these. Inspector Winchester has them now but I examined them first myself."

I paused for effect.

"Phalaris arundinacea and Typha latifolia!" I announced grandly.

"Otherwise known as Reed Grass and Reed Mace. They only grow near water, which in this case means the lake. There are dozens of their seeds on Enfield's clothes."

"Nonsense!" broke in Enfield, "The grass was wet with dew, that's how I got my feet soaked, and any seeds must have blown up from the lake."

"Indeed?" I said quizzically, and went on.

"Then again," I said, "you told us that the burglar was carrying some sort of a bag. You actually said that he struck you with it. And you inferred that he still had it with him when he made his escape.

Flotsam," I said, "kindly relate what you did in the grounds."

"Certainly Sir," he said, and, "Following Sir's instructions I borrowed a torch from Mr. Gatling. I followed the footprints from the library window across the grass, which was wet with dew, as Mr. Enfield has said. The tracks were quite obvious. This was before the arrival of the police so no-one else had been out in the grounds. The trail led across the bridge, but not up the far slope. They turned left rather and some sixty feet from the bridge, under a willow tree, I found a hold-all hidden in the reeds. I did not disturb the bag but returned and made my report to Sir."

Enfield was looking quite distraught by now.

"The police now have the hold-all," I said with some relish, "and if you have been careless enough to leave any fingerprints on it, Mr. Enfield, I reckon you'll find them difficult to account for."

By the expression on Enfield's face I guessed that he had indeed been careless.

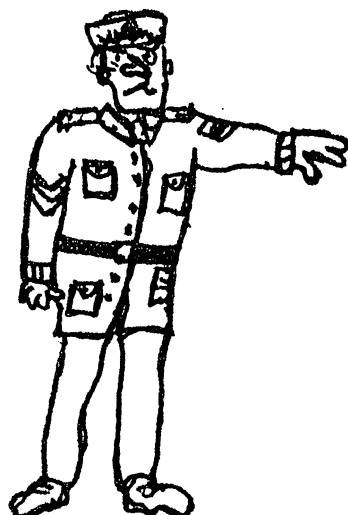
Inspector Winchester delivered the caution and he and his sergeant departed with his prisoner.

Sir Lewis hardly needed His Grace's, "I told you he was a whiz!" to convince him that I'd done a good job.

For my efforts he presented me with a painting, which he took to be an early Picasso. I didn't let on that it was really an ATOM, and gloated all the way home.

"About the Junior Detective badge?" Flotsam hinted delicately.

"OK," I said, "we'll have a bit of a presentation ceremony. After you've broached another cask of vintage Lumphammer."



THE CLOBBERED CAVILIER

After the battle the dead and wounded picked themselves up and retired to the beer tent, whence the other Cavaliers and Roundheads had already made their way.

This was at another of the annual fetes put on at Hamley Hall, with the kind permission of His Grace, Walter the fourteenth Duke of Duggley.

It was he, the Duke, who introduced me, us, to Sir Edward Brooks, the commander of Prince Rupert's Regiment of Horse.

Sir Edward, it appeared, had been much impressed by His Grace's enthusiastic accounts of those occasions when I had been of some small service to him.

"You must come along to the Annual General Meeting, Mr. Soames," burred Sir Edward, "many of our members are familiar with your exploits, they'd be delighted to make your acquaintance."

"I'm no scholar," I demmured, "I imagine that I'd find the proceedings, however fascinating for the members of your esteemed society, a trifle on the dry side."

Sir Edward laughed heartily.

"I'd hardly call the AGM 'dry'," he said, "we combine the AGM with a good old fashioned Cavilier banquet. There'll be lashings of good food and better booze."

Presented in this light the AGM sounded rather attractive, so I consented to present myself, along with the inevitable Flotsam, at Harvington Hall, a fortnight hence, for the aforesaid AGM and feast.

It was a pleasant day. The trees stirred in the gentle breeze. The birds were singing their heads off and opulant cars hurtled up the lane to the discomfit of unwary pedestrians.

Flotsam parked the trike over by the church and we strolled over the disused bowling green towards the brick built bridge which spanned the moat.

We were intercepted by two large blokes decked out in Cavilier costume, neither of them would have made a good subject for that Laughing Cavilier painting. They looked, in fact, right fed up. Embarrassed even.

I recognised one of them, Sergeant Todd from Hagley.

"Hello, Sweeny," I said, friendly like. I could afford a certain familiarity with Dodd. I knew where those rabbits came from, the ones he had hung up in his shed. And I could prove it.

"Hello,hello,hello!" said Sweeny. He was a bit of a traditionalist. "If it aint Mr.Soames and Dr.Flotsam."

"Your perspicacity," I observed kindly, "is a constant source of amazement. What brings you here, old chap? We, I might mention, are here by personal invitation of Sir Edward Brooks."

"Duty, sir," said Dodd self-importantly, "half the gentry of the county are at this here do. We'm the security arrangements."

This declaration did not fill me with overwhelming confidence.

"I see," I said tactfully, "Well, keep up the good work. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get at the booze."

Before any awkwardness could develop Sir Edward appeared at the far end of the bridge and, under his wing, so to speak, we were ushered over the bridge.

We passed under the arch and into the Lower Hall, and thence up the grand stairway into the Great Hall. Here we found gathered a gallant company, perhaps two hundred strong, for the most part arrayed as Cavaliers.

They were all talking and drinking merrily around a huge U shaped table. This, groaning under the weight of a multitude of goodies, took up most of the space.

"It won't be long now," Sir Edward assured us, showing us to our places at the table. We sat down, helped ourselves to drinks, and waited.

Sir Edward, in his capacities as Host, Chairman and Commander, struck a bell and initiated the proceedings just a few minutes later.

The AGM was conducted with commendable despatch. The minutes were read, accepted and passed swiftly, then the date and venue for the next meeting was fixed. At the conclusion of the Chairman's remarks he, Sir Edward, was given three hearty cheers, and the banquet commenced.

Some while later, the feast being largely but a happy memory, Sir Edward drew me and Flotsam to one side and was having me relate to a couple of his buddies how I'd solved the conundrum of the Careless Heart and other of my cases.

I was in full spate when suddenly there came a piercing scream from Lady Yale's bedroom, which, as it happened, was right behind us.

An abrupt hush descended and all eyes swung in the direction of the sound. The door to Lady Yale's bedroom was flung open and a stout, distraught lady, well on in years, hurtled into the Great Hall and threw herself into Sir Edward's arms.

The company burst into an uproar.

"Order! Order!," bellowed Sir Edward, the volume of his voice probably not doing the already distressed female's nerves any good.

I suppose it helps, if you're a chief constable, to have a voice very nearly as powerful as the foghorn of the Queen Mary.

"Everyone sit down," ordered Sir Edward.

The hubbub subsided into mere murmurings as everyone, bar me and Flotsam and a couple of other chaps who were near Sir Edward, resumed their seats.

"Now then, dear lady," said Sir Edward, "what seems to be the trouble?"

"Oh, Sir!" wailed the good dame, one Carolyn Horn, the housekeeper I later learned. "He's all over blood!"

Encumbered by Miss Morn's ample frame as he was, and disconcerted by her continual shrieks and clutchings, Sir Edward cast his eyes around distractedly.





Spying me and Flotsam close at hand the worthy knight called out,

"Soames! Be a good chap and take a look."

This I did not like one bit. I can't abide the sight of blood.

But Sir Edward frowned horribly and uttered an encouraging,

"Don't just stand there gawping man!"

"Oh well," I thought, bearing in mind that Sir Edward could be a good patron.

"Come on Flotsam," I said, and pushed him along ahead of me through the door.

Lady Yale has been dead and gone for these past three hundred years, but the gent sprawled untidily on the carpet had been corpsed for a considerably shorter time. I noticed that as soon as I opened my eyes.

The blood was still runny I observed, peeping cautiously from behind Flotsam's broad back. As ever in a crisis my good sense did not desert me.

"You know my methods, my dear chap," I said, "take a look at the fellow."

Bouyed by my inspiring support Flotsam examined the recumbant cavalier.

"Dead as a doornail," he announced triumphantly, "and," he said, pointing to an object on the floor near the body, "it looks as if the deed was done with this poker."

I had a look at the victim's face. It was rather unpleasant, more so even than it had been in life.

"Damn me eyes!" I said, "if it aint Bob Coulson, the antique and rare book dealer."

"Sir is acquainted with the deceased gentleman?" enquired Flotsam, a bit slow on the uptake, as usual.

"Slightly," I replied, "he deals in antiques and old books, but as a side line he does recovery deals."

I could see that Flotsam wasn't quite with me.

"Recovery deals," I expanded, "he used to act as a go-between, recovering stolen property. I've always thought there was something a bit fishy about that part of his activities."

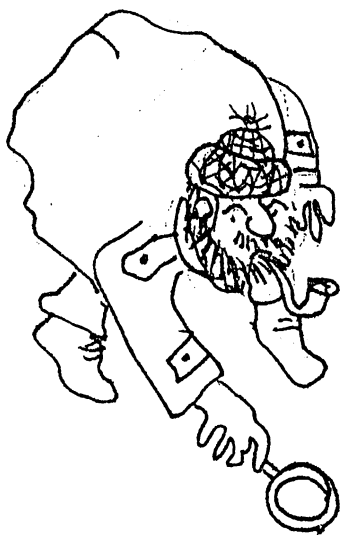
"I can detect no aroma of fish," declared Flotsam mystified, "though there is a smell as of burnt paper orininating from the fireplace. It would seem that a quantity of paper has recently been burned there."

"Funny," I thought, "No fire has been laid, at this time of year it wouldn't be necessary." Nevertheless, there were burnt papers in the grate.

"I doubt that the intention was to light a fire," said Flotsam, quite redundantly, "the conflagration seems to have been initiated solely to destroy some papers."

Keeping well clear of the corpse I bent over to study the floor in it's vicinity then, returning to the fire place I studied the contents more carefully.

With an "Ah!" pregnant with meaning I said. "There Flotsam, do you see what I see?"



Actually I could see nothing of special interest, only ashes. But Flotsam needed the practice, him being an apprentice detective.

Flotsa, bless his cotton socks, studied the ashes intently.

"Now that Sir has drawn my attention to it," said the lad humbly, "I observe that the paper consists of pages from a rather large and old book. I would venture some sort of a dictionary or encyclopaedia."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, as much to keep Flotsam on his toes as anything. "Is that all that you see?"

"My apologies Sir," said the minion and squinted hard at the ashes.

"The ashes are still slightly warm," he ventured. I sighed. He looked again.

"They haven't been disturbed....ah!"

"Got it now?" I encourage cunningly.

"Yes, Sir," said Flotsam, "I think so. These are not pages, not whole pages, but as if someone had cut out and burned the middles of pages, leaving, one supposes, the margins intact."

"Quite frankly," I said kindly, "I'm just a little bit disappointed in you, you damn near missed the obvious."

Flotsam hung his head.

"Never mind," I said, "you aint had my years of experience. Anyhow, let's see. Here we have the middle cut out of a book. A large book. This would leave a cavity. Why leave a cavity? Simple, to hide something in."

"Sir surmises that these burnt remains are somehow related to the murder of Mr. Coulson?" asked Flotsam.

"Could be, could be," I said. "Suspicious anyhow. If there is a connection the identity of the killer should be easy to discover, don't you agree, Flotsam?"

"Indubitably Sir," replied the lad, with unnerving certainty. "The murderer must have traces of ash and blood upon his clothes and person. However slight these may be a simple forensic examination of the people present at the AGM will discover them."

A thoughtful expression came over Flotsam's face.

I knew the signs. "Out with it," I ordered.

"Curiously enough, Sir," he said, "I happened to notice that one of the gentlemen in there," he indicated the Great Hall, "carried a smell burning on his clothes."

Now Flotsam has a sense of smell that would give your average bloodhound an inferiority complex. Nobody at the AGM would have noticed any smell, but I'd no doubt that he had.

"And who, exactly, was this 'gentleman'?" I asked.

"Alas, Sir," he admitted, "I do not know the gentleman's name, but he was the fair-haired person in the royal blue coat who was sitting two places up from us."

I closed my eyes and visualised the seating arrangements.

"Just as I suspected!" I cried, "It's that Sir Benjamin Indick, the well known collector of Civil War manuscripts and prospective Conservative candidate!"

"I hesitate to suggest it, Sir," said Flotsam diffidently, "but

is it possible that Sir might be jumping to a too hasty conclusion?"

"Nonsense, my lad!" I declared, "the chap's a died in the wool Tory of the old school, and therefore capable of any villany!"

I could sense that Flotsam was not entirely satisfied with my shrewd deductions, the trusting fool, I took another quick look around the room then led Flotsam back into the Great Hall.

Miss Horn, thank goodness, had been hustled away by then, presumably to be plied with the great English cure-all, a pot of tea.

I was pleased to see that someone had had the good sense to station Sergeant Todd and his equally robust fellow policemen at the top of the grand staircase, thus blocking the only egress to the ground floor.

"Well?" demanded a harrassed looking Sir Edward.

"There's a dead body in there," I informed him, "In life he was the antique and rare book dealer Robert 'Shifty' Coulson."

"Coulson?" exclaimed Sir Edward.

"Coulson?" exclaimed His Grace, "I don't recall that I ever heard him called 'Shifty'."

I smiled enigmatically.

"It's Coulson all right," I said firmly, "dead as a door nail, been bludgeoned to death with a poker, quite recently too."

"Damn inconvenient," said Sir Edward disapprovingly.

"Also some papers have been burnt in the grate, paper cools quickly but there was some residual warmth in the grate."

"This is terrible," said Sir Edward, shaking his head. I was not sure how much of what I'd said he'd taken in.

"I'd best send for the scene of crime team," he decided.

"A moment," put in His Grace. He directed his attention to me.

"My dear Soames," he said, "is it possible that you....?"

"Since you ask, Your Grace," I said, "I must admit that I have made one or two trifling deductions."

"Trifling?" said His Grace, obviously a little disappointed.

I raised my voice because I could see that Sir Benjamin was straining his ears. Mind you, so were they all.

"Apart from the fact," I said loudly, "that the murderer was a fair haired gent with a King Charles beard and whiskers, about five foot ten in height, weighing roughly twelve stone and wearing a royal blue Cavalier coat...."

Sir Benjamin shouted an oath and bolted for the door.

"...I discovered very little," I finished.

The press of the guests impeded Sir Benjamin's flight and he was easily intercepted by Sergeant Dodd and his mate.

"You discovered very little?" said Sir Edward, astonished.



"Just a few of the more obvious clues," I said with my usual modesty.

At Sir Edward's direction the two policemen hustled Sir Benjamin into the Drawing Room, next door to Lady Yale's bedroom. Sir Edward, His Grace, and me and Flotsam followed them in.

"Why on earth?!" exclaimed Sir Edward, at a loss for words.

"You can't prove a thing," growled Sir Benjamin truculantly.

"There will be finger prints on the murder weapon," suggested His Grace, an ardent fan of mystery fiction.

"Possibly," I admitted, "but everyone knows about finger prints, the handle has probably been wiped."

Sir Benjamin said nothing, but from his attitude I guessed that we certainly wouldn't find any prints on the poker.

"But in any case," I went on, "there's bound to be traces of blood or ash or both on Sir Ben's clothing. Your forensic chaps should be able to find those."

How will you explain that, Sir Benjamin?"

"Oh, all right," said the naughty knight sullenly, then added bitterly, "But the bastard deserved it!"

"Deserved it?" asked His Grace mildly.

Sir Benjamin's face turned livid.

"He deliberately destroyed the True Copy!" he snarled.

"Ah," I said comfortably, "The True Copy! All is explained. The True Copy. Of course!"

"It might be clear to you," said Sir Edward, exasperatedly, "but I don't know what you're talking about."

I looked at Sir Benjamin but he wasn't disposed to talk just then.

"Flotsam?" I said.

"Sir!" said Flotsam, springing to attention.

"The True Copy. When the Catholics were being persecuted back in the 1670s the Franciscan priest John Wall is reputed to have said Mass here in Harvington Hall. It may be that he even occupied one of the priest's holes at some time. Be that as it may, what is certain is that John Wall was unfortunate enough to be arrested at Rushock Court, not far from here as you will be aware. That was in the November of 1678. He was executed at Worcester in 1679, and the Pope canonised him just recently, in 1970."

"All very interesting, I'm sure," said Sir Edward, "but what has all this to do with Coulson getting murdered?"

I intervened. "The True Copy," I said, "is a printed pamphlet of the speech John Wall made from the scaffold. Very rare. A copy of this



pamphlet is, or was, counted amongst the treasures of Harvington Hall."

Sir Benjamin, unable to contain himself, burst out with,

"And that bloody vandal Coulson burnt it!"

"The encyclopaedia," whispered Flotsam in my ear. I nodded.

"Burnt it?, said Sir Edward.

"You're sure he burnt it?" I asked Sir Benjamin.

"Sure I'm sure," declared Sir Benjamin, "I hired Coulson to get the copy for me."

"Steal it, you mean," asked His Grace, shocked.

Sir Benjamin glared, showing no remorse at his perfidy.

"I arranged to meet Coulson in Lady Yale's bedroom just after the ACM. Everybody was milling about so it was easy for me to slip away without being noticed. When I got there I found him burning the True Copy in the grate!" Sir Benjamin paused to pant angrily.

He went on.

"I cried, 'What are you doing!'" and he sneered and said, 'You'll never get your hands on the True Copy now!' I saw red. I wrenched the poker out of his hand and beat him across the head, and beat him, and beat him!"

Sir Benjamin flung himself down at the table and sobbed hysterically. It was quite distressing.

After the scene of crime people came, and after Sir Benjamin had been taken away, we adjourned to the library with a bottle or two of old port.

"What a pity," observed Sir Edward, "he was such a good candidate too."

"A pity indeed," I said, with the merest hint of sarcasm, "A pity about Coulson too."

"Oh, yes, quite," agreed Sir Edward, "a bad business. But what's done is done. We can't bring him back."

"And the True Copy," added His Grace, "A great loss."

I twiddled with my glass.

"Maybe, maybe not," I said mysteriously.

"I don't follow you," said His Grace.

"The True Copy," I said carefully, "may not be lost."

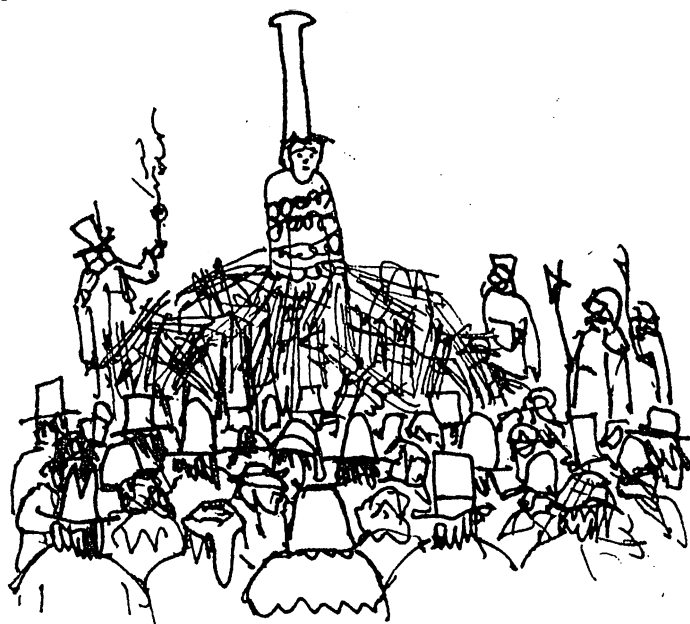
Sir Edward sat up.

"But you heard Sir Benjamin," he said, "he was there, he saw Coulson burn the True Copy in the fireplace in Lady Yate's bedroom."

"Ah," I said. "Something was indeed burned in the fireplace, but I don't think it was the True Copy."

"Not the True Copy!" exclaimed His Grace, "come now Soames, you must have a reason for saying that!"

"The paper in the grate," I explained carefully, "was from the pages of a dictionary or an encyclopaedia, a big one. Not the whole pages you



understand, the middles of the pages, which would leave the book with a hole, a hiding place."

Light slowly dawned as they puzzled over the implications.

"You meam," said Sir Edward, frowning, "Coulson didn't actually burn the True Copy, he hid it?"

"So I deduce," I said with professional calm.

"But why would Coulson do that?" asked His Grace.

I shrugged.

"That's probably something we'll never know," I said. "It may be that he'd found another, better paying, buyer for it. His taunt about Sir Benjamin never getting his hands on it might have been true, but he let Sir Ben think that the paper in the fire was the True Copy, perhaps to cover up his change of plan, perhaps out of sheer mischief."

"In that case," said Sir Edward, "where is the actual True Copy now?"

"Simple," I evaded. I nodded to Flotsam. "Do you think you can find it lad?"

The lad, grateful for his moment of glory, beamed.

"A sort of Purloined Letter, Sir?" he simpered.

I wondered what the idiot was talking about.

"Something like that," I said, "Pray get on with it."

Sir Edward and His Grace didn't have a clue as to what Flotsam was talking about either. I sat back looking smugger than I felt.

"It is of course possible that the True Copy may be amongst Coulson's effects," said Flotsam, "it may even be in his car, but I think not. And it certainly wasn't on his body. Therefore he must have hidden it, probably here in Harvington Hall.

And where best to conceal a book in which the True Copy is hidden than amongst many other books?"

"Here, in the library!" I finished. Well, it was obvious.

"Look at it this way, we know the True Copy was kept here, locked in yonder chest. I doubt that it ever left the room. Coulson hid it in here, intending to come back and get it after all the fuss was over. And there would have been a fuss when it was found to be missing."

Sir Edward had no need to call in his men to conduct the search, Flotsam found the disemboweled encyclopaedia in less than ten minutes.

Sir Edward insisted in showing his appreciation of my efforts in a tangible form.

His Grace, his faith in my powers vindicated, slipped me a couple of twenties too.

There were fringe benefits too.

As I remarked to Flotsam while making my way a little unsteadily back to Gas Lane Cottage, from The Spotted Cow, not a week later.

"Aint it wonderful how the local bobbies manners have improved since the word's gotten round that I'm the Chief Constable's blue eyed boy?"

"I was not aware that the colour of Sir's eyes had changed," said the big oaf gravely.

"Hic," I said.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE CAPER



A twig snapped, 'crack!' under my foot.

"Shush!" I hissed, "watch where you're putting your clumsy great hooves!"

"Sorry, oh noble boss person," apologised the hapless skivvy, "I am experiencing some difficulty maneuvering the sack and the spade through this dense undergrowth."

"The undergrowth isn't the only thing that's dense," I muttered as I felt my way forward.

Bump! A tree suddenly loomed out of the gloom and ambushed me. Or am-treed me, take your pick.

"Soddit!" I exclaimed quietly but with considerable feeling.

"Would it not be easier, Sir," said Flotsam plaintively, "just to BUY a Christmas Tree?"

"What!" I whispered indignantly, "have you seen how much they're asking for them in the shops?!"

"Some uncharitable persons might construe Sir's acquisition of a Forestry Commission fir tree in this way to be not entirely lawful," suggested Flotsam daringly.

"Nonsense," I chided, "I'm a tax payer aint I?" I gestured grandly at the night shrouded forest. "So at least one of these millions of trees by rights belongs to me."

"Sir's logic is, as ever, irrefutable," sighed Flotsam. He sounded far from convinced but I ignored him and pressed on through the plantation.

Some minutes and a few bumps and stumbles later we came to an area of younger trees. I surveyed them, six and seven footers, with great satisfaction.

"Ah," I breathed. "This is more like it!"

"HALT! Stand and be recognised!"

The voice was sudden, loud, and totally unexpected. I nearly peed myself.

"Bloody hell!" I thought, "The Forestry Commission blokes are really taking themselves seriously this year!"

The moon was full and bright. Out of the shadows under the trees glided eight huge blokes. I noticed, puzzled and with growing alarm, that they were all wearing mottled battledress and had blackened faces. Each one was also carrying a gun.

"Evening gents," I essayed nervously.

"Get your bloody hands up on top of your heads," growled the foremost of the warrior band.

With characteristic quick thinking I decided to mollify the brute by following his instructions. I could always argue later, I hoped.

Flotsam, following my example, also put his hands on his head, letting his burdens fall to the ground as he did so.

"What's that?" said the big brute with the sergeant's stripes suspiciously, and, "Shepherd, see what he's dropped."

Another prime specimen of military manhood gestured for Flotsam to stand aside. He moved forward and knelt down. He fumbled about for a second or two and then, surprise evident in his voice, he said,

"It's a spade, Sarge, a spade and a sack."

"A spade and a sack?" said the sergeant. A person, I surmised, of rather limited vocabulary, and intelligence. It took him a little while to think of anything further to say.

"Well, pick them up," he said irritably.

"As for you two," he continued, "you're trespassing on government property."

"Really?" I said innocently, "Goodness me. We must have lost our way in the dark."

"And you just happened to wander through two ten foot high wire fences," sneered the sarcastic devil.

"Ah, well," I said weakly. "There are big holes in both of them." I felt it might be tactless to mention that it had been Flotsam, at my behest, who had made the holes.

"You're on government property, unauthorised," said the sergeant stubbornly, "I'm taking you in for interrogation."

My protests were brushed aside and surrounded by the soldiery we were marched westwards along a winding path through the woods.

Eventually we descended a flight of steep steps cut into the sandstone and came to what appeared to be a tiny village.

I say, 'appeared to be' advisedly, because I at once recognised the place, having passed by it many times while travelling along Kingsford Lane. Actually the village was a fake. It had been constructed during the second world war to disguise the entrances to the underground factories which had been deviled beneath the escarpment.

The last time they had been in the news was back in the '60s when they had been designated a Regional Seat of Government. Living quarters had been added then and, according to strong rumour, the remaining space had been filled with some thousands of cardboard coffins.

We were hustled across the street and into the church. Of course it wasn't



a genuine church, it never had been. The interior was brightly lit and divided off into work areas.

"Wait here." ordered the sergeant and leaving us with his men he marched smartly off and went through a door set in the base of the tower.

He returned shortly and waving his rifle in a casually menacing fashion he ushered us ahead of him through the door.

On the other side of the door there was a large, high ceilinged, square room. This was occupied by a general and a colonel.

"Interesting," I thought, my curiosity getting the better of my nervousness, "Rather high ranking officers for a little backwater establishment like this"

The colonel looked up. His jaw dropped. His eyes popped.

"Soames!" he exclaimed.

"Jimmy?!" I exclaimed, likewise surprised, and rather relieved.

"Duh?!" said the sergeant.

"What! What!?" said the general.

"Just a moment," said Jimmy, the same Jimmy, then a major, Sir James White, Baron Wombourne, who I had encountered in the Careless Heart affair.

Jimmy took the general off into a corner. There they spent some minutes in whispered consultation, both of them casting glances in my direction from time to time. Eventually they settled on something and came over to where we were waiting.

"Leave them with us, Sergeant Franson," ordered the general, "you can go now, thank you."

The sergeant's eyes fair bulged, but he mastered himself.

"Sir!" he snapped, soldierly like and saluting smartly he turned towards the exit. His departure was somewhat marred by the fact that because he was nosily looking over his shoulder he nearly walked into the door frame.

"So," said the general thoughtfully, "you're the redoubtable Hemlock Soames."

I smirked modestly.

"Some have seen fit to so describe me," I said with becoming humility.

"Soames," said Jimmy, "This is general Mark Manning of the Seattle Highlanders, my superior officer and," speaking more confidentially, "an old friend of the family."

"Honoured to meet you, sir." I said, thinking that it didn't hurt to suck up to the gentry, particularly in the prevailing rather delicate circumstances.

"Hmmm." said the general. "Any relation to the Belladonna Soames who's, er...?"

"A minor civil servant," I said smoothly. "She's my sweet young sister."

The general and I exchanged appraising stares.

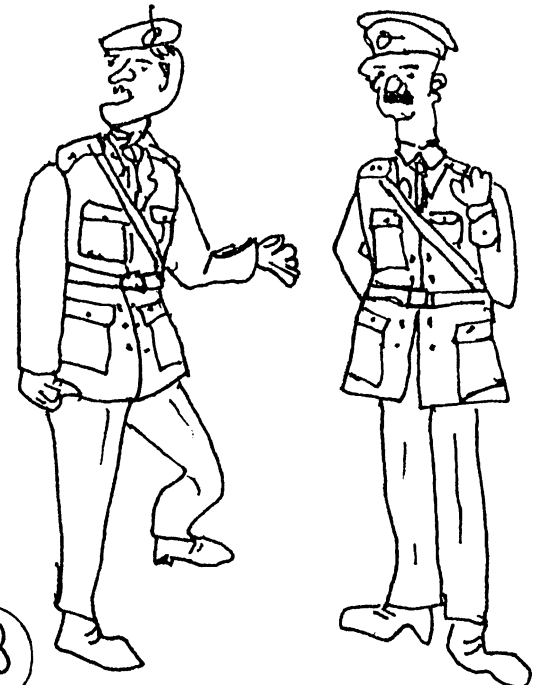
"But what are you doing up on The Edge at this time of night?" asked Jimmy.

'Awkward', I thought.

"Well," I said with unfeigned reluctance, "That's something I'd prefer not to go into."

"Aha!" exclaimed Jimmy, "you're on a case!"

A nice bloke Jimmy. Maybe just a little bit on the simple side, but nice.



I shrugged.

"It was just a bit of bad luck that we ran into your patrol," I said, and added cunningly to divert further enquiries, "I see you've got a bit of a flap on."

The general and Jimmy both stiffened.

"I told you he was astute," said Jimmy.

"So it would seem," agreed the general, eyeing me shrewdly.

I ask you though, who would see a bunch of British soldiers clumping about in a forest, in the dead of night, wearing full battle array, and not guess that something unusual was going on?.

And with a general on the scene too!?

"Actually we do have a spot of bother," said Jimmy unhappily.

"A bad business," agreed the general, tugging at his moustache.

"Perhaps, Sir, the gentlemen might like to avail themselves of your services?" suggested Flotsam diffidently.

I could see that this could be tricky. But it was a way of diverting their attention from my nocturnal activities.

"Aha!" exclaimed Jimmy, and with, "Uncle Mark, may I have another word with you?" he took the general off to the corner again for another private little chat.

I heard the general say, "Very well then, but not a word about you-know-what," and Jimmy reply, "No uncle, of course not." and then they came back again.

We made ourselves moderately comfortable. Jimmy broke out the booze and issued generous servings.

'I could get to like this place,' I thought, rolling the amber liquid round my tongue.

"Something happened here last night," Jimmy began, "and I seem to be the only one without an alibi."

"Come, come," said general Manning comfortingly, "no-one seriously suspects you my boy."

I was inclined to agree with the general. Partly because I couldn't imagine Jimmy being mixed up with anything unlawful, partly because in all of the mystery stories I've read it's hardly ever the suspect without the alibi who did it, whatever the 'it' happened to be.

"Perhaps not," admitted Jimmy gloomily, "but if this thing isn't cleared up there'll always be a question mark on my record."

The general shook his head sympathetically.

"Go on with the story, Jimmy," he advised.

"Well," continued Jimmy, "somebody got into the uff last night..."

"I beg your pardon sir," interrupted Flotsam, "did you say, 'got into a huff?'"

"Oh," said Jimmy, "not 'huff', U.F.F., the underground factory, it's what we call it." He looked uncomfortable and went on. "anyway, I can't tell you anything about the uff, except that certain things were done at a particular time, a time when I had no witnesses to support my account of where I was."

"Hmmm." I hummed. "Hence your statement that you have no alibi."

"That's right," said Jimmy, looking quite distressed.

"I think it would be best if you let Jimmy say his piece," said the general, "and save your questions until he's finished."

Jimmy gathered his thoughts and continued.

"We work three watches," he said, "Colonel Linwood, this week, has the 0600 to 1400 shift, I have the 1400 to 2200 watch, and Colonel Girard has the 2200 to 0600 one."



I came off duty at 2200 hours last night and went straight to my billet. The officers have separate rooms in the building just across the road from here. The doors of the building all open at the side away from the street, facing the woods. Anyway, I decided to relax with a drink and a book before turning in. About thirty minutes later, it would be about 2235, I heard a commotion and went out to see what was going on. I was still fully dressed, I'd not even loosened my tie, I saw Col. Girard and some of the men from the main guard room hot-footing it in the direction of the uff. I hurried after them and arrived on their heels, as it were. We found the two men on duty in the uff guard room unconscious, and their two dogs too.



Col. Linwood came up as we were examining the scene and, after a brief consultation we entered the uff and found, well, what we found.

We came out almost at once and sealed the door, then we left four men on guard and 'phoned the general.

We've investigated of course. There was no sign of a break-in, which means that whoever entered the uff knew the codes. When the uff guards came round we naturally questioned them.

Their story is that they 'phoned in to the main guard room at 2200, as is routine. They would have called in again at 2230. But at 2205 someone came into the uff guardroom and let off some kind of a gas bomb, which knocked them out instantly. They knew nothing else until they woke up in the infirmary."

Jimmy seemed to have finished speaking so I ventured a question.

"Obviously they didn't recognise the intruder?"

"No," said Jimmy, "he was wearing a dust mask," and anticipating my next question he added, "It was the sort of mask we always have to wear when we go into the uff, so they weren't surprised or alarmed."

"You mentioned that there were two dogs in the room with the guards," said Flotsam.

I recognised the old classic.

"What about the dogs?" asked Jimmy uncomprehendingly.

"Ah," I said, "the question is, what did the dogs do when the masked man entered the guard room?"

"Do? What would they do?" said Jimmy.

"Very significant," I said, wagging my head wisely, "the dogs did nothing."

"I see what you're getting at," said general Manning, "the dogs didn't react because they recognised 'X'. But it seems certain anyway that this was an inside job, only the three colonels and myself know how to open the UFF."

"That narrows it down considerably," I mused.

"But it doesn't help me," said Jimmy miserably, "the other colonels all have unshakeable alibis."

"Ah," I said, "if, mind you, IF, there is no possibility of anyone else knowing the er, combination to the uff, then one of the alibis, logically, must be false."

"I don't see how that can be," said Jimmy.

"Let's see," I said thoughtfully, "The guards at the uff failed to 'phone in at 2230. This alerted the main guard room, and Col. Girard led a party of

of men and went to investigate?"

"Right," agreed Jimmy. "They were quick off the mark and got there at 2238, as near as dammit."

"So," I said. "Col. Girard is presumably accounted for, him being in the main guard room at the critical time?"

"I handed over the watch to him at 2200," said Jimmy, "there are many witnesses to that, and he remained there, in the guard room, all the time until he went up to the uff."

"What about this Col. Linwood then?" I asked.

"He's got an air-tight alibi too," said Jimmy, "He was in the kitchen having a mug of tea at 2215, Sgt. Franson and his entire patrol were all in there at the time."

"The sergeant is absolutely sure of the time?" I asked.

"Oh yes," said Jimmy, "He's quite positive."

"The sergeant's watch has been checked for accuracy, I presume?" asked Flotsam.

"Watch?" said Jimmy, exhibiting a curious surprise, as he continued his meaning became clear.

"Oh no, they don't wear watches while they're on patrol," he said.

At my raised eyebrow he explained, sort of.

"There are...reasons," he said mysteriously.

"In that case, sir," persisted Flotsam, "how can we be sure that the time the sergeant gave is correct?"

"Well," said Jimmy, "that's a point. But I suppose he went by the kitchen clock."

"And is the kitchen clock accurate?" I asked.

"Bound to be," said Jimmy, but he didn't sound entirely sure.

"There a couple of points to check then," I said briskly. "One, did the sergeant tell the time from the kitchen clock, and, two, was the clock showing the right time?"

"It seems only a minor point," said the general doubtfully.

"Possibly, possibly," I said in my best professional manner, "but it just might be important. If Col. Linwood's whereabouts at the crucial time depends upon an unreliable clock, or upon a mistaken witness, then he may have had the opportunity to do whatever has been done."

"Where's Sgt. Franson now?" asked the general.

Jimmy looked at the clock on the wall then, self consciously, at his watch. "Nearly 2200," he said, "he'll probably be in the mess or the kitchen."

"Phone round, Jimmy," instructed the general, "the mess first, then the kitchen, in any case have him found."

"If I might be so bold as to make a suggestion," said Flotsam, "if we were to arrange to meet the sergeant in the kitchen we could not only check his evidence but also inspect the clock."

"Good idea," said the general, "do that will you, Jimmy."

As it happened the sergeant was in the kitchen, we found him waiting for us a few minutes later.

"Ah, there you are sergeant," said the general. An unnecessary observation I thought.

"Sir!" replied the sergeant, springing to attention.

"Stand easy," said the general.

"Nothing to worry about, sergeant," said Jimmy reassuringly. "we just want to



check over some details.

As I understand it you had just come in from the first leg of your patrol and, as usual, you and your men stayed in here for ten minutes, had a mug of tea, and went off again?"

"Sir!" agreed the sergeant.

I didn't think that 'Sir!' was very informative.

"Perhaps," I said, "the sergeant could just run through the events of last night, sort of re-enact them?"

The sergeant looked blank, confused, uncomprehending.

"You can do it, sergeant," said the general encouragingly.

"Stand in the doorway," I said, "as if you were just coming in."

The sergeant looked at his officers, mute appeal in his eyes.

"Just do as Mr. Soames asks," said Jimmy soothingly.

The sergeant marched to the door, stepped outside, turned around, and stood there like a dummy. I sighed.

"OK," I said. "Just come in, like you did last night."

Hesitantly the sergeant walked forward, said a respectful, 'excuse me sir', and turned into the door on our right.

"The mess hall," murmured Jimmy to me, aside.

We trooped into the mess hall.

"What did you do next?" I asked kindly.

"Sir! I saluted Col. Linwood, Sir!" he said.

"And where was Col. Linwood?" I enquired.

"Sir! Sitting there, Sir!" he replied.

"There? Under the clock?" I said, getting interested.

"Sir!" said the inarticulate warrior.

"And then?" I asked, very gently.

Sgt. Franson struggled with this.

"Sir! I had a mug of tea, Sir!" he managed.

"Show me," I requested patiently.

The sergeant went to the kitchen counter, which was to the left of the door. A large urn and an array of mugs stood there. He glanced at the general, who gave him a reassuring smile and a nod, then he picked up a mug and filled it.

"Did you drink standing up?" I prompted.

"Sir! No sir," he said, and catching on he took a few steps and sat down at a table.

"And did you sit there until it was time to resume your patrol?" I asked.

"Sir! he said.

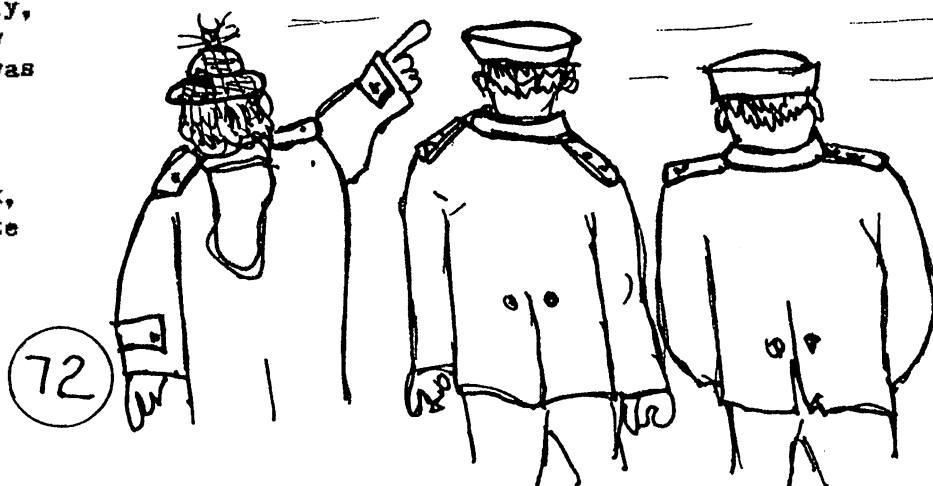
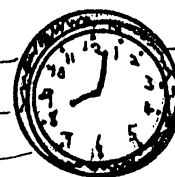
"Excellent! Well done sergeant!" said Jimmy.

Sgt. Franson looked very gratified.

"Now then," I said, very slowly and clearly, "You left at 2215. How did you know that it was 2215?"

"Sir!" said the sergeant, "it was 2215 by the mess clock, Sir!" He sounded quite triumphant.

The general and Jimmy consulted their



watches and checked them against the clock.

"Well it's showing the right time now," said Jimmy, "very nearly 2210."

Flotsam coughed defferentially.

"Yes, Flotsam?" I asked.

"May one ask, Sir, whether the sergeant looked at the clock of his own initiative, or did he perhaps have his attention drawn to the time by some other person?"

"A good point," I said. I wasn't at all clear what the lad was getting at but I've found that it sometimes pays to let Flotsam have his head.

I turned my attention to Sgt. Franson again.

"Was there any particular reason why you looked at the clock?" I asked.

"Sir!" he replied. "I keep my eye on the clock in any case sir. We go out on the second leg at 2215 whatever time we get in from the first leg, sir."

"What do you mean by saying you look at the clock 'in any case'?"

I asked.

"Sir!" said the sergeant. "If Col. Linwood is here he always makes a show of looking at his watch when it's getting on for time for us to be off.

He sort of hints you might say."

"Aha!" I said. "And did the colonel 'hint' last night?"

"Sir! He did sir, at 2214 sharp sir," was the reply.

I could see that Flotsam had something more to ask. I nodded permission.

"There is something else I suggest that we should clarify, Sir," he said. "What does the sergeant mean by 'whatever time we get back from the first leg'?"

"Sergeant?" I said.

"Sir!" said the sergeant. "We don't carry watches with us on patrol so we can never be sure of the exact time. Sometimes we get back a bit early, sometimes a little later."

"How much early or later?" I asked.

"Sir!" he said. "We've got things pretty near sussed by now. We're hardly ever more than seven or eight minutes out. Sir."

I could see that Flotsam was working up to something but I couldn't guess what it was.

"Perhaps, Sir," he said, tactfully, "as the sergeant has done so well, we might ask him to take the re-enactment a little further."

I considered. It couldn't hurt, and it might impress the general and Jimmy. Besides Flotsam must have his reasons...

"Good idea," I said, "I was just thinking that myself."

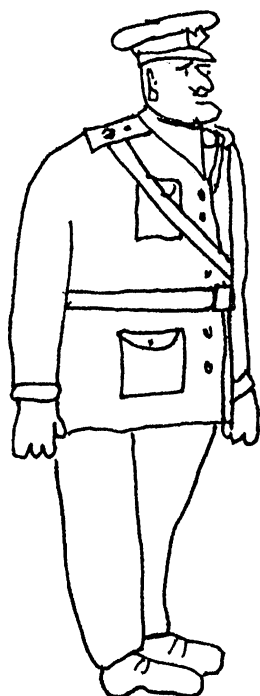
"Sergeant," I said, "might we prevail upon you to demonstrate how you effected your exit from this establishment?"

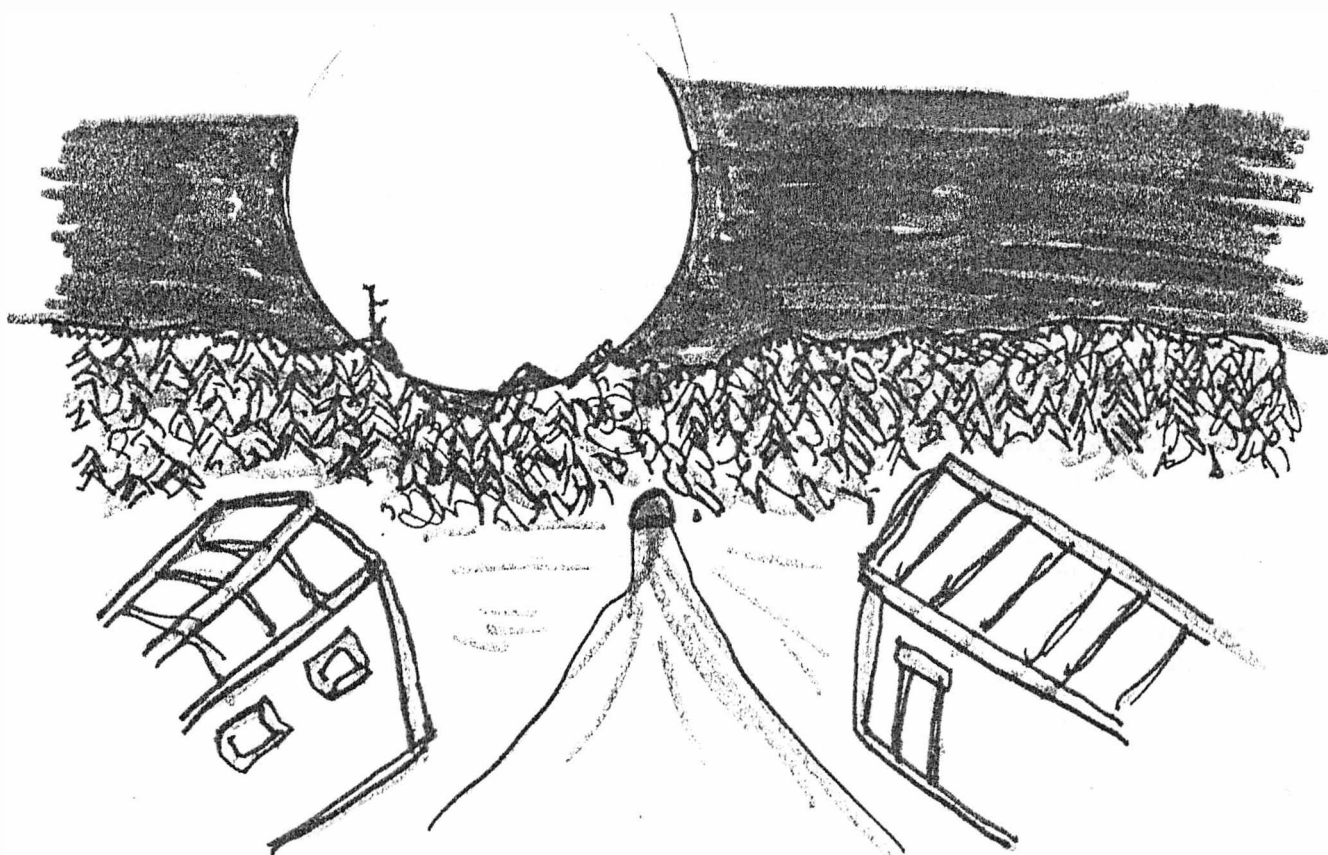
"What Mr. Soames means," translated Jimmy, "is we would like you to act out how you left the mess."

Sgt. Franson's face cleared. He got up and, overacting horribly, he returned his mug to the tray by the urn. Then with us trailing him and watching his every move, he walked to the outside door, paused momentarily, and started to march off to the right.

"I think that'll do," I said hurriedly.

The sergeant marched back and waited stolidly for further orders.





"Sir," said Flotsam quietly in my ear, "could you ask the sergeant why he hesitated in the doorway?"

"Good work lad," I said quietly, "I'm glad you spotted that." I did rather wonder exactly what he'd spotted, but no doubt it'd become clear.

"Sergeant," I said in my normal voice, "I noticed that you stopped for a second just outside the door. Would you mind telling me why you did that?"

"Sir," said the sergeant, frowning slightly, "No particular reason, sir. I was just looking at the moon, sir."

"Interesting," I said quietly to the minion. "But I'm not going to state the obvious. I'll just say, are you satisfied we've gotten everything out of him, are you?"

"Well, not entirely Sir," replied Flotsam. "The sergeant is rather frugal with his explanations. It might be useful if we could get him to enlarge upon that last remark."

"Good thinking, Flotsam," I said, "I'll make a detective out of you yet! In fact you go ahead and question the sergeant and I'll only chip in if you miss anything important."

This pleased the lad no end of course. Besides I'd no idea what to ask.

"Sir is too kind!" enthused Flotsam.

"Aint it the truth," I said.

"Sergeant," said Flotsam carefully, "would you please stand in the doorway and look at the moon again?"

The sergeant, obviously mystified, but obedient to a nod from the general, took up his stance just beyond the threshold and gazed earnestly up at the moonlit sky.

"There's the moon," said Flotsam. Rather redundantly I thought. "You looked at it last night. What is different about it now?"

The sergeant studied the moon with painful care. A length he said;

"Sir, there aint no difference, sir."

"No difference at all?" insisted Flotsam.

"Sir! No sir," said Sgt. Franson stubbornly, "The bottom of the moon is resting just on that notch in The Edge, exactly like it was last night."

"Aha!" breathed Flotsam.

"Gentlemen," he said, "what is the correct time now?"

Puzzled, the general and Jimmy consulted their time pieces.

"Just about dead on 2216," said the general.

Flotsam beamed. "In that case..." he began.

"Just a minute," I said hastily interrupting the lackey, "Before we continue I'd like to have a few words in private with my assistant."

I drew Flotsam aside.

"My dear chap," I said kindly, "it's not that I'm doubting the accuracy of your deductions, but I wouldn't like you making a fool of yourself in front of these military gentlemen. Explain your conclusions to me and I'll see if you've got it right."

"Thank you, Sir," said Flotsam humbly. He continued;

"Well, as Sir will have observed, the moon is just over The Edge now. The sergeant said it was in that exact place at 2215 last night. But it's in the same place now, at 2216."

"Splendid!"

I said, concealing my bafflement with the ease of long practice, "and that means, of course?" I let the question hang.

"Well, as Sir well knows, the moon rises approximately 22.53 minutes later every night."

"Quite so," I said, nodding approvingly. "and of course that means?"

"It means, Sir," burred the lad happily, "that Sgt. Franson could not have seen the moon in that particular place at 2215 last night, it would have been too low in the sky. However, it would have been in that position at 21.52."

"Or near enough," I said judiciously.

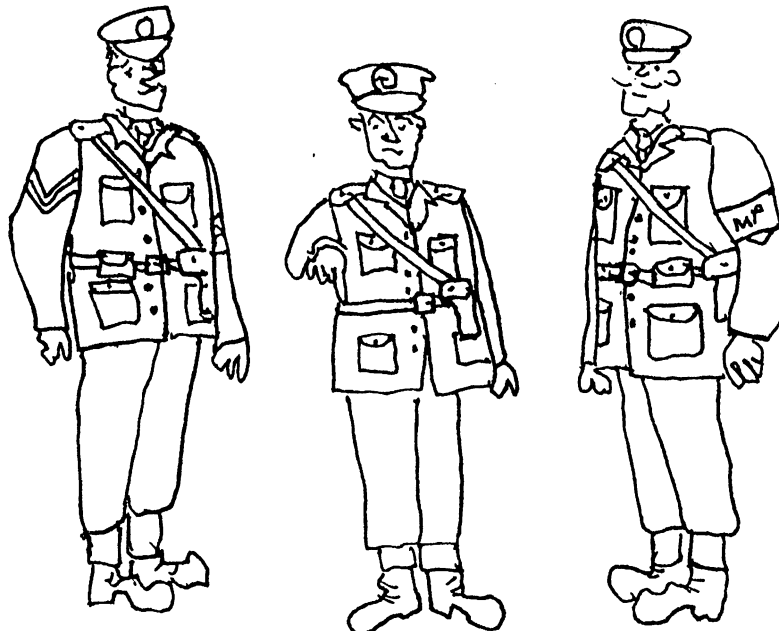
"Quite so Sir, or near enough." agreed Flotsam. "It therefore follows that the sergeant actually saw Col. Linwood about twenty minutes earlier than he thought he had."

"The clock," I mused aloud, "Col. Linwood must have altered it."

"Indubitably Sir," said Flotsam. "and as one has to open the front of the clock to move the hands there is a possibility that Col. Linwood has left his fingerprints inside."

"Is that it then?" I asked.

"Yes Sir," said Flotsam, adding anxiously, "Did I miss much?"



"Oh, nothing essential," I lied, "just a few minor clues, the tea arrangements, the bootlaces, the matter of..." I paused.

"But there," I said comfortingly, "you did very well and I'm proud of you lad."

Flotsam simpered and blushed. Simple soul. You know, sometimes I wonder about Flotsam.

We rejoined the military gentlemen.

"Flotsam," I ordered, "You take Sgt. Franson down to the office and help him to write a detailed statement of what he's told us."

Sergeant, you read it over carefully to be sure that it's absolutely accurate. Then, if you're satisfied, I want you to sign it. Better get a couple of witnesses to sign it too."

"Oh Sir!" cried Flotsam, "can't I stay here with you?"

"No you bloody well can't!" I said, "bugger off and do as you're told, or I won't let you watch those Magic Roundabout videos."

Relenting I added ingeniously.

"This is a very important task I'm setting you. I can't trust anyone else to do it right. Run along now, there's a good chap."

Somewhat mollified Flotsam went off with the sergeant. When they were safely out of the way...

"Col. Linwood is your man," I said grimly. "He must have been planning this for some time. It all depended on intercepting one of the patrols on a night when they came in early. But he, naturally, couldn't take into account my being called in. My astronomical knowledge and my fine honed powers of deduction enabled me to work out his dastardly plan."

You see, this is how he worked it..."

And that was that. I played no more part in the affair.

Col. Linwood by the way had left his fingerprints on the clock, very remiss of him. Jimmy told me that much, later.

Of course, there was nothing in the newspapers.

A couple of days later a fully decorated Christmas tree was delivered to Gas Lane Cottage, compliments of the general.

Mind you, I'm not saying that we won't be out next December, with sack and spade. But I think we'll try the Forestry Commission plantations up on Highgate Common. But The Edge? Not bloody likely!





THE LOCH MACINTYRE MONSTER

"Hello." I said cautiously. (I've never got used to having a telephone, I only let Flotsam put it in because he said he needed it for his knitwork or summat...besides he paid me a hefty rental).

"Is that you, Jimmy?" said the caller, in a broad Glaswegian accent.

"No, it bloody well ain't Jimmy," I said peevishly, "This is Hemlock Soames speaking."

"Aye, Jimmy. That's right. Neil here, Neil K. Henderson."

I damn near put the 'phone down there and then. But I knew that Neil was a persistent devil so I resigned myself to hearing him out.

"What do you want?" I asked, with commendable restraint. I signed to Flotsam to pick up the extension.

"How would you like to have an all expenses paid holiday in one of the most beautiful parts of the Highlands?" said the smooth tongued Scot.

"What's the catch?" I asked immediately, knowing Neil of old.

"No catch." replied Neil, in that butter-wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth voice he puts on when he has some particularly devious plan in mind.

"Come off it", I scoffed, "You want something. Hurry up and tell me what it is so I can say 'no'".

"Well," said Neil, trying to sound casual, "There is a little something I'd like you to look into while you're up there".

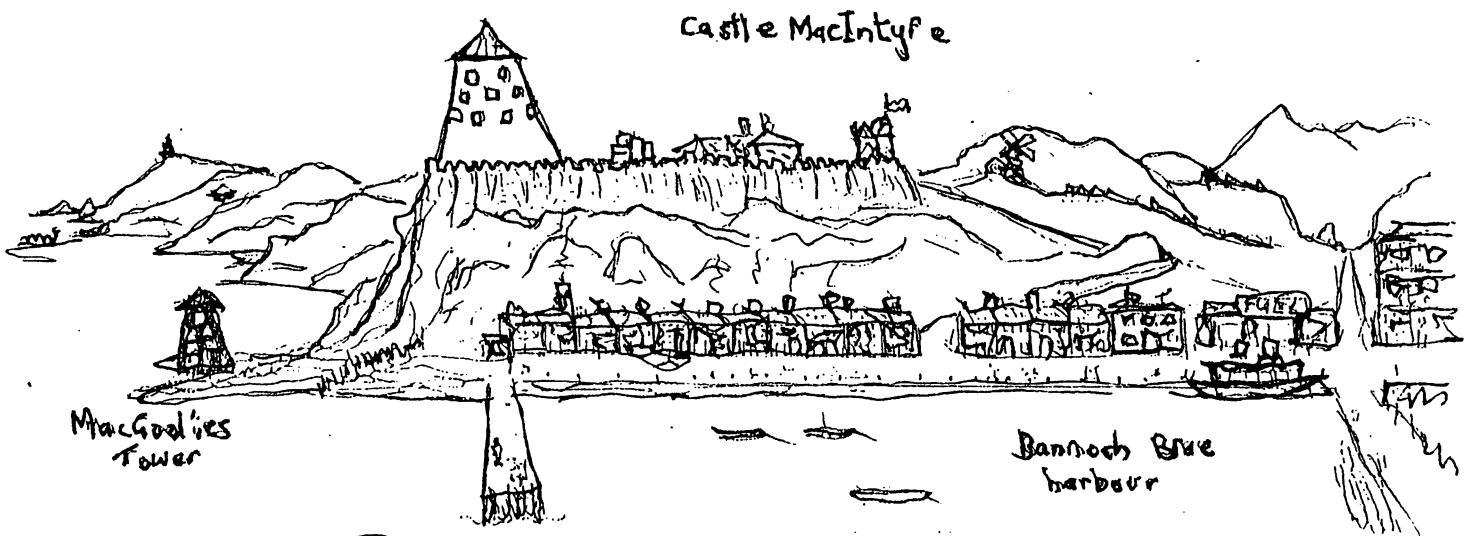
I thought as much.

Neil meanwhile warbled on.

"Have you seen 'The Scotsman' today?" he said, and not waiting for a reply, continued. "Never mind. I don't suppose you have. The thing is that there's a story about some Nessie-like beastie being seen in Loch MacIntyre".

"Nessie!" I snorted, "Not that old fairy tale again."

"Yes, daft isn't it? Obviously it's a pumphrey."



I always knew Neil was a bit weird. Pumphrey indeed!

"You're up there, much nearer the scene than I am", I said, "why can't you go up to Loch watsit yourself?"

"Impossible just now," said Neil firmly, "got too much on."

"Too bad," I said, "I've got a lot on too, can't make it this week, or this month, nor this year if it comes to that."

"Oh, come on," said Neil, "it shouldn't take you very long to find out if there's any truth in the story, a week, a fortnight at the most."

"No," I said adamantly. "Also nein, nyet, or... anyway. NO!"

There was a silence. I don't know how he did it, but it was a brooding, pregnant silence.

Then, in a musing sort of voice, dripping honey, the swine said.

"I wonder how Sherry Hormones would react if she were to hear what you had to say about her the last time we met, you know, you had a little too much Glen Fiddleh...."

A nasty cold shiver ran up my spine.

"You wouldn't be such a cad," I quavered.

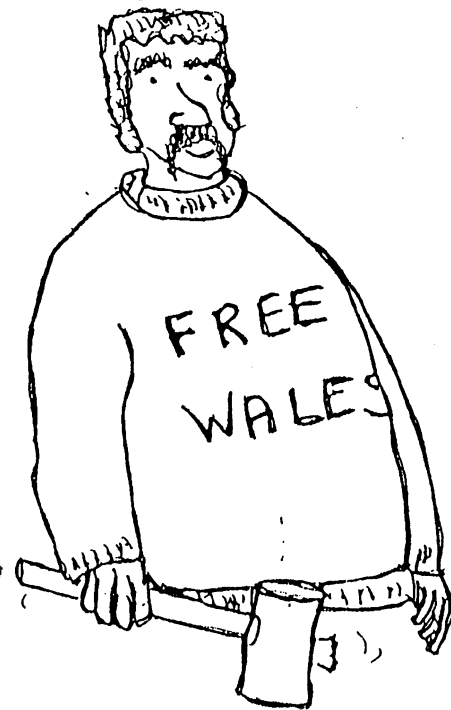
"Wonderful things these modern recording devices," observed the Lowlander louse, "Every word you said comes across loud and clear."

"Every word!" I gasped..."The....."

"Oh yes," chuckled Neil, "the simlie you used was most amusing. Not to Sherry of course. I reckon she'd tear your head off, and then..."

What could I do? I capitulated.

We set off early the next morning.



Dougie MacIntosh, Publican.

Loch MacIntyre is located in the north west of Scotland amid some of the most scenic landscapes in the British Isles, possibly in the world. The loch, as I learned later from the guide book, is about eighteen miles long from north-west to south-east. Nowhere is it wider than three miles. The widest part is overlooked by the little town of Bannock Brae, two thirds of the way up the eastern side of the loch. And the town is overlooked by Castle MacIntyre, the foundations of which are neolithic at least, though the present castle is mostly 14th and 17th century.

We passed through Oatstone Bridge, at the foot or south east end of the loch and went in and out of Finlay almost before we noticed the little hamlet, and arrived at Bannock Brae in the early evening.

Neil had booked us into The Crofters Rest, a solid and comfortable old pub which took up half of the west side of the town square. We booked in, ate a simple but excellent meal, washed down with a damn nice locally brewed beer, and then, as it was a fine June evening with plenty of daylight left, I decided that we would take a stroll down towards the loch.

Surrounding the town square were another couple of pubs, lots of little shops, butchers, bakers, candle stick makers, that sort of thing, a bank, and on the north side of the square, what looked like a Catholic church.

As it was on our way we paused in the porch of the church. As I had hoped we found parish guides on sale. Flotsam forked out, naturally.

There was a useful street map in the guide, and a map of the loch. It also contained interesting information such as the population of the parish, less than four thousand souls, listed the market days, Wednesday usually, the times the ferry was supposed to run between Oatstone Bridge, Finlay, Bannock Brae and Murdock, at the top of the loch. There was also a potted history of the area, which was, in effect, a history of Clan MacIntyre.

On an impulse I ordered Flotsam to purchase an English-Gaelic phrase book. "Get stuck into that," I instructed, "some small knowlege of the native's language might come in useful."

With me consulting the guide book and Flotsam muttering Gaelic phrases under his breath we strolled out of the square heading towards the loch.

On our left was a carpark and then the harbour. On our right as we walked along was a police station, 'Hector's', a garage, and a row of ancient cottages the front doors of which opened directly onto the broad cobbled quayside.

The cottages and other buildings pressed back against a steep and rocky hillside, a small mountain really, a headland. Crowning the height was an edifice which I deduced from the guide was Castle MacIntyre.

Beyond the end of the harbour and cottages the road continued as an unmetalled but well-kept track. This led to within a few score yards of a atructure which I identified as MacGoolie's Tower. We were unable to proceed further because our way was blocked by a five barred gate. A notice, looking newly painted, afixed to the gate read, PRIVATE PROPERTY. KEEP OUT.

We contemplated the gate, the notice, the tower and the loch for some little time before retracing our steps townwards.

As we returned through the square we made a short diversion in order to view what appeared to be a war memorial, or some such monument, which stood in the centre. The inscription on the monument made for interesting reading.

IN MEMORY OF THOSE MACINTYRES WHO FELL AT CULLODEN, it said,
MURDERED BY THE ENGLISH. BETRAYED BY FELLOW SCOTS. SENT TO
THEIR FUTILE DEATHS BY AN IDIOT FOREIGN PRINCELING.

"Whew!" I remarked, "Whoever composed that, was determined to get up absolutely everybody's nose."

Bact at The Crofters it was pretty crowded. One bar was full of local people and the other one was mostly occupied by "foreigners" like myself.

"You go and mingle with the locals", I instructed Flotsam. "Keep your lug holes open and see what info you can pick up about this Nessie affair. I'll stay here with the outlanders."

"As the noble Sir desires", quoth the rightly humble lackey. And added, brightening up, ""Would it be in order for he to try out my grasp of the Gaelic, Sir?"

"You do that," I said, "But be careful not to say the wrong thing, you could well upset them with a mispronounced word or inappropriate phrase."

(I remembered a certain nasty experience I had once had in Cairo....but enough of that.)

"I had planned to sit quietly and just listen at first, Sir." replied the lad.

"Excellent idea," I said. "We will compare notes later on, when the pub closes."

So Flotsam trotted off and I found a space at a table occupied by what was pretty obviously an American couple and half a dozen casually dressed folk who seemed to be, most of them, English.

It soon transpired that the English party was discussing the alleged monster sighting.

From their conversation, being an astute sort of a chap, I quickly deduced that they were what one might call "professional" Nessie hunters.



Robert Bruce MacIntyre. USA.

It seemed that they had come up from Loch Ness very recently, probably as a result of the Scotsman article. They had a boat and lots of equipment and were investigating the Loch MacIntyre monster story.

Their opinions were somewhat divided.

Some of them were dismissive of the possibility of there being any large creature in the loch. They pointed out that, unlike Loch Ness, this loch had no access to the sea, and that there had been no history of any sightings until a couple of months ago.

Then a local young man, reckoned to be a bit simple, and even known as "Wullie the idjit", had come out with a story of being dogged by a monster something while he was fishing in the deep water on the far side of the loch from Bannock Brae. At the time Willie's story was dismissed out of hand. But then, a month ago, several sightings had been claimed in the course of a few days.

The pro-monster faction that the lack of a long history of sightings was neither here nor there. They also didn't think that the lack of access to the sea was necessarily significant.

Loch MacIntyre, they declared, was one of the deepest lochs in Scotland, and the shores were mostly uninhabited. Furthermore, they said, the people who had reported seeing something were all solid citizens, and some of them had been in groups. If what they had seen wasn't actually some sort of cousin to Nessie, well they had seen something, and it needed to be investigated.

"Do you think there's a monster in the loch.?" I asked the American couple.

"Well, I guess there may be something out there," said the large American gent. "But me and Lulu Mae were hoping to have a quiet holiday here in the old country so we're finding all this excitement a bit distracting."

"We came looking for our roots," explained Lulu Mae earnestly. "Back home in MacIntyre Springs, ma and RB, (RB stands for Robert Bruce but everyone calls him RB), are joint presidents of the MacIntyre Clan Association."

"How very interesting," I said, and mean't it too. The fact that the pair of them looked very well heeled and might well be generous in providing a poor old English bloke with a pint or two hardly crossed my mind.

I drained my pint pot and set it down on the table with just a little more force than strictly necessary. I sighed.

Robert Bruce, gent that he was, rushed off and got me another.

"Yes sir," said RB expansively, "just about every third person in the county is a MacIntyre, and most of them belong to the Clan Association."

"A big town is it, this MacIntyre Springs?" I asked.

"Heck, no," said RB amiably, "it's just a little place, twenty-one and a half thousand at the last count."

"And every third one a MacIntyre," I marvelled.

A thought struck me. I smiled.

"The guide book gives the population of the parish as four thousand," I said, "that means that there are more MacIntyres in your home town than in the heart of Clan MacIntyre country."



Lulu Mae MacIntyre, USA.

"Gee," exclaimed Lulu Mae, "now ain't that something."

"It sure is," agreed RB, "be somethin' to tell the folks back home, it sure will."

I'd half an ear cocked towards the Nessie hunters, who were laying their plans for the morrow, so I'm afraid that Lulu Mae and RB didn't get my full attention.

"So, this is your first visit to Bannock Brae?" I said absently.

"It sure is," said Lulu Mae enthusiastically, "and we're enjoying every minute of it. Why, we only got here the day before yesterday and already we've traced our family back to a family of MacIntyres who emigrated to the U.S. after the '45."

"The pastor at St. Adain's been a great help," expanded RB. A note of awe crept into his voice. "He's the Laird's youngest son."

There was a silence which could only be described as 'reverent'.

"And," continued the irrepressible Lulu Mae, "we've picked up some great ideas too, ideas we'll be able to use when we get back home."

"Oh yes?" I said politely.

"Sure have," enthused RB. "We've got the '49-er ville, and the Native American complex, but we've got nothing very big in the way of things Scottish. With there being so many MacIntyres in and around MacIntyre Springs I reckon a MacIntyre Heritage Park is a sure fire scheme."

"Maybe we could persuade some of the local folk to come over to MacIntyre Springs, weavers, craftsmen, singers, dancers, practically anyone would do." said Lulu Mae wistfully, "But, I mean, who would be prepared to up stakes and leave all this?"

Lulu Mae waved her arms about in a gesture which embraced the pub, the town, and presumably everything Scottish.

I guessed that Lulu Mae had a rather romanticised idea of life in late twentieth century rural Scotland. The country is picturesque, especially at this time of year, (I thought), but in the winter it must be pretty bleak.

And then of course there's the employment situation. Or, rather, the UN-employment situation. I doubted that the local inhabitants thought that they had secure, comfortable or prosperous lives.

"If I was you," I advised, "I'd chat up some of the townsfolk, consult this parson chap too, and go and have a word with the Laird."

RB and Lulu Mae looked thunderstruck.

"A word with The Laird!" breathed Lulu Mae.

"Visit with The MacIntyre?" gasped RB.

"That's right," I said, "he might find you some volunteers to go to America."

"Well, we might consult the pastor," said RB very doubtfully, but approach The Laird!"

I was quite taken aback by their attitude of, well, there's no other word for it, veneration. Worship even.

I let the subject rest.

The conversation veered away from things strictly Scottish and RB and Lulu Mae chatted happily about MacIntyre Springs, of RB's intention of running for a second term as mayor, of his forthcoming retirement as president of the gold mineing company, the, modest, hotel they jointly owned, the '49-er theme park they had shares in,

and their part in the Native American complex.....all very, very, interesting

By the time the bars closed me and RB and Lulu May were bosom pals. We parted assuring each other that we would see a lot of each other during our stay in Bannock Brae. Thank god that most Americans one meets are much nicer than the ones we see on film and TV, much more modest, and hardly any of them carry guns.



William MacGoolie

Up in my room I found Flotsam waiting for me.

"OK bud, spill the beans." I rasped.

Flotsam's bewildered expression informed me that I'd flattened him with another colloquialism, this hardly ever fails to entertain me.

"Did you learn anything from our Gaelic friends." I clarified.

The lad's brow cleared.

"Indeed Sir," responded the tall twit, "I had very little difficulty in joining in the conversation. I'm happy to say that my Gaelic passed muster, though my accent did occasion some comment the general impression was that I was a native of the Outer Hebrides. I declined to comment or respond to leading questions, but was accepted on face value.

I have, I believe, Sir, made a comprehensive account of the events of last month, as known to the local people."

Flotsam offered me a dauntingly thick sheaf of papers. I accepted them but put them down on the dressing table. Damned if I was going to wade through all that job.

"Very useful," I commented, "Well done lad. I'll read through your notes later." (I lied). But for now just give me a verbal summary."

"Well, Sir," said Flotsam, "It all seems to have started on March 23rd. A certain William MacGoolie, commonly designated 'Wullie the Idjit' because of his apparant limited intellectual capacity, was fishing from a boat on the far side of the loch from Bannock Brae. He was about a hundred feet from the shore, it's very deep there, it was dusk, and a light rain was falling. He was preparing to return to the harbour when something surfaced inshore of him. He described it as a long necked beastie with a snake's head and humps like a camel. Whatever it was William claimed that it circled round the boat for a good five minutes, coming at times, as he put it, within spitting distance. Eventually the thing submerged and vanished.

Upon his return to Bannock Brae William made a statement about the encounter to the police sergeant, Hugh MacInchmery,. William is not very coherent at the best of times, and naturally he was upset. His story was overheard by some local people who happened to be in the police station at the time, helping the sergeant with certain enquiries, to do with salmon as I understand. These folk spread the tale around the district, where it was universally dismissed. William's adventure was more or less forgotten in the course of the next six weeks.

Then on May 4th, there was another incident.

Ian 'The Boat' MacIntyre operates a moderately sized motorised boat, it is in fact what the guide book calls "the ferry". It's actually more like a country bus on water and the timetable it runs to is not very exact.

This vessel, with Mr. Ian at the helm was on it's way from Murdoch to Bannock Brae. The evening was calm and due to dense but patchy skeins of mist the visibility was variable.

It was at six pm, or very nearly, that Mr. Ian saw a moving object about three hundred yards away, on his starboard side, between the boat and Dhu Ness. He called his passengers attention to the object and three of the nine people saw something. They all made signed statements after the event, they were Jamie the Piper, a MacNeil, Rory MacSullivan the verger and disc jockey, and a Mr. Bambro, of

Ian 'the boat' MacIntyre.



Ivy Cottage, reputed to be a retired solicitor, lawyer, or maybe a bull fighter.

The object, or creatuer, was heading south-east at some speed, the general estimate is sik knots,. The thing submerged after approximately three and a half minutes. The witnesses agreed that it had a snake-like head and two or three humps. This incident gave William MacGoolie's 'monster' story a certain credibility.

The next sighting was on May 7th, again around dusk. The visibility wa described as fair to middling. A crofter, 'Old Fergus' MacIntyre, was up on Olav Ness tending Margaret, one of his cows, when he saw something in the water near the far shore: that would be a little over a half a mile away. He said that it was moving 'verru briskly' in a north-westerly direction, and 'dolphining'. He stated that he had it in sight for ten minutes, maybe a little less, before it dived.

Mr.Fergus is not prepared to say that the thing he saw was a Nessie, but he's adamant that it wasn't seals or salmon or otters or any other creature he'd ever seen. Mr.Fergus is well respected in the neighbourhood and although he was the only witness to this sighting his word is universally accepted. That is, he is believed to have seen something."

"Er, is there a lot more?" I said. I'd had a hard day and I was feeling tired.

"I've got about halfway through,Sir." said Flotsam.

"OK," I sighed, "Carry on."

Flotsam continbued.

"Three days after that, on May 10th, Mr. Malcolm MacIntyre, who drives the local bus, Janet,(Dr.Cameron's housekeeper) and seven out of the other fifteen passengers on the bus, which was returning to Bannock Brae from the market at Murdoch, all claimed to have seen "the monster". It was about dusk yet again and an inter-mittent drizzle was falling; a common phenomena in this part of the world. They claim to have seen a creature with a horse's head, a long neck, and with humps on it's back, near the far shore. That would be three quarters of a mile away and almost due south. Mr.Malcolm halted the bus on the bridge over the Ella Burn and they watched the creature 'disporting' itself for some minutes.

The most recent, and up to now the last sighting of the whater-it-is took place on May 28th. It was seen by six visitors to the loch. These gentlemen were staying in Finlay, at The Fiery Cross, and went out that day to fish from the shore at the southern tip of Banmor Ness.

The party consisted of a Mr.John MacNab, who is some sort of game keeper, Dr. Acton Croke of Edinburgh, Sir Archibald Roylance, Sir Edward Leithen, an ex Attorney General, Mr. John Palliser-Yeats, an eminent banker, and Sir Charles Lamancha, the cabinet minister, all men of impeccable reputation."

Flotsam hesitated momentarily.

"It may however be relevant that local gossip has it that the gentlemen were all the worse for drink at the time.

Be that as it may.

It was early in the morning this time. Although there was a light breeze mist hung in dense patches over the surface of the loch. The gentlemen said (I had this second or third hand, the said gentlemen having left the district a few days later) that the object was a good four hundred yards away and proceeding north-west 'at a fair lick'. They claim to have had it in sight for five minutes or so before it submerged. Their description of the creature it's head, neck and humps, tallies pretty well with descriptions given by



Jamie the
Piper MacIntyre.



"Old Fergus" MacIntyre.

other witnesses..

I believe that it was these gentlemen who contacted the people at Loch Ness. When the Loch Ness folk decided to send a team up here to investigate that attracted the attention of 'The Scotsman'."

"The story appeared on the 6th." I mused. "The day after the Nessie hunters got here. And we arrived on the 8th. Hmmm."

Was there anything else?"

"I don't know if there's any connection." Flotsam said doubtfully.

"Go on," I urged, "spit it out."

"Well, Sir," said the lad, "There is a Mr. Angus MacGoolie. He's the grandfather of Mr. William, the young man who first saw 'something'. He has a nickname actually, it's 'Mad Angus', although some folk say he's not at all mad, but that he has second sight."

"Interesting. But not very." I said, "do get on with it."

"The old gentleman lives in the tower we saw at the end of the track, past the cottages." said Flotsam. "In fact, though it belongs to Castle MacIntyre it's generally known as MacGoolie's Tower. Mr. Angus is somewhat of a recluse, he locks himself in, in the upper part of the tower, every night. He is reputed to have Second Sight."

Flotsam paused, untypically uncertain. I waved a hand impatiently.

"Well, Sir, since the sightings began he's been going round saying that there's a curse on the MacIntyres, he claims to have had a 'sending', a 'vision' of the castle hill wherein the castle had completely vanished."

"I thought you said the old bugger was a recluse," I said, "so how can he be 'going round' spreading this tale?"

"Ah," said Flotsam, "Only 'somewhat' of a recluse. Apparently spending most evening in a pub doesn't count."

"Nor should it," I commented.

"Anyway, curious though this 'vision' or whatever is I can't see where it fits in, if it fits in at all, with the monster sightings."

With regard to the alleged monster it seems to have remained undetected until very recently, and, although it seems to move about the loch, it definitely favours this northern end. It also confines its activities to when visibility is poor, in particular around dusk."

"It may be that, if the 'monster' actually exists, something has happened recently to disturb it, to cause it to appear more frequently on the surface. And it's appearing when the visibility is poor may mean that it's eyes are sensitive to light, or that it is of a naturally shy disposition."

"You may be right," I conceded. "Anyway, the first thing tomorrow we'll see if we can hire a boat and have a potter about on the loch. It's a pity we haven't got some underwater radar like them Nessie hunters have got."

"Alas, Sir," said the always willing to be helpful minion, "I have nothing like that immediately to hand. But," he continued brightly, "If Sir wishes I believe that it would be possible for me to make a personal underwater search."

"You mean we might hire some scuba gear?" I said. "I very much doubt if such equipment is available in Bannock Brae."

"I wasn't thinking of hiring equipment, Sir," said Flotsam, "I believe I can cobble together something suitable out of the oddments I have stowed away in the boot of the trike, with perhaps one or two minor purchases."

"Good, OK," I said, "you do that. But in any case we'll take a boat out tomorrow but later on, when it gets nearer dusk, we'll try out your underwater gear."

The next morning, on the recommendation of Dougle the publican, we visited Hector, the proprietor of the quayside garage. Hector willingly hired us a small sailing boat. I chose that rather than a boat with an engine on the premise that the sound of an motor might scare off the alleged monster.

"Wind's light to variable," intoned Hector doubtfully. "Ye could get becalmed out in the middle of the loch in weather like this."

"That is of no consequence." I assured Hector, "My man here has a strong constitution so if we lose the wind he can use the oars."

Hector cast an eye over Flotsam's stalwart frame. Flotsam was taller than Hector, though not as heavily built.

"Aye," agreed Hector, "Mebbe ye'll manage."

We stowed substantial packed lunches and bottles of beer in the bottom of the boat and pushed off. The morning was cool but the day promised to be a fine one.

Once clear of the harbour I tacked south towards Olav Ness. We glided along at little more than walking pace, which was fine by me, I wasn't interested in speed.

It took us about forty five minutes to reach the vicinity of Olav Ness. The ground here rose steeply from the loch, though not as steeply as on the other or western side. There were in fact one or two places where we could have pulled the boat ashore, very small beaches. There was little to see except the grass and heather covered hillsides. There were a few large, brown, hairy cattle browsing quietly in the sunshine. We caught a glimpse of a longish low building, whitewashed and with a heavy stone roof, halfway up the hillside, which I guessed was Old Fergus's croft. There was no sign of any people.

After a while we pressed on. Another hour took us to Banmor Ness. Here we did step ashore, on the southern tip, where there was a flattish stoney area. Probably this was where the gentlemen fishers had stood. No-one was about on that day however so we re-embarked and made for Finlay.

Finlay is almost too small to be called a village, pretty though, with a grand little pub right on the quay. We ate a leisurly meal there, downed a couple of pints, and listened to the locals gossiping. We learned nothing new and eventually sailed off again.

On the return voyage the wind was with us. I kept close to the west, or south-west, shore. The cold air sliding down from the steep hillsides tried constantly to push us further offshore. The hills, as I have previously remarked, were much steeper on that side of the loch. They dived into the water at a very sharp angle and I could see no sign of the bottom even when we were less than twenty feet from the shore. The water, besides, was brown with peat. There were no beaches whatsoever and the many tiny streams fell precipitously into the loch over waterfalls or in knife-edged gullies.



Malcolm MacIntyre,
the bus driver.

The day drew on. We re-passed Banmor and Olav nesses and rounded a headland. Here was the bay where Wullie had encountered his beastie and, a mile ahead of us, where Dhu Ness, higher and steeper than anything we'd seen before, loomed. The ness looked dark and forbidding, one could even say that it brooded, over the dark waters.

We headed across the loch then and beached the boat where the Ella burn ran into the loch. We picnicked just below the road, near to the road bridge.

In the course of the day we'd seen only a few vehicles, and fewer folk, on the eastern side of the loch, and nothing and no-one on the western side, where, in any case, there was no metalled road. We had seen a few boats, but all of them, except the ferry, confined themselves to the Oatstane Bridge end of the loch.

"It's very quiet," I observed. "I'm not surprised that there haven't been many sightings, there are very few folk about."

"Indeed, Sir," agreed Flotsam, "very quiet. Though the tourist season is well begun."

"I don't suppose they get many tourists around here," I said, "Along the coasts maybe, but here we are too remote, and there is nothing to attract people...well, only the scenery and the fishing, but that's nothing extra special."

"The report of the monster sightings may attract more visitors when the word spreads," suggested Flotsam.

"Could be," I agreed, "It might be a bit of luck for the locals."

"Then, there is Castle MacIntyre," mused Flotsam, "that might conceivably be a tourist attraction."

"Might be," I said, "I wonder if it's open to the public."

"I've heard nothing to that effect during my conversations in the pub." said Flotsam.

We were back in Bannock Brae in time for me to have a little nap before the evening meal.

"You go and get your gear ready," I instructed Flotsam, "if you finish in time you can eat."

I believe in giving the lad every help, encouragement, and incentive.

As it was by six thirty we were munching our way through helpings of steak and chips.

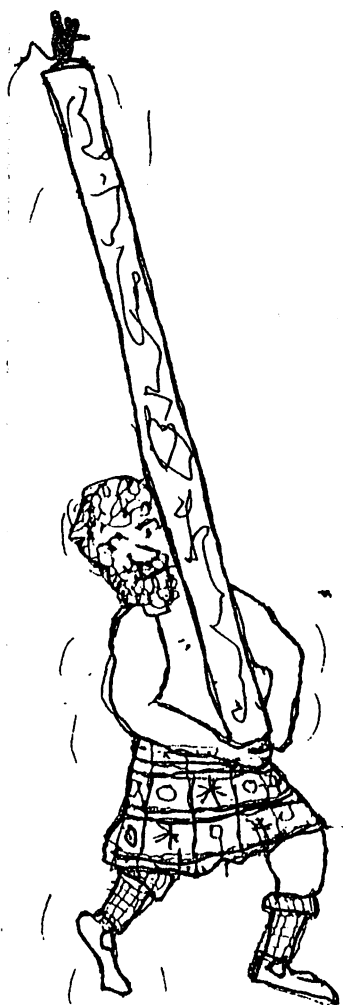
"If you're sure you've got everything ready," I said, "go and sit in the local's side for an hour, I'll be in the other bar. It won't be dark until after ten o'clock tonight but we want to be off before then. We'll go a little way up the shore, find some little cove where you can get into the water, and take it from there."

In the bar I was made welcome by my American acquaintances. I gave them a version of our sailing expedition and they told me what they had been doing. This seemed to have been going through various parish records and looking at old gravestones.

".....and we've bought a dozen derelict crofts too." enthused Lulu Mae.



"Mad Angus" MacGoolie.



Hector MacInery

"You plan to live here?!" I asked, startled.

"Oh no," said JB, "we're going to have them taken apart and shipped over to MacIntyre Springs. We'll be building the heritage park around them."

"That'll cost you a bit," I said thoughtfully.

"Oh, money," laughed Lulu Mae merrily, "No difficulty there, we could buy up the entire town with the MacIntyre Clan Association's petty cash, if the owners would sell."

"Up the road in 'Vegas they bought London Bridge," said RB, a touch enviously, "but of course it wouldn't have been right for MacIntyre Springs."

"What you want is Castle MacIntyre," I said jokingly.

RB looked at Lulu Mae, Lulu Mae looked at RB. "If only we could," sighed Lulu Mae.

My jaw dropped, my mind boggled. They were absolutely serious.

At that moment Flotsam arrived and the talk became more general. Flotsam had read a couple or three guide books and so on, he's a fast reader, I'm glad I spent that afternoon teaching him how to read. Anyhow, he was now a mine of information on local geograph, history, and legend. I didn't hear everything he said, I was wrapped in thought, mulling over the conversation I'd just had with the American MacIntyres.

I do remember him saying that the Culloden Monument was erected by the present earl's great grandfather. There was money in the family in those days. The great grandfather was a rather eccentric gentleman of whom many tales were told. He died at the age of ninety five as a result of

a fall...he was attempting to put a chamber pot on the pinnacle of Salisbury Cathedral at the time. (he disliked the archbishop).

Eight o'clock rolled round. I made our excuses and dragged Flotsam away from his fascinated audience.

In mere minutes we were aboard the trike and heading north along the loch road. A mile up the road we hid our transport behind a wall and, with the lackey carrying a knapsack, we made our way over rugged ground to the shore of the loch.

We found a little cove there where we were completely hidden from anyone unless they actually came down from the road.

The far shore of the loch was more or less in darkness by this time, but our side was still catching the last rays of the westering sun. Flotsam had his gear unpacked in no time at all, there wasn't much of it, just a sort of face-mask and a couple of foot-long tubes.

"Is that it?" I asked doubtfully. "No air tanks or anything?"

"Nothing more is needed, oh noble boss person," Flotsam assured me. "The mask extracts oxygen from the water and these tubes provide me with a means of propulsion. I can control my speed by squeezing them with a greater or a lesser force."

Well, I gotta admit that the lad was pretty good with gadgetry, and he seemed happy enough with his gear. I did sort of wonder what would be the result if he encountered some great beast in the loch, but then, I thought, "the damn thing will just have to take it's chances."

Flotsam stripped down to his trunks.

"Has Sir any particular instruction?" he asked diffidently.

"Not really," I said, "though I rather fancy that the waters round Dhu Ness might be worth investigating. No, you just scoot around as you think best and take note of anything untoward."

"The loch is only eighteen miles long," said Flotsam, "I should be able to make an adequate survey in a little over an hour. If there is some creature in the loch I'm quite confident that I will find it for Sir."

"Good lad," I said, "I have every confidence that if there is anything to find you're the one to find it." That last statement was absolutely true.

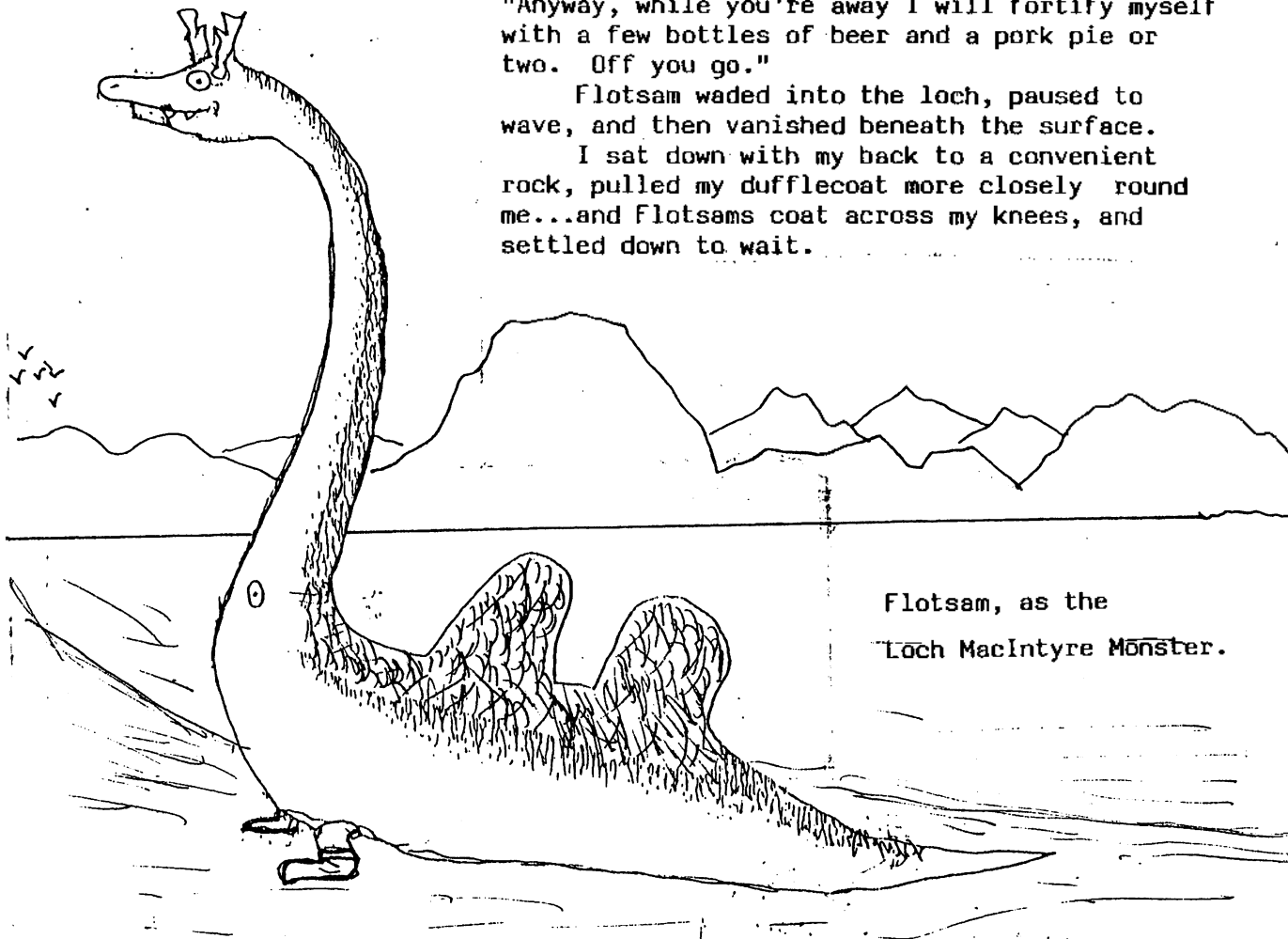
Flotsam beamed. "Sir's confidence in me is a source of inspiration," he declared.

"I guess it is at that," I said modestly.

"Anyway, while you're away I will fortify myself with a few bottles of beer and a pork pie or two. Off you go."

Flotsam waded into the loch, paused to wave, and then vanished beneath the surface.

I sat down with my back to a convenient rock, pulled my dufflecoat more closely round me...and Flotsam's coat across my knees, and settled down to wait.



Flotsam, as the
Loch MacIntyre Monster.

I must have dozed off.

I woke up with a start. Something was making quiet splashing sounds as it waded through the shallows. I was not alarmed of course, obviously it was Flotsam coming back.

I was therefore somewhat taken aback when a large reptillian head, on a long neck, loomed out of the gloom.

"Oooo-er!" I exclaimed bravely.

"Sir!" a familiar voice called softly. "It is I, Flotsam."

I unfroze. "Flotsam?" I called, much relieved.

"I found this in the deepest part of the loch," said a muffled Flotsam, "below Dhu Ness." struggling out of the 'nessie costume'.

"Bloody well done!" I exclaimed.

"It was nothing, Sir," said Flotsam modestly, though I did think that I

detected a certain note of triumph in his voice.

On further investigation the 'monster' proved to be a tubular steel frame, very professionally made, covered with some sort of rubbery material, very realistic looking.

"I found no evidence that a real creature lives in the loch," said Flotsam, "and I made a thorough search. I do not think, Sir, that there can be much doubt that this construct is the origin of the reports of monster sightings."

"I suspected something like this all along," I said, (I really had). "Someone has been perpetrating a hoax."

"Sir is once more utterly correct," said Flotsam humbly. "What would Sir like me to do with the evidence?"

I thought about it. It was indeed a pretty problem, with ramifications that Flotsam in his innocence had not imagined.



Janet, Dr.Cameron's housekeeper.

"put it back where you found it," I instructed him, "we can always recover it if we need it. I'll decide later what to do about it."

"As Sir wishes," said Flotsam, and a few minutes later he re-entered the water and sped silently off in the direction of Dhu Ness.

He returned shortly in a state of some agitation.

"I'm afraid I was seen, Sir," he said apologetically,

"What!? Where?! by Who!?" I exclaimed.

"Oh Sir," said the lad, metaphorically wringing his hands. "I thoughtlessly returned to the vicinity of Dhu Ness on the surface.

I was almost upon the Nessie hunter's boat before

I noticed it. They were lying silent and unlit. I dived at once, of course, but there was an outcry."

"Pity," I said, I wasn't much worried. "but it can't be helped. Get changed now and we'll go back to the Crofters, there's still over an hour till closing time."

"There is one other thing," said Flotsam as he pulled his clothes on. "That place, MacGoolie's Tower, it has a pair of large and solid doors under the water. It may be significant."

"Significant!" I cried, my mind going into overdrive. "Of course it's bloody significant, you moron! I bet you a week's supply of Eccles cakes that that's where the hoaxers have been operating from!"

"It is a distinct possibility," admitted the idiot.

"Right!" I said, "back to the pub. Later on, when everything's quiet, you and me are going to have a look around MacGoolie's Tower."

"Is Sir perhaps contemplating making an illegal entry?" asked Flotsam uneasily.

"You can bet on it!" I said firmly.

There was a great kerfuffle going on at The Crofters when we got back. I sat down besides my American friends. I didn't have to ask what all the fuss was about because everyone was loudly and excitedly explaining to everyone else what had happened.

"Nearly ran us down!" exclaimed a scrawny, bearded nessie hunter, obviously not for the first time, "as large as life, just as described, big glaring eyes, a snake-like head, yards and yards of neck. Going like the clappers it was, never seen anything like it!"

"It dived just before it struck us," shouted a rotund gentleman, gesticulating wildly, "went down like a stone it did. We tried to track it with our latest equipment, but we lost it when it got near to the bottom, too much interference from the debris down there, it's getting on for a thousand feet deep there, the pressure must be tremendous!"

"No doubt about it," put in another bloke, "I'm convinced. Just wait till we tell the others back at Loch Ness, boy, will they be green!"

"Wait until the newspapers get hold of it," said the landlord happily, "this'll bring in the tourists, in droves."

Not everyone looked to be overjoyed at the prospect.

"How'd you like to have the monster in MacIntyre Springs?" I asked the American MacIntyres.

"Well, I guess it would be an attraction," said RB, "but you can't rely on a creature like that to appear to order. It would be better to have a model, or maybe some sort of a boat that looked like a nessie, for folk to ride in. Whatever, you gotta have something that folk can see, that's there when you want it."

"Like a castle," said Lulu Mae dreamily.

'Interesting,' I thought. 'Interesting'.

Eventually the pub had to close. Me and flotsam and the other resident could legally have stayed on, but I was tired, and things still had to be done.

I lay down on my bed with my boots off and my clothes on.

If I fall asleep wake me up at one o'clock," I said, "meanwhile get together anything you think might be useful for getting into that tower."

I didn't notice when I fell asleep, well, I mean, you don't do you?

I woke up to find Flotsam bending over me.

"One am, Sir," he whispered.

One am! I groaned. The things I have to do to earn a modest crust, the hours I'm forced to work!

"OK," I yawned, "have you got the burglaring kit ready?"

Flotsam winced.

"Are you sure that this is a good idea, Sir?" he said fretfully.

"Goopd idea!" I exclaimed, heatedly but quietly. "Of course it's a good idea. There's no other way we can get any solid evidence on who's behind this nessie business."

"I suppose Sir is right," said Flotsam reluctantly.

We crept down the stairs to the back door, which Flotsam easily opened and as easily locked behind us. The lad has his uses.



Burns Night.

We flitted up the back of the houses and crept along the quay. It was fortunate for our enterprise that the night was almost moonless and that a thick layer of fog had rolled up from the loch, as it often does in that part of Scotland at any time of the year.

Nothing stirred, not even a cat. There were no lights other than the street lamps, and they couldn't penetrate the fog. There were lights on in the police station, but we passed by on the other side of the road, well nigh invisible. It didn't take us long to slip along past the quayside cottages and come to the gate. We climbed over that and proceeded cautiously until we at last arrived at the tower.

"What if Mr. Angus hears us, Sir?" whispered Flotsam.

"Shut up and open the door," I hissed, "if the old codger hears anything he'll not be coming down to confront the bogles or things that go bump in the night."

The lock was old and stout. Flotsam opened it in a trice. He pushed the door. It didn't move.

"It's got a bar across, on the inside," he whispered.

"Excuses, excuses, always excuses," I hissed, "stop messing about and get the bloody thing open."

Flotsam sighed and produced something the size and shape of a biro. He applied this to the crack between the door and the frame. There was a faint smell of burning then Flotsam pushed the door open.

Inside the tower, naturally enough, the darkness was thick enough to cut with a knife, a fish knife. I'd overlooked the matter of how were to see our way around once inside the tower. Well, I'd had a lot to think about.

"You did remember to bring torches?" I asked in an admonishing sort of a voice.

"Better than that, Sir," said the lad, and thrust something into my hands. "Night-sight goggles."

"Thank you lad," I said kindly, "just testing."

The goggles worked wonderfully well. Much, much better than any other night-vision glasses or whatever that I've ever seen or heard of. Presumably they were of Flotsam's own manufacture.

The room, the ground floor of the tower, was easily sixty feet across, MacGoolie's tower was a round one of course, and the ceiling a good twenty feet above our heads. Through the goggles the room looked as bright as day.

The room was essentially empty. There was a trapdoor in the ceiling to one side, but no stair. Presumably Mad Angus had a ladder which he pulled up after him.

To our left was another trap door, this one set in the floor. There was no lock on it, but it wouldn't open.

"Bolted from below, Sir," said Flotsam.

From below? I thought. Curious, and of course significant.

"Get it open," I directed.

Thus commanded Flotsam applied his handy little gadget again and, in a trice, was able to lift the trap door up. It's hinges, I noted, were well oiled.

We descended into the room below by means of a flight of well word, but broad, stairs, which hugged one wall of the tower.

The chamber we were now in was as large as the one above, but far from bare.



Hamish MacIntyre,
The Laird.



Callum MacIntyre.

All about the room there was evidence of activity. Tools and equipment, rods and sheets of metal, various machines and a quietly humming generator.

At the far side of the room from the stairs we found a pool. Well, we could hardly miss it, it took up about a third of the floor area. Over the edge of the pool, suspended from the sort of crane they sling lifeboats from, was a fifteen foot long submersible.

"Shades of Jock Coostow!" I exclaimed.

The lights came on.

"Good evening, gentlemen." said a cultured voice behind us.

We turned, removing our goggles as we did so, and found three blokes standing near the far wall. Behind them a section of shelving had swung out revealing a tunnel.

The chap in front was an aristocratic looking gent who I judged to be in his early sixties. (actually I found out later that he was seventy four). He was slightly above average height, wiry, tanned or weather worn and moustached.

He was flanked by two younger and larger men, both of whom bore a distinct resemblance to him.

"You tripped an alarm, Mr. Soames," he said mildly.

"Lord MacIntyre, I presume?" I said with commendable composure.

"You presume correctly, Mr. Soames," said the Laird. "May I present two of my sons,

Callum." he nodded to his right, "and Alistair." he nodded left.

"Honoured to make your acquaintance." I said politely.

None of the three seemed to be armed and therefore, as long as I had Flotsam with me, they presented no threat. Still...

"I would be grateful if you and your assistant, Mr. Flotsam, would accompany us back up to the castle." said The MacIntyre.

I pursed my lips and looked doubtful.

"I can assure you, Mr. Soames," said The Laird, "that we intend you no harm. You have discovered our little secret and I, we, merely wish to discuss the matter with you in more comfort than this chamber allows."

Well, I was rather curious to hear the story, and besides there were other things to consider.

"We'll be happy to accompany Your Lordship." I said graciously.

Led by The MacIntyre and with his two hefty sons bringing up the rear, we climbed an interminable ramp, (not stairs, curiously enough) and in due course emerged into what was obviously, or had been, the castle's armoury. From there we proceeded along corridors, clean enough but with an undefinable air of crumbling, until we arrived at a largish room, or small hall. A cheerful fire blazed in an open fireplace, and three other people were there taking advantage of it.

The parson I guessed was the Laird's youngest son, Kenneth. Hector, the garage bloke I recognised, and the lady, by her bearing and her age, I guessed to be the Laird's wife, the Lady Morag MacIntyre. (nee Bowes-Lyon).

His Lordship introduced everyone to everyone else and then we got seated around one end of a heavy oak table big enough to accomodate thrice our number.

Callum and Alistair served drinks all round and then we got down to business.

"You must understand," said His Lordship, "that the family has fallen on hard times. Grandfather made a lot of unwise investments and my father's death duties, well, they impoverished the estate.

So far we have rubbed along by selling off our portable assets, like the paintings." he indicated the bare patches on the walls.

There was only one painting left there, a portrait of a sturdy, bearded clansman with, no doubt about it, a veritable twinkle in his eye.

The MacIntyre noticed the direction of my gaze.

"That one we could never part with," he said fondly, "it was a present from a Very Gracious Lady."

"It appears to be a portrait of Mr. John Brown," observed Flotsam, "who, if I remember correctly, was a gillie employed by her late majesty Queen Victoria."

There was a peculiar sort of silence. Lady Morag, I was interested to note, actually blushed.

"Confidentially," said His Lordship, I can tell you that John Brown was actually a MacIntyre, but in view of his, er, special relationship with her late majesty, he thought it best to assume an alias."

"Ah." I responded, noncommittably, then.

"You were explaining the MacIntyre's financial situation?"

"Oh yes," said The Laird. "We are the biggest employer in these parts, and I, we, feel that we have obligations to the clan. But with the estate struggling as it is we've not been able to provide as much work as we'd like to for some years now. Too many of our folk, especially the young ones, can't find work and are having to move away."

"Not that the employment situation is any better anywhere else in Scotland." said Lady Morag sadly.

There were nods from all around the table.

"To get to the point." continued His Lordship, "some of us were discussing the situation a few months ago when the idea was mooted. I mean the idea of having a monster in the loch. You see, we thought that a nessie in the loch would attract sightseers, tourists, and that would be a shot in the arm for the pubs and the shops, and provide at least some jobs.

Hector here is ex-navy and knows all about submersibles, we roped him in early on. It was a bit difficult but we managed to get this ex-Russian navy submersible, via Japan, we paid in whiskey, and with all of us helping him Hector got it working perfectly in no time at all."

"I designed the monster's skin." said Lady Morag proudly. "my time in St. Irinian's art and craft classes wasn't entirely wasted."

"And a grand job it was too, m'dear." said His Lordship.

"As I was saying, we made the 'monster' and started operations. It worked pretty well too. But then Kenneth discovered what we were up to."

"It wasn't honest." said Kenneth the parson seriously.

'Bloody spoilsport' I thought.

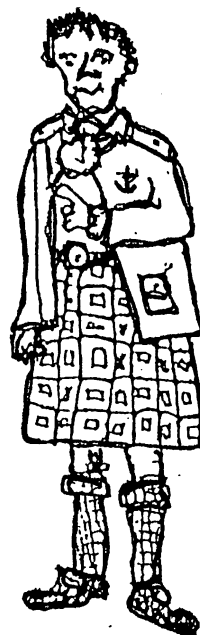
"I suppose not." said the Laird with a sigh, "but it was fun while it lasted."

"While it lasted?" I mused aloud. "There's some ambiguity there."

"Oh." said His Lordship, "when Kenneth found out he insisted that we drop the scheme, so we dumped 'the monster' in the deepest part of the loch. That was weeks ago.

Imagine our surprise then, our consternation, when those fishing gentlemen claimed to have seen a monster."

"They can't have done." declared Hector. "The monster is sunk too deep to have been recovered by anyone without massive special gear. It's my firm belief that the lot of them had had too much to drink and imagined the whole thing."



Alistair MacIntyre

"I must admit that I'm inclined to go along with Hector." said Callum. "At least I was. But those nessie hunters claim to have seen a monster just this evening, and they're not easily fooled."

"Maybe there really is a monster in the loch after all." put in Alistair, "or maybe someone else had the same idea as us."

I considered that it would not be an opportune time, nor an appropriate occasion, to mention Flotsam's recent, er, activities.

Instead I asked:

"So what's the problem with your private nessie?"

"Why." said His Lairdship, "now you know our part in the affair we're anxious to know what you intend doing about it."

"Doing about it?" I asked, puzzled. "well, I'm not here in any official capacity. I couldn't care less what folk believe about a monster in the loch. I can't see any reason for me to do anything at all."

"But you've been making investigations," protested Kenneth, "you must have some reason for making them."

"How do you know I've been 'making investigations', apart from getting into the tower that is?"

"We guessed when we recognised you." said Callum, "Cousin Walter, (the Duke of Duggley) has told us many tales of your exploits, and he has shown us several photographs of you. So when you turned up...." he spread his hand eloquently.

"I'm afraid your guilty consciences have misled you." I smiled. I'm up here on a commission. My only object was to discover the truth behind the 'Scotsman' story. I've done that. All I have to do now is to report to my client the essential fact that the monster is a hoax. He's not interested in anything else and he'll certainly not be interested in divulging anything I tell him in confidence to anyone else."

"Will you take another wee drop?" said Callum, all smiles.

"Might there be a little MacIntyre blood in your ancestry, Mr. Soames?" asked Alistair.



Lady Morag
MacIntyre.

In the more relaxed atmosphere I ventured:

"Nice place you've got here, Your Lordship."

"Yes, it has it's points," agreed the MacIntyre, "but it's too big for us, and the upkeep is much more than we can afford."

"Have you thought of opening the castle up to the public?" I enquired.

"Thought of it, yes." said the Laird, "but most of the castle is badly in need of repair, it wouldn't be safe for tourists to be shown round, even if the nessie story does bring them in."

"I'm afraid that the ancestral pile is a millstone round our necks." put in Callum. "we tried the National Trust, but they wouldn't touch the place."

"The Dower House on the other side of Bannock Brae is where we really live," said Lady Morag, "it's smaller and it has modern conveniences."

"This castle is an ice-box in the winter." said Kenneth, with considerable feeling.

"We might not have to worry about keeping the place up if Mad Angus MacGollie's Second Sight is working properly." remarked His Lordship.

"Ah yes." I said, "he's the chappie who claims that he's seen the castle vanished and gone."

"Best thing that could happen to it," chimed in Alistair, "in fact I'd be very happy to take the place apart stone by stone myself."

"Oh really?" I enquired.

"I'm an archeologist," explained Alistair, "perhaps you've seen me on 'Digging Up History', BBC 2..? Anyway, there has got to be lots of really interesting things under all this stone, the site's quite old, neolithic at least."

The time now seemed to be opportune to introduce a notion that I had been maturing for the last couple of days.

I began by;

"I wonder if Your Lordship would allow me to bring two people to see you this afternoon. They are Americans, true, but they are also part of clan MacIntyre."

"Eh?" observed His Lordship.

"I don't want to say anything at the moment, but I may have hit on a solution to some of your difficulties."

I suppose His Lordship felt he owed me something for keeping mum about the family involvement in the nessie affair. He was a generous natured chap anyway and would probably obliged in any case.

As it was we arranged a meeting for the next day, or rather, later that same day, the hour was that late, then me and Flotsam returned to the Crofters.

The American MacIntyres were right chuffed when I told them that I'd arranged for them to meet The laird, nervous, but as pleased as punch.

We arrived at Castle MacIntyre at the appointed time.

"Lord MacIntyre, Lady Morag, gentlemen, allow me to introduce a pair of far flung MacIntyres. Robert Bruce and Lulu Mae MacIntyre of MacIntyre Springs, Nevada, U.S..of A..."

"And they sorted everything out between them." I told Neil a few days later. "The American MacIntyres are going to buy the castle, take it apart, supervised by Alistair, transport it to America, and rebuild it in MacIntyre Springs.

They're also going to lease the site of the castle and build a hotel there. RB reckons to send parties of MacIntyres, and other Americans of Scots descent, over every year, and probably all the year round. He thinks it'll go a bomb for the foreseeable future.. AND he's offered contracts to folk to go over and work, appear more like, in the proposed MacIntyre Heritage Park. He's had lots of volunteers already, including, surprisingly enough, Wullie the Idjit and his grand-dad Angus."

"Aye," said Neil, unenthusiastically, "but are you quite, quite sure that there was no pumphrey involved?"

"You have a one track mind, old haggis abuser." I declared. "I've explained. There isn't a monster, there never was a monster, the whole thing was a hoax, there is absolutely no chance that a pumphrey is or was ever involved!"

(Pumphrey indeed, I thought to myself. The man's deranged.)

"Ah, well." sighed Neil.

Flotsam slid silently into the room behind Neil. He gave me the 'thumbs up', the sign I'd been waiting for, the sign that told me that the good lad had found and destroyed that, that, ghastly dangerous recording of my indiscrete comments I'd made about Sherry Hormones.

"So." said Neil, rather too cheerfully for my liking. "As you're here we can discuss the next little investigation I'd like you to make, it involves....."

I stood up.

I put my thumb to my nose.

I wagged my fingers at the astonished Neil,
and blew a very juicy raspberry.

Me and Flotsam then made a dignified exit while the wily Scot was still gasping in astonishment.

THE END

