

SILLY SHORT STORIES

Paul Gordon Busby



volume 1

Silly short stories

Volume 1

by

Paul Busby

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SEBASTIAN'S STORY

Sebastian St John Speaks was a born loner. He was the only child of a ledger clerk and a former nun. It is rumoured that his father was once sent to audit the accounts of a convent which produced a surplus supply of sloe gin. This was sold for charity. After a few tasters, he could no longer resist the temptation aroused by the sight of the nun's habit and foisted himself on her. Or perhaps it was the other way around - no-one really knows, including the two people concerned. Anyway, months later, he ended up fathering a very unappealing-looking baby, who was the spitting image of his father.

The woman was immediately asked to leave the convent. Having kicked the habit, literally, she had not anywhere else to live, so she moved in with the ledger clerk. Out of a sense of guilt and rapidly-growing dislike for him, she took a vow of silence. Her last words were to insist upon calling the baby St John, after her other suggestions - St Matthew, St Mark and St Luke - were rejected by the registrar.

The boy grew up to be very shy and retiring. Communication between the father and son was on the terms of speaking only when absolutely necessary. Such occasions were few and far between. His mother remained silent, putting all the blame for her plight on the 'holy spirit'. It is not surprising that the child grew up lacking any social graces and shunning social gatherings.

At school he would sit at the back of the class, virtually unseen by the teacher and during playtime would wander off alone. He became quite adept at playing marbles by himself, using different fingers to represent other players, and used a branch of a tree to hang a conker from, when he played conkers.

Whatever he did, he never lost a game...except to himself. He did come unstuck once, though, in his attempt to play hide-and-seek. Having hidden himself in a small cupboard in the boys' toilet, he waited in vain to be found. He realised after a lengthy period of time, that it was actually himself that he was waiting for to discover where he was. While he was working this out, the call of nature intervened, and he had to leave his hidey-hole before everyone else stumbled upon him, hiding from himself.

Never sure what to say to anyone he might meet in the street who knew his parents, he once informed an elderly lady that his mother was in fact a sister, or rather, used to be. The lady quickly departed, looking very confused. He had obviously noticed the rosary on the bedside cabinet in his mother's room. He made a note that in future when anyone enquired about his parents, he would not try to explain matters.

For his seventeenth birthday his father bought him a drawing book with a selection of crayons. On the cover it said: *For children aged 3 upward.* Well, that was technically correct. Sebastian enjoyed the

time alone indulging in this pastime, even though he had absolutely no artistic bent.

After finishing up the drawing book, he thought he would try his hand at real painting and found in a shed some tins of old emulsion paint and a large brush. For a canvas, he used anything he could lay his hands on - planks of wood, cardboard, or tiles blown off the roof. To be honest, some of his efforts were 'interesting', his father thought, but he was handicapped by not being able to think of anything remotely abstruse or surreal to give to his works for titles. As a consequence, his notions of becoming a professional artist were dashed, and he had to think of something else to do for a living.

The idea of working with anyone else in a team was simply not on. The one job he did apply for was as a school caretaker, but he failed the interview in spite of being the only candidate. With no success finding anyone, the headmaster took over the role himself. He admitted in an off-the-cuff moment that it was preferable to teaching children, any day. The broom never answered back and the dustbins always behaved themselves perfectly.

Sebastian's luck changed when he saw a vacancy in the newspaper for a shepherd. No interview was required - all he had to do was to say he would do it, and turn up in a certain field the next day. On account of the weather being atrocious, no-one else wanted to apply, so the job was his. He did not have the luxury of being assisted by a sheepdog but had to herd up the sheep by himself.

"Keep them moving as much as possible," the farmer advised him, "otherwise they might get foot-rot"

The sheep had been used to receiving instructions from a sheepdog, but he had broken a leg and had to be retired, so it was not easy getting them to do anything without him. Sebastian shouted, screamed, waved his arms around, and charged at them. But nothing seemed to work.

"This is a bit rough," he muttered. Suddenly the eyes of all the sheep widened as they looked at him in astonishment. "Yea, this sure is a bit rough", he muttered. The nearest sheep started to pay attention to him. "Really rough", he added. But by now the sheep were beginning to do as they were instructed to do. He didn't realise why, but he now had all of them in the palm of his hand.

"Rough!" he kept repeating as he ran around the assembled herd. Whatever it was, he sensed that he now had the answer. From one field into another he drove them, along a narrow lane onto a narrow bridge, and into a small thicket where he turned them around, and went back the way they had come.

On the bridge this time they encountered a car full of people coming in the opposite direction, but it was forced to stop by the herd of advancing sheep which soon engulfed it, followed by this rather weird man who let out a low growl as he passed the car. To show his annoyance he cocked up his leg and wedged on the back tyre before charging off to guide his flock. Mission accomplished, he thought when they entered the original field, and sat down to eat his lunch before repeating the whole exercise.

A side-effect of all this exercise was that he became very fit, and his thoughts turned towards doing some kind of outside sport. In the far distance he often noticed some hang-gliders descending from a steep tree-lined hill. He was intrigued by this, and whenever they took to the air, he would watch them diligently, learning all of their movements. This gave the sheep a bit of a breather, and enabled them to get some grass to eat - a rare treat for them now. He convinced himself that he would like to try his hand at this and planned how he could go about it.

The cost of purchasing a hang-glider and other bits of equipment was a big obstacle, but perhaps he could find extra work, and persuade his father to chip in with some money. By this time, other people had noticed his sheep-herding skills, and he began to receive offers of similar work. The most lucrative one was rounding up cows for milking. They did not take kindly to being barked at, and the milk they produced ended up being curdled. He used this to his advantage, however, and depending upon whether the farmer wanted normal or curdled milk, he would judge whether to bark or not.

When in due course he learned that there was a used hang-glider for sale, on account of the sudden death of its previous owner (no more explanation than that was given), he seized the opportunity. A small top-up from his father was still required, but there was no argument over that as his father welcomed the chance to see less of his son. They had not got on well ever since Sebastian's artistic endeavours, when he covered over the windows with black gloss paint. His mother did not seem to be at all concerned about her son taking up hand-gliding, as she spent most of the time on her knees (an ingrained habit) in order to wash the floors, that is when she wasn't distilling gin and making her own unique brand of vodka.

With great excitement, he collected the hang-glider and harness from the former owner's wife, but was told that the safety helmet was too damaged to be used, without mentioning that her husband's head was still wedged inside it. Never mind, he thought, I may not need one at first. I'm not going to be going far until I get the knack of it.

The following day was quite breezy which he was glad about as he thought the effort of taking-off would not be so great. Late afternoon when all the other hang-gliders had gone home, he made his way to the hill, and attached the harness from the glider to his chest. He ran a few yards and fell over. He got up and tried again, with the same result. This continued for a while. Then he changed the direction he was facing, and as he was tying a shoelace and about to start the initial run, a strong gust swept him aloft. He tried straightening up, but the glider was out of control and heading downhill fast. His legs brushed the top of a tree with such force that he spun over, and minutes later, his head hit the ground several times as he bounced to an eventual stop... at which point he passed out.

It was by now starting to get dark and no-one was about, only the sheep down in the field below as they witnessed their strange "sheepdog" descend from the heavens into the trees, accompanied by a lot of swearing. Only the lambs appeared to enjoy the spectacle. They had placed bets on whoever it might be, and when they heard some of his utterances, they knew they had guessed right. They loved to have a gamble in the evening.

At some point in the night he came to, and tried to make sense of where he was. With some effort, he undid the straps of the harness and wrapped the torn and battered material over him to keep warm. His legs and arms worked as normal, and nothing seemed wrong with his back or neck, apart from some aches and pains. His head, in particular, felt like a ton weight, but there was no bleeding and it was still attached to his body. I'll just have to stay here until it gets light, he reasoned with himself and promptly fell asleep.

As dawn came, a man on horseback was startled to see a body covered over in red canvas. He gingerly approached and touched a leg, at which the body sprang up, startling the horse and rider equally. "Had a bit of a rough landing, I see," observed the horseman, at which a chorus of "baas" from the flock of sheep in the nearby field could be heard.

After deliberating on the matter, he decided to ride off to get some assistance. Sebastian was to stay put until help arrived. An hour later, a man with a wheelbarrow made its way through the trees to the scene. The man was less than pleased with the destruction of a few of his best trees, and hardly seemed to notice the figure on the ground. When he did see him, he realised it was the man who had urinated on his new car tyre a few months ago. He made off again without any further to-do. Left alone again, Sebastian picked up what remained of his hand-glider and started walking back to town.

He was reluctant to draw attention to himself over the next few days and stayed at home, but the extreme headaches he now suffered from convinced him to visit the doctor's. It was in the waiting-room that he first heard voices in his head. He did not know whose voices they were, but they were all strangers to him. He looked around and saw a young man and a schoolgirl in adjoining seats to him, texting on their smart phones.

"Where exactly are you?" asked the young man.

"I'm in the doctor's surgery", replied the girl.

"That's funny, so am I."

"Whereabouts?"

"Next to the door in the waiting-room."

"Oh, I'm a couple of seats away, next to a man with an odd-shaped head."

"That's funny! So am I. Anyway, hope we meet up sometime."

“Me too.”

And the voices stopped and all he could hear was the clock ticking.

The doctor did the usual tests and could find nothing wrong, bar the cuts and bruises. He prescribed some paracetamol, as he believed that people expect something for making the effort to visit the surgery, just like young children all expect a bag of presents for going to one of their friend’s birthday parties.

It was back to work for the next few weeks for Sebastian. Everything gradually returned to normal. Thanks to the paracetamol, his injuries had healed up nicely, or so he believed. His head too was no longer troubling him at home where silence prevailed, or in the fields where the only sounds he heard were the bleatings of the sheep and the chirruping of the birds, apart from the occasional car or plane going overhead.

One day, though, he was asked by the farmer to pick up some new shears from a farm shop in a town some distance away. Sebastian did not drive, and the buses were few and far between, where he lived, so he had to go by train. In the coach he looked for an empty seat and found one beside a WiFi sign, which meant nothing to him.

A business-man sat down opposite him and immediately opened up his laptop. A few seconds later he saw in his mind various photos of a young attractive woman, which was followed by more, all of them in various stages of undress. He then could make out the sounds of people’s voices. A small boy was asking his friend where he had put his football; a woman was telling someone what was for tea; an elderly man was informing someone what time he would arrive at the station; two girls were excitedly talking to each other about how much they fancied a certain male pop singer; and so on. At the same time, he heard assorted pings and pongs from a number of video games that people were playing. This was all quite overwhelming.

On looking around he saw more people had their laptops open, and in his head he had visions of holiday snaps, houses, groups of people looking at a camera, and now and again, a graph and a pie chart would waft into view. He closed his eyes, but everything was still there. He put his hands over his ears, but the voices and sounds carried on regardless. This was driving him crazy. In desperation he went into the toilet where it was a bit quieter, except for the normal train sounds. He stayed there, much to the annoyance of fellow passengers, until it was time to get off.

Eventually he arrived at the shop, made his purchase, and thought hard about how to get home again. Even in the suburban streets, he was not entirely free from hearing sounds and voices. It was now evening, and as he walked past houses along the streets, his vision was now disrupted by the sight of moving pictures - politicians spouting forth, women standing beside weather-maps, all kinds of

advertisements and scenes from soap operas - all happening at the same time.

Rather than travelling home by train, he decided to walk home. OK, it was 20-odd miles, but he was used to walking, even if he had to go most of the way in the dark. Anything would be preferable to his train journey earlier.

When he told his father of his journey, his father has said: “You know the trouble with you is that you’re sick! Really sick!” His mother looked up at him and said a silent prayer. It took a lot of courage for him to make up his mind to visit the local hospital, but felt there was no alternative. He put it off as long as he could until he had run out of excuses not to go. The sheep had been shorn the previous day, and the farmer thought they could have a day-off to recover.

The Accident and Emergency Department of the hospital was full of people with missing ears, legs completely hidden by plaster-casts and bandages, and assorted other people who were either asleep or dead. When he was eventually ushered into a room to see a doctor, he had difficulty describing his symptoms, owing to his being very inarticulate and the strange nature of his condition.

“So, you hear different voices in your head,” said the physician. “Sounds like you may have schizophrenia. You need to see a psychiatrist or one of those people.”

After another attempt at finding out about some more of the symptoms, he said: “And you have strange visions going through your head. Then you’re either a prophet... or you’re completely nuts. I would go for the latter. I’ll make an appointment for you to be admitted to a mental hospital.”

A few days later a letter came from him to attend the said mental hospital. He was told to bring plenty of clothes and clean underwear, as the washing machines were not to be used by patients in case anyone tried to climb into them. The nurses were very friendly, however, and helped him to settle into his secure room. The next morning, he was taken for an MRI scan, “just to see if a parrot has got into your ear”, joked the radiographer. No-one laughed.

The scan revealed nothing unusual at first glance, until a student nurse observed that “the auditory cortices in the temporal lobes at the sides of the head were very much enlarged, and Oh My God! Look at the size of his cochleas.”

She was sent away to make the tea, and Sebastian was wheeled into another room for an EEG (an electroencephalogram, if you must know) where patches were placed on his head and connected to a computer screen. Again, no abnormalities were discovered. Just as they were about to remove the patches, the technician’s smart phone rang with a new text.

“What time will you be over, lover?” Sebastian heard a husky female voice ask.

“Just a call about some equipment,” the man quickly remarked and put down the phone. But parts of their patient’s brain were lighting up like the Blackpool illuminations. This was not expected, and everyone gathered round the screen to watch. The phone rang again with a new message.

“Will you be long?” Sebastian heard. The phone was immediately switched off.

“Well, you’d better tell her how long you’ll be,” piped up the patient.

In spite of the glaring evidence the technician declared: “I see nothing unusual in his brain. Take him back to his room, nurse.”

As they started wheeling him back, the sound of the irate technician could be heard coming from behind the closed door. “I told you not to ring me at work,” he was heard to say. The other staff looked at each other knowingly and quietly walked down the corridor.

Sebastian was released from the mental hospital the following morning and went back to work the following day. By now, word about his strange condition was getting around, and that evening there was a knock on his door. Two official-looking men stood there, and after inviting them in, they took off their overcoats to reveal their military uniform beneath.

“We have reason to believe that you can pick up radio-waves in your brain,” one of them said. “Exactly how do you do it?”

Sebastian shook his head.

“You do realise that you are a danger to national security,” the other one added. “If you can decipher secret messages from smart phones and laptop computers you could be used by agents from hostile governments.”

All of this went over the head of Sebastian who regarded anywhere more than 5 miles away to be part of a foreign country.

“If you tell us how you do it, you will not come to any harm,” the first man said menacingly.

“I don’t have any idea. It must be something to do with the sheep,” Sebastian uttered.

“Are you saying that the sheep can send you messages which you understand?”

“Oh, I fully understand what they say. It’s all part of my job.”

“You mean the sheep can text... no, that’s ridiculous,” the second man interrupted.

“But can they use a laptop?” the other man said, without thinking.

“My 2-year old can use a smart phone,” the first man admitted.

“But she’s not a sheep, is she?”

“Of course she’s not a sheep. I call her 'my little lamb', but that’s different.”

While this conversation was going on between the two men, Sebastian had made his way to the door, unnoticed by them and sneaked outside where he made his way to join the sheep in their field to get some sleep.

When he got back from the field the next evening the two men had gone. But they had left a note on his table. We will be back, it read.

Sure enough, when he went to work in the morning, he was discretely followed by the two men, still in their military uniforms.

From behind a rock, they observed Sebastian rounding up the sheep and taking them for their morning journey. It was true that he did know a lot about sheep by now - what they wanted, what mood they were in, what the weather was going to be like, the relationship between them all, and their birthdays. He soon got to recognise them individually by their fondness for certain places over others. There was the hedge - Reg, the gate - Kate, and the hillock - P.....You get the idea. He could also imagine what jobs each would be good at - barber, barista, barman, bath-attendant, bandit, ballet-dancer, no, that was stretching it a bit far. They were all different and did their own thing. It was only people who acted like, well, sheep!

How much they knew about him is debateable, except they all thought he was crazy, but at least he didn't snap at their heels like the sheepdog had done, and for that they were extremely grateful.

"I don't see any smart phones on any of the sheep," whispered one of the military officers to the other. "Maybe they are hidden in their wool somewhere."

After a day following the herd the men gave up and left Sebastian to it.

That evening, Sebastian had a visit from an advertising executive who brought along a briefcase full of bits of equipment.

"I'd like to do an experiment with you," he stated. "I'm going to send a subliminal message in a video from this laptop to this one. Now if you would kindly stand between them and tell me what the message is..."

The video was like a holiday movie with the message "I'd like a bacon sandwich for tea" subtly hidden within it. Sebastian refused to comply and ushered the man to the door.

His mother had got wise to these various visits and saw in them an opportunity to sell some of her own vodka. She set up a stall outside his door. Her intention was to wear her old habit in the hope of giving the sale some kind of religious significance. But when she tried putting on her former habit, she could not get into it after nearly 20 years of eating too much rich food and a sedentary existence. Her

husband saw what the problem was, and being slimmer than her, he offered to wear the habit in her place. Sebastian, in the meantime, was totally ignorant of all this.

The very next evening the military men returned. Seeing the vodka on the table by the door, their suspicions were aroused.

“You led us down a blind alley with that story about the sheep. We have investigated the sheep and none of them has a laptop or smart phone. Tell us the truth! What have you been up to lately, and who is your Russian connection?” the senior officer interrogated him. “And just to warn you, I shall be writing everything down that you tell us in this notebook.”

Sebastian told him that all he did everyday was minding his own business, by which he meant, herding the sheep. He didn't know what they were talking about concerning a Russian connection.

“You know perfectly well,” retorted the second officer. “There is a person in a nun's costume outside the door who offered us some vodka.”

Sebastian looked outside the door and was taken aback to see his father in the habit.

“Who would like some vodka?” his father called through the open door to the two men.

“You're not a real nun!” exclaimed one of them.

“Yes, I am,” came back the reply. “I am Father, I mean, Mother Superior.”

“Then where is your convent?” asked the officer.

Staring at the bottle of vodka in his hand, Sebastian's father came up promptly with the answer: “Moscow”.

“You have a very low voice for a Mother Superior,” the other officer observed.

“I am the world's first trans-Mother Superior,” was the reply.

“How did you get here from Moscow?” the first officer questioned him. At that moment his eye came to rest on the remains of the hang-glider under the bed. “Did you perhaps fly here with that?”

“I've never flown anywhere in my life.” Sebastian's father stated. “That belongs to my son.”

They all looked around to see Sebastian, but he was nowhere to be seen. He was in another room, telephoning the mental hospital.

“Please can you send someone around here, quick,” he whispered. There are two men here in military uniforms who are claiming that my father is the Mother Superior of a convent in Moscow and arrived here on a hang-glider.”

The distraction enabled Sebastian's father time to change into his own clothes while the men from the military downed yet another glass of vodka. It was all too much for them. The van from the mental hospital arrived soon afterwards. The driver read the men's notebook and took them away with hardly a word being said.

Half an hour later, there was a telephone call from the hospital to say that the military men were in fact Russian espionage agents, and they had now been taken away by the police.

Sebastian's problem, or *radiowavus interruptus* as it became labelled in medical textbooks, cleared up in a matter of months, thanks to regular doses of paracetamol. What's more, coming into contact with other people in recent times and hearing their conversations on their smart phones had made him much more talkative and sociable. When the job of being a shepherd came to an end, he applied for the position of headmaster of the school and was given the job without any hesitation.

To everyone's surprise when his mother heard the news, she finally broke her silence and was the first to congratulate him.

"And by the way," she added. "This is not your real father, or I don't think it is. Your real father is the farmer you used to work for. He used to come to the convent regularly to supply us with sloe berries. The man you thought was your father only came once to check the books and look things over."

She was obviously lying, but no-one felt inclined to argue with her, particularly as sales of her vodka were booming.

MAN'S WORST ENEMY

"Doctor, I've looked it up online and I can tell you straight. I've got benevolent prostrate enlargement," Albert declared.

"It's not benevolent..." the doctor said, clearly irritated.

"You're telling me it isn't," Albert interrupted. "Every night I have to get up at least four times, and when you get the urge to go you can't hang around. It's quite a way from our bedroom to the loo, past a couple of spare bedrooms, down a few stairs, and then to the end of the landing. By the time you get there, you've already done half of it on the carpet."

"That's not a very convenient set-up for you," sympathised the doctor. "But at least your pyjamas will absorb it."

"I don't wear them. Not since I tripped up over one of the legs some years ago. And what's more I have to go in the dark as I don't want to wake up my wife if I switch on a light."

"That sounds rather dangerous to me."

"Oh, I've got used to it. Put the light on, and my wife would wake up and she'd start up: "Did you remember to put the dustbin out? Have you fed the cat? When are you going to start painting the kitchen?" And on it goes. It's all right for her. She hardly ever needs to get up and go in the night, and besides she uses a cork - her nightcap, as she calls it."

"You don't mean it?"

"It's a great help. Gives her peace of mind, even if the pressure can build up behind it sometimes."

"I don't think I could recommend that. Anyway, you were saying that when you've gone to the loo without any clothes on in the dark, you tend to spill some of it on the way there. What do you do about that?"

"No problem. I retrace my steps and mop it up as I go, except that in the dark I can't see it, and I have to go by smell, so I get on my hands and knees and use my nose."

"How revolting!"

"I've got the knack of it now. But there are times when things have gone a bit astray. The other day, for instance, our cat had a urinary track inflection and couldn't get outside quick enough. Somehow the trails got mixed up, and I ended up with my head wedged in the cat-flap in the kitchen. The worst time though was last Christmas when my wife's elderly sister was staying with us. She must have been woken up by hearing me shuffling back from the loo as I was cleaning up after me. She suddenly came out of

the side bedroom and next thing I knew, the end of her walking stick was jabbing me in the buttocks. That made me loose balance and fall down flat onto the wet carpet. There I was, lying prostate. She stumbled over me, and the shock of it all made her wet herself. The commotion woke up my wife, and I could hear a loud pop like a cork coming out of a Champagne bottle. We had to laugh about it afterwards, well, a long time afterwards, mind you"

The doctor made a mental note not to visit his house in the future, if he could avoid it.

"Well, I'll give you a prescription for some pills which will help," said the doctor. They were for sleeping pills. He bade him farewell: it was already time for the next patient.

Albert diligently took the pills. They did help somewhat, and cut down on his night visits, but trips to the toilet were still a regular daytime experience for him. As long as he was at home, he managed fine, but he had a lot of trouble when he was driving around. As a nearly-retired delivery driver for a firm dealing with spare car parts, he had to go between various towns in the area and sometimes even further afield. No motorways connected these places, so he had to use other roads. They were still busy though, and it was all in a heavily built-up area.

Years ago, there were several public conveniences in every town, and there was always an odd chance you could park nearby. But then something happened and nearly all of them were converted into flower-shops, newsagents and ice cream kiosks with such twee names as *P is for Peony*, *The Wee Shoppe* and *Passing Wafers*.

He wrote to the local council about it, but was told that they had to close them because of vandalism. But he regarded it as a far worse act of vandalism closing them down.

There were times when he turned up at what he thought was still a going-concern only to find that it was either boarded up or being used for another purpose. When you've got your mind set on doing something, it is not easy to just put it out of your mind. This created a lot of agony for him, not to mention a wet floor in his van. The customers he was delivering to sometimes did notice their spare parts did not exactly smell very fragrant, and he had to make up stories about the new packaging they now used. He could not go on like this to be sure.

While loading up the odd assortment of hoses, fuel-tanks and clips one day, he had a brainwave. If you put that into that, add this and attach it with this thingy, you could actually build a sort of portaloos in the van, he thought. But he didn't want to run before he could walk, so his first prototype would be

very simple. Just like the old-fashioned toilets in trains, he would empty the contents on the road as he was moving along. Of course, he would refrain from using it when stationary in a town which could be embarrassing and a bit of a give-away.

To make this work, he would just need a hose going from seat-level to the floor with a knob he could pull to open a latch and empty out the contents. The flap on the floor of the van proved easy to put into place, and a hand-operated lever to open it was installed without difficulty. To be accessible it was placed close beside his left leg.

The more difficult part was the other end. Here he needed an attachment which did not require him being able to see it, once he had unzipped his trousers. Being of the opinion that he was much larger in that region than in fact he was, he initially made this end far too big, with the result that it slipped off when he was underway, and he ended up wetting his pants.

There was no easy way in which he could insert himself securely into the hose while driving. The only solution was for him to put it on before he got underway, so that when the urge took him, he was already prepared. To make a comfortable water-tight fit, he would have to wrap a sponge around his nether region and velcro it into place. For decency's sake in case the passengers on the upper deck of a bus were to pass him, he would have to place the insert end of the hose into his trousers and do up his zip as far as it would go, which proved to be not very far.

A trial run was uneventful - he simply did not feel the need to go. I hope this isn't going to be a wasted effort, he thought.

It was during another trial run that things went a bit askew. Coming to a stop at a set of traffic lights on his way down a hill, he meant to apply his handbrake, but pulled the lever which emptied the hose instead. His van crept forwards at the same time as a pool of liquid washed all over the road. His van skidded from side to side and came to rest in the hole the workmen were digging. By instinct he opened the car door to get out and very nearly ruptured himself. A fire engine had to extricate him from his van before an ambulance took him to hospital. Fortunately, he was still intact, but found he had grown several inches in length.

When the pain finally subsided in a few months' time, he decided to make a change to the design and added a holding tank. This rendered the lever unnecessary. The whole thing worked perfectly, and his confidence returned. He always remembered to zip himself in before he set off, and to unzip himself when he arrived at his destination. He didn't always remember to do his zip up afterwards, but a few stares and polite coughs were nothing compared to what he had to go through before he had made himself this amazing water feature.

Age was catching up with him fast, and it was not long afterwards that he had to retire. The van he had got used to driving had to be returned, and he was without any transport of his own.

Walking is a stimulating exercise, but unfortunately it stimulates certain organs of the body you wish would not be stimulated. On his walks around town, he got used to making mental notes of landmarks where he could "unburden" himself if necessary - road-side trees, plants and bushes, drains, telegraph poles - all places which never caught the sun and were in permanent shadow.

All of this went swimmingly, but there was a snag to it. After a while, he associated such places in his mind with suitable venues for relieving himself. Even if he had passed his favourite willow tree and helped to water it, he still had enough in reserve to irrigate the sweet peas a little further on, and then do the same in the drain, and so on down the road. Many a dog gave him a knowing look as he did his business and encouraged him by wagging their tails.

Near the shops was a pub and pubs mean loos to many people.

"Come on in and wet your whistle," a friend on his called out as he was passing it one day.

"It's not my whistle I'm worried about," he retorted.

There was a sign in big letters by the toilets: *For use by customers only*. Albert gave it some consideration but didn't really see the point. Having a drink in order to go to the toilet would merely be substituting the contents of his bladder for other contents, so he gave it a miss.

He was getting very fed up with having to spend so many pennies and made another appointment to see the doctor.

"I need to give you an examination," the doctor explained to him, "to see what I can find," at which he beckoned Albert to the couch and told him to take down his trousers and underpants.

"Would you like a chaperone?" he asked.

"No thanks," said Albert. "I've already eaten."

Without pausing for the answer, the doctor ordered him to lie on his side facing away from him. "This will only take a few moments," he added reassuringly.

While Albert was examining a chart on the wall in front of him, he suddenly felt a gloved finger being inserted into his bottom. The muscles around it automatically tensed up and gripped the finger tightly.

"Just relax," said the doctor.

But this was no relaxing matter. The doctor pulled and pulled, and with much effort his hand came away leaving the rubber glove still inside. However much effort he put into retrieving it, it would not

budge.

"I think I will need some help," the doctor panted, and left him there. No colleagues of his were available, so he wandered into the reception area. A very good-looking blond receptionist told him that she once did some training in midwifery but gave up because she didn't like children. She may be able to help. They returned to the doctor's room where there was no change in the circumstances. They both grabbed hold of the bottom of the glove and yanked as hard as possible, but it just stayed put.

"Look, you've got much smaller hands than me," observed the doctor. "Try putting your hand into the glove and levering it out."

She did as she was bid but nothing moved.

Albert was getting very fed up with this and was also getting rather peckish. He surreptitiously took a packet of mixed nuts out of his pocket and swallowed a few of them whole.

The receptionist continued with her struggle while the doctor encouraged her by shouting: "In. Out. In. Out. Shake it all about".

There was a sudden explosion as Albert passed wind. The glove in the receptionist's hand shot out, causing her to fall backwards on to the floor.

"Did you find anything?" Albert asked.

"There's something in there about the size of a walnut, " chipped in the receptionist.

"That was quick!" exclaimed Albert, and noticing the receptionist face-on, he quickly tried to regain his dignity by pulling up his trousers.

"That's his prostate gland," explained the doctor and he prescribed some pills for it. He offered the glove to the receptionist for a souvenir, but she turned his offer down. She had enjoyed herself though and went back to her desk with a spring in her step. She had not joined the National Health Service to sit behind a desk all day making appointments for people but to get some hands-on experience. She had been finally been immersed in the deep end and was itching to continue.

Going to the shops was now proving to be a long-drawn out experience. In both directions he felt obliged to stop at all of the landmarks. Coming back home, encumbered with shopping it was more difficult to avoid accidentally wetting things as he had to use just one hand. He was not alone and often had to wait in a queue behind a number of dogs who had the same idea as him.

He cut down considerably on the number of liquids he consumed but was still confused that there was still seemingly more coming out than going in. That meant that although he still had the same number of urges to go, he often had to stand there without anything happening. On one particular day, he was

walking home, having just eaten a jam doughnut he had bought at the bakers, and had not realised that a blob of strawberry jam had got stuck on his fingers. Coming up to one of his favourite trees he made his customary stop to relieve himself. Looking down he noticed that he was coated in jam and sugar. Just as he was wiping it off with his handkerchief, a woman spotted him and called the police.

He was officially investigated but no charges were brought as there were no other witnesses, and the policeman admitted that he suffered from the same problem as Albert.

At home he placed an armchair outside the toilet and spent most of the day there. His wife ruled out the idea of him using a hose to connect himself to the loo.

“I also have to go at times too,” she stated, “and I’m not going to shove your thing out of the way each time.”

Ridiculous as his suggestion seemed, it did give her the idea of him getting a catheter. She asked about this at the surgery, and a few days later a letter came giving him an appointment at the nearest Weebeing Clinic for him to have a catheter inserted. The nurse who was to do the job turned out to be the former receptionist at the surgery. Her exciting experience on the day that she saw him gave her fresh encouragement to become more active in surgical procedures.

“I just love urine,” she said in her application letter for employment at the clinic. The urologist also just happened to be her boyfriend. He had the utmost faith in her (otherwise she would have left him) and he gave her the responsibility of carrying out this particular insertion.

Albert was reluctant in having a catheter fitted. “It’s against my religion,” he stated.

“Where in the bible does it say you can’t have one?” the nurse asked.

“The Book of McDonald chapter 4, verse 17,” he answered her.

She disappeared a while and came back to say: “I can’t find the book of McDonald in the bible. What does the verse say?”

“Thou shalt go where others go without any hindrance. Let no obstacle stand between you and your goal,” he quoted.

He had come across this on an American evangelical church website. The blurb had actually continued – *Send \$100 now for your own personal booklet on securing your very own place in heaven.* He had been inspired by this message and had taken it to heart.

She looked suitably impressed. She went off again and announced that her supervisor had told her to carry on regardless.

She washed her hands, had a thought and then washed his for good measure. Then picking up the end

of the catheter tried to insert it.

“It’s far too big. It’s never going to fit,” she despaired, after struggling with it.

“Maybe you ought to try the other end,” he suggested.

He flinched as she managed to get the end in and then pushed the tubing up. So much of it went up that she kept checking that it wasn’t emerging from his mouth. Then it came to an abrupt halt.

“Now we’ll just attach this bag to your leg. Which leg would you prefer?”

“Well if you’re going to, you might as well put one on both legs. I might need them.”

She had to go away and find a special valve which enabled both bags to be used. When all was done, he pulled up his trousers and attempted to sit down...but it was not easy sitting on two bags, even if they were still fairly empty. He removed his trousers again and she repositioned the bags at the sides of his legs. Fully equipped he left the clinic and walked home. At each of his watering-holes he let a dribble take place, but felt elated that he could still keep on walking and not have to expose himself.

A few days later he ran into his wife’s sister on the way back from the shops.

“You’ve put on a bit of weight since I saw you last,” she commented. “Your legs look as if they’ll hardly get into your trousers. Have you been on the booze lately? I did warn my sister about you, but she wouldn’t listen.”

He shook his head and decided to ignore her rude comments.

“And you look really flushed,” she continued. “At your age you have to take things easy.”

As they walked back home together, he let nature take its course, instead of answering her caustic remarks. It gave him a lot of satisfaction. This was the consolation prize for the discomfort he felt.

There were indeed good and bad things about having a catheter. On the negative side, it was very messy emptying the bags, and as they were quite heavy when full, they required a lot of effort to hold. Sometimes his wife had to help him lift them, something she disliked doing. But the thought of dropping them on to her clean floor gave her added strength.

"They didn't mention emptying catheter bags in the marriage service - *to have and to hold and to empty you-know what.*" she complained.

"That's because none of the disciples ever had a problem with his prostrate...as far as we know," said Albert.

"Noah did, and look what happened to him," came the reply.

The constant uncomfortable feeling down below played on Albert's mind. Even when he was watching football on the television, he was preoccupied in wondering when and where the players had

to go to spend a penny. Perhaps when the camera is not on them, they are all at it all over the pitch. At least wearing shorts makes life easier for them, he thought.

On the positive side, he was now able to walk to the shops and back without feeling the attraction of the different watering-places he had found. He was also able to travel on the bus again and visit friends' houses without having to constantly ask to be excused. There are limits to the number of euphemisms you can use, he discovered.

"Aye lad," someone had once said to him. "You've washed your hands, gone to the bathroom, visited the little room, seen a man about a dog, gone to water your horse, pointed Percy at the porcelain, shaken hands with the vicar, trained Thomas on the terracotta, and spoken to Grandma slowly. Why don't you just go for a piddle and be done with it."

At last with a catheter he could sit quietly in his seat without getting up every few minutes.

So it was that one evening, he and his wife were visiting an old friend, and he was able to indulge in his favourite topic of conversation - toilets through the ages. The friend's cat was curled up in his lap fast asleep, when Albert got carried away with excitement and started gesticulating. This woke the cat up, and it thought that it was time for a game. It pounced on his leg and stuck out its claws. The more Albert did to restrain it, the more playful the cat became. A dribble appeared on his trouser leg above where one of the bags was placed. The cat's hind legs penetrated the bag on the other leg soon afterwards. The dribbles grew in intensity and turned into rivers which ran on to the carpet. Albert made his excuses and quickly left the house, followed by his wife, who was desperately trying to make apologies. But the damage had been done.

A hefty bill for cleaning the friend's carpet arrived on his doormat a few days later with a handwritten note forbidding him to ever visit them again. He yanked out the catheter and dispensed of it in the dustbin.

"There's only one thing left I can do for you," said the doctor," and that is for you to have the operation."

Albert was persuaded that he had no choice but to have it done. He was anaesthetised and laid out face-down on the operating table. The surgeons decided to give him a rectal examination first to warm up, before doing the more complicated procedure.

When they delved into the area in question, one of them uttered a cry of surprise:

"What's this?" he said. "It looks like a finger off a rubber glove, and there's something inside it. Looks like an engagement ring."

"I recognise that ring," said the other. "I wonder how that got there."

The operation to shave a bit off his prostate went very smoothly with no problems at all after that. Albert came to, had a drink, and after recuperating for a few hours, he left the hospital, very pleased with the outcome. It was the happiest time in his life. Isn't life wonderful, he murmured to himself. On crossing the road, he was knocked down by a van delivering spare parts for vehicles. He never got up.

His funeral service was a sad occasion attended by only a few of his old friends, his wife, and her sister.

The music his wife chose reflected his true passion in life: *Bridge over Troubled Waters* and *The Rivers of Babylon*, and the vicar spoke movingly of Albert's heroic battle against his bladder. On the headstone of his grave the epitaph read *Wee shall overcome*, a typographical error by the mason, which was left to stand.

Today, a willow-tree stands beside his grave. It is admired by many who visit the graveyard, particularly by all the dogs from the area who visit the site regularly. Albert would have appreciated that, even though he himself would have no need of it. It was his legacy to future generations.

If these matters concern you, there is an organisation called the British Toilet Association (www.btalooos.co.uk) which is campaigning to stop the closure of public conveniences and to promote new better equipped ones.

CECIL'S DIARY *

Age 6 months

From what a little bird told me, I think it was probably a sparrow, I was borne about a hundred yards from my mother. It was quite a windy October day, and my acorn ended up some distance away from all my acorn siblings. I didn't stay there long though before a young squirrel picked me up and carried me off to this spot. At the time there was a bit of a ditch here which used to trap fallen leaves in it, and I was deposited under one of those and left.

The squirrel had been collecting up acorns all day long and secreting them in various places. I think I must have been the very first one he hid, and for several days afterwards he continued to store up acorns before the nasty weather set in. Well, nasty for him, but ideal for me. I needed to chill out.

Winter came and when Spring arrived, he still had not returned, so I was beginning to think I'd got away with it. But then one day he turned up along with his mother who was fussing at him for having such a poor memory. By this time I had begun to self-germinate, and he took one look at me and a look of disgust came over his face.

"What's that?" he asked his mother pointing at my bottom.

"That's his root," she replied, "and those on the top are some very tasty baby shoots."

"I can't eat those!" he cried. "I don't like greens. At squirrel-school we only eat acorn-burgers and chips if anyone can find any in the litter baskets near the shops."

"You should eat your greens or you won't be healthy. But I see I'm wasting my time," she sighed, and with that they scurried off.

I was very proud of my little leaves. They made me feel really grown up, although I can't have been more than a foot high. Unfortunately, one day a rabbit took a shine to my leaves and was starting to eat one when a sudden noise startled it and it bounded off. Having half a leaf eaten made me feel not quite 100 percent. But in time with more sun and more rain I got over it and grew some more leaves and didn't even notice any more how disfigured I had become.

Age 1 year

I seem to have escaped any more rabbits. I think they must have had something else on their mind. Grown much taller now. Every now and again I feel an itch on my stem and a swelling appears. This gets bigger and bigger and turns into what I can only describe as a twig. I wonder if I should see a pedia-tree-cian about it. Second thought, I don't know how I could actually get to see him. At least I seem to be in

a stable condition at present.

I have a much worse problem, however. My precious green leaves are turning colour in this cooler weather - yellow and then brown, and before you can say *Quercus Petraea* they've fallen on the ground. It's blooming cold standing her on this hill without any leaves on, believe you me! And also, quite embarrassing! The conifer trees look down on me and laugh. It's alright for them. They're still covered up.

Another thing, I'm starting to feel quite sleepy. Each day I get more and more drowsy. Yawn. I could do with a good long sleep. Maybe that's just what I'll do.

Age 3 years

A starling who often visits me told me fatigue is very common in oak trees, indeed in all deciduous trees, whatever they are. All of them shed leaves and have a rest over the winter, it said. Makes me wonder if human beings also take off their clothes and sleep together when it gets cold. I expect so.

Talking of the starling, I do wish it would refrain from treating my branches as a trampoline. It makes me feel quite dizzy.

Notice I said "branches". Yes, I'm just shooting up and branching out now. Not many other trees about, so I've got a lot of room to myself. I need my own space more than ever. This photosynthesizing lark is easy when you get the knack of it. I showed off how it's done to a worm yesterday, and try as he might he could not go green. Not trying hard enough I expect.

Age 5 years

I have a new neighbour.

"Hi," she said: "My name's Pendunculate, but you can call me Penny."

Only a wee sapling, but nice company for me. She told me that some children had deliberately put her here as part of their nature studies. That's strange: I thought human beings only chopped us down. Maybe she is too young for that. My grandfather went on to hold the roof up in the local pub until he got woodworm and had to be replaced with a bit of plastic - what an indignity! His uncle went on many world cruises. He had no choice - the ship would have sunk without him. I expect I'll end up as a rocking chair or bookcase or kitchen cupboards.

Anyway, Penny's a bit different from me, not that I'm racist, but her stalks don't seem the same as mine, but I can live with that.

I say "she", but like me and my parents she is intersexual, both male and female, but that doesn't stop me from fancying her. I am well and truly intersex. It's all the rage in humans I understand.

Age 10 years

Some beetles have moved in with me. I was a bit dubious at first, but came to the conclusion that if they scratch my bark...I'll give them a home. At least they are more amenable than the deer who came by the other day. He rubbed his antlers against me and gave me bad bark-ache. Left a nasty gash. Nothing you can do about it apparently - it will heal itself, unless it kills you first.

Having trouble with my top branches. I don't know which one will grow up the highest. Maybe I have a split personality. Have compromised by letting some of the others grow sideways on. My girth is expanding rapidly. Penny said I was getting fat by drinking too much. If only...

I seem to have become a landing-spot for a number of different birds now. When it's raining they perch all over me. I've had blue tits, robins and bullfinches. They're only small and I can cope with that. But when it comes to an owl, blackbird or crow it's a bit much. Don't mention the word thrush – not nice at all. Gets me down sometimes, but I do like their singing. Some of the other things they do are not so pleasant. No way I can clean it off.

Age 15 years

I noticed yesterday that on the ground around my trunk there is a patch of fungi. I think I can feel it underground around my roots too. Not complaining. Keeps them warm at night.

Wonder if I can connect up with Penny. She's not been too well lately. Be nice if I could send her something sweet like a bit of sugar to give her a bit more energy. She's not really used to this sandy soil.

Am also getting a coating of moss and lichens on my trunk. I guess this is all part of reaching puberty. This also attracts certain insects to me. Nice to be popular, just as long as they don't start boring holes in me.

My sap is definitely rising. Happens to all adolescents I believe. Hope it is not too noticeable.

Age 25 years

Penny and I are both pregnant! We have both been blessed with some baby acorns. As they say, I am blooming. I don't think it is anything to do with what we've been doing with our roots together. We do have a lot of empa-tree, that's for sure. I think it's more a question of the birds and bees and what they get up to.

Not sure what will happen to our little ones yet. At the moment they're still hanging around. Have to wait until next Spring to see if any of them survive.

It might be coincidence but I now have a mistletoe growing up my trunk.

Age 50 years

Life is not easy for my acorns. As soon as they drop off, squirrels appear from nowhere and make off with them. So, I may have descendants all over the place. It's far more likely that I've just helped fatten

up the squirrels. If that isn't bad enough, a local farmer has put some pigs in the field which have a voracious appetite for acorns. This is nothing short of a massacre. I should form a protest group but marching in a demonstration just doesn't seem possible.

On a more positive note, I have become the venue for a nest. Really stirs my maternal and paternal instinct. Mother and chicks are doing well but she does sometimes complain when I sway about in the wind. Well, what am I to do about that? Makes me feel at times like an airport but without any toilet facilities.

There are no cats in the immediate area so the birds should be safe. Besides, I am not easy for a cat to climb up. Wish I could say the same about young boys. I do hate it when they clamber all over me and break off some of my twigs. That really hurts. Fortunately, it doesn't happen that much, as children are too busy looking at their smart phones to even notice a tree.

Age 100 years

I think I am a father/mother at last. There is a sapling not far away from me and I recognise the family resemblance. Also got some of her mother/father's looks. Our first little hybrid. I am thrilled! Can't wait for him/her to grow up and become a father/mother him/herself and give us our first grandson/granddaughter.

Age 300 years

Am getting a lot of middle-age spread. Pity it's not possible to sit down sometimes: it does get tiring having to stand all the time, especially in the wet and windy weather. I've been told about some very old oak trees which have pollards to keep the heavy branches up. That would be a real tree treat. Not quite at that stage yet, thank goodness.

I've lost count of the number of insects and other wildlife that I have to support. I'm not registered with social services and don't get any benefits. I just do it because I don't have a choice. Not that I'm complaining. It would be very lonely without them. I draw the line at woodpeckers though.

Age 700 years

Old age has crept up on me. I am now infertile would you believe. I can no longer produce any acorns. I've had to bow out of that sort of thing now. To tell you the truth it was all getting a bit much. They may have to put me down for a care home – as an armchair I expect.

I don't know whether it is because of my age or the weather but of late I have noticed that my leaves are drooping more these days. We have had very little rain for some years, and I have been getting very thirsty. My poor roots are digging down even further but can't find much in the way of water. Then all of a sudden, we have torrents of rain for months on end, and my roots get nearly waterlogged, even up here in this soil. I don't like this change in the weather one bit. It's not what I'm used to.

1000 years

Well, I never expected to reach this grand old age, whatever it is. The other tree I was very fond of (wish I could remember her name) has been felled to make way for a new road. They've also built a lot of new houses around me which are using up a lot of the water. It's not the same here anymore – far noisier and with a lot more pollution and the temperature has gone up and up. Unbearable at times.

Quite a few of my branches have broken off, and my leaves have lost their sheen. My bark is weather-beaten and gnarled. I'm still home to hundreds of other birds and insects. And badgers, rabbits and foxes still come to see me, but I can no longer welcome them as I used to be able to do.

Maybe tomorrow the chain-saws will come for me. Or maybe it will be the day after.

**Cecil pronounced Sessile*

THE SHOOTZER

Clarence Weewilly Junior was filling his tank at the gas station. It was a second-hand Sherman which was in good working condition. Well, the engine was. He was not so sure about the gun, but he hoped he would soon find out. It only had about a gallon of gasoline left in it, and he was filling it up with another 167 gallons. At least there was no shortage of gasoline in Texas. He hoped that the gas station in Shootzville was well-stocked up.

He had bought this latest acquisition from a store which sold vintage military stock called *Tanks for the Memory*. The Second Amendment did not forbid anyone from owning a tank, in fact it positively encouraged people to arm themselves, which is precisely what he wanted to do. He had always liked things that go BANG and finding a suitable target for the bang just seemed second-nature to him.

As a toddler, he remembered his mother pointing at his father and saying:

"Tha's yer pah. Say howdy to him."

"Howdy pah," he would say, pointing at him.

"And tha's yer big sister, Trishy. Now say howdy to her too."

His 20-year old sister's real name was Patricia, shortened to Trishy as there were several other Pats in the family.

"Howdy big Titty," he responded and pointed at her. Everyone laughed... except Tricia.

It's rude to point at people, his parents frequently told him. But knowing it was wrong made him more determined to do it. After all, he had often seen his parents do it. After watching some Westerns on the television, he soon learned that pointing at people, while saying *Bang*, was rather like shooting a gun, which all his favourite cowboys did so much of the time. Except that at his age, some words were not easy to say. The classic example of this was one day when Aunt Myrtle came by the house and was sitting on the settee talking to his parents. Clarence had been watching a Western and was saying "Gang gang!" over and over again.

"It ain't Gang, it's Bang," said his mother.

Clarence turned around and pointing to Aunt Myrtle shouted: "Gang Bang". Everyone laughed...except Aunt Myrtle.

Using his fingers was all well and good, but as he grew older, he longed to have a proper gun, just like on television. At the department store they found a water pistol. It didn't go bang, but it did spray

out water which was a bonus. Within a short time, he managed to soak a lot of the furniture inside the house and was told only to use his water pistol outside. The trees in the backyard were soon doused in water, but this merely looked as if there had been a heavy shower. He looked for something more interesting than water to use.

His father had recently been painting the fence and had left a tin of white paint around, which was very handy for Clarence to get find. He filled up the water pistol with the paint and took up a position next to the road. There were several cars parked along it, and he sprayed each of them in turn with lots of squiggles before the paint ran out. His mother saw he had come back in a terrible mess and had scolded him before washing the paint off him and sending him to bed. Better not say anything about this to anyone else, she thought, as we could land up in deep trouble.

That week there was a big write-up in the local paper about the white marks on so many cars. It was put down to bird droppings. It was not long before the City council passed a law encouraging everyone to shoot down any birds which flew overhead to prevent damage to automobiles.

The water pistol was taken from him and buried in the yard, far from prying eyes. This left a big gap in Clarence's toy collection, and he made a big fuss about it until he was taken back to the department store. On the way, there were lots of billboards advertising the latest movies. Each of them showed a man, or sometimes a woman, holding a gun and looking very heroic.

"Them there are the good guys," his father told him. Naturally enough good guys have to have guns, is how he interpreted this.

The department store did not have anything which interested Clarence, but a school-friend of his he met up with the next day said that he had an old gun he didn't want anymore and swapped it with Clarence for some marijuana his father had stashed away. It was a cap-gun which made a big bang when it was fired and produced a whisp of smoke from the end of the barrel. Clarence fell in love with it immediately and went home and "shot" his mother and father over and over again. They were of course obliged to look as if they had actually been shot – all part of the fun.

"Yer gotta die properly," he said to them. "Y'all shoot me with mah gun an' Ah'l show y'all how to do it." He put his hand on his chest, and with a pained expression managed to say "Ugh!" before falling to the ground and lying still. It looked so realistic that his mother got quite worried and nearly called the ambulance.

"Lordy be! Y'all should be in the movies," his father said. "Y'all could make a reeal fortune."

His mother agreed: "Y'all could be a good or a baad guy." He relished this praise.

The cap-gun proved to be a big hit with Clarence, especially as the gun looked like a real one. He contemplated trying to hold up a bank, but changed his mind when he saw the size of the bank manager

(who also carried a very large gun).

Like many Americans in rural areas, his father had his own arsenal of weapons which he kept in the basement.

"Ah'm fixin' t' go huntin' tomorra. Wanna come along, Junior?" he asked his son.

"Shor thayng," came the reply.

"Ah got a perdy li'l rifle yer could use. But it'll hurt yer shoulder reeal bad if yer don't hold it right."

"What yer huntin' fer?" Clarence said. "'roun' here, ain't no deer, no boar, no 'gators, no..."

"How d'yer know if yer don' go huntin' fer 'em," interrupted his father.

So, at 6am the next morning, they got in his father's pick-up truck and went off-road. Clarence aimed his rifle at everything he could see, itching to use it.

"Hold own thayre," said his father. "Tha's a steer - you cain't shoot that! An' tha's a hog – now don't you go shootin' that!

An' that thayre's a rooster...Oops, better get outta here fast."

Clarence had fired the rife awkwardly and now his shoulder was paining him, as if someone had punched him hard on it.

Just then they saw a huge rattlesnake. It was a 4-foot western diamond-back rattler - a very venomous snake which seemed to be threatening them.

"Quick, shoot it!" shouted Clarence's father. But Clarence was still in agony and could not hold up the rifle.

His father snatched it from him and shot it. They took it back home for a trophy. Clarence saw how easy it was to kill a snake with a rifle. His shoulder took a time to heal, but the pain did not curb his enthusiasm from wanting to shoot with a real gun.

Not long after that there was a shooting in a care home for people with dementia in a city in Texas. Fortunately, no-one was killed but at the enquiry it was recommended that in future, all care-staff and residents should be armed to prevent it happening again.

Now that he knew where to find the hunting-rifle in the house, Clarence would often take it down from its fastening when his father was not around and play with it. In the back yard he lined up various objects, which included a watering can, a couple of different-sized flower pots and an assortment of other gardening items and used them as a shooting gallery. This was far more fun than studying for school. His father sometimes wondered how they all had bullet holes in them but assumed he had practised shooting at them himself in his younger years.

Clarence also liked to pretend he was a security guard, on occasions when his parents were attending the *Grow your own dope* classes. One particular night when "on patrol" outside the house, he heard sounds emanating from the front room. All the lights were out and thinking it was an intruder, he burst in and fired a bullet directly in front of him. There was a woman's scream, followed by a man's voice telling her to take cover. It turned out to be his sister, Trishy and her boyfriend who were "making out" on the settee. The bullet grazed her bare butt – not a life-threatening injury but a very uncomfortable one. She made a pact with her brother that she would not mention the shooting to their parents if he did not let on about what she had been up to. All the same, it did make life very uncomfortable for her whenever she attempted to sit down.

At the age of seventeen, Clarence enlisted in the army and was in seventh heaven. He was issued with his very own gun and was instructed how to use it when faced with the enemy, or anyone else.

In the army he learned that there were other parts of Texas that he had not known about, and other States besides Texas, although they were foreign countries as far as he was concerned. He was sent to an army base in Europe, which was just like being at home. The base had all the accoutrements of normal life – ten-pin bowling alleys, liquor stores and movie theatres. You could drive around the base and believe you were back in Texas. He did not see much of what life was like outside of the base, except for short spells when they went on military exercises. But apart from having a good time, smashing things up in specially designated areas, it was no different from being out in the scrub and coming home to plate-fulls of burgers with French fries and apple pie, washed down with cans of American Budweiser. In the years he spent in the army, he never got to speak to anyone who was not American and never got to see anywhere except the base and its surroundings.

One of the military exercises which took place at night, however, did not go quite as planned. They had all been issued with live ammunition to make it more realistic, even though they were instructed only to fire in the air. The whole company had been divided into two: the goodies and the baddies. The aim was for the baddies to capture a small town, which the goodies then had to recapture and plant a Stars and Stripes flag in the central square. The normal practice for this sort of exercise was to use some wrecked buildings with some additional cardboard cut-outs, on part of the base itself. On this occasion, though, the baddies were led by someone who had no experience of reading maps or following written directions. As a consequence, the baddies found their way to the neighbouring village, laid siege to it and locked up all the inhabitants in the buildings.

The goodies, led by Clarence, heard where the kerfuffle was coming from and attacked in order to retake the village. In the melee that followed, the goodies fired their rifles into the air causing large

sections of the church tower and the medieval town hall to fall to the ground, joined by sections of upper storey shutters and numerous chimney pots. At the height of the action, Clarence thrust the flag into the ground in front of the mayor's house and declared that the village was American and would always be so.

Fortunately, none of the village inhabitants were injured, except for their pride, but the whole episode created an international incident. The daily demonstrations against the base unnerved the soldiers, and no-one was allowed out without an armed guard. It was not long before the complete personnel were replaced by others, and everyone was demobbed and sent back to the States.

Back in Shootzville, Clarence opened a new fast food joint which he called *Weewillies*. It soon proved to be very popular and renown for serving the biggest burgers in town. As a veteran he had had no difficulty in getting hold of a sub-machinegun. Every night he left his house and headed out of town with it and hours later came back with a truck-load of raw meat.

"Tastes jus' like good ole Longhorn Steer," said a customer. "Cain't beat it."

Some people did complain about bits of shrapnel in the meat, but Clarence told them they were bits of grizzle and not to worry about it. After all, for their money they were getting 100% genuine US growth-hormone which everyone thought was great value.

At about this time there was another shooting incident somewhere in the States, and the National Gun Society lobbied the President to pass a law requiring weapons to be provided to all schools for defensive purposes. After that it was not unusual to find the Principal with a Kalashnikov behind his desk. It was also reported that many four-year old children were carrying handguns to pre-school, but they had to be concealed under their jeans or in their underpants.

Like many people Clarence was very concerned about protecting his property. It was legal to kill someone who might want to steal something of yours, so he looked around for some form of deterrence to anyone who might break in. At an antiques fair he came across just what he wanted - an old cannon with a number of cannon balls. He placed the cannon on his lawn and installed a tripwire nearby which rang a bell in his house. All he had to do then was to go outside and light the fuse. In one season alone, he managed to maim two mailmen and a pizza delivery driver and kill an assortment of cats and dogs, most of which ended up in his fast food joint.

As a devout Christian he attended church regularly and took along a rocket-launcher to help protect the congregation. The minister was extremely happy to see his concern for his fellow worshippers.

"Every one of us, like our good brother here, must defend our right to keep our Christian values," said the minister in one of his sermons. "Not like folks in other countries who allow themselves to be tempted by the devil. We shall indeed inherit the earth, but we must take up arms to protect our faith from other ungodly faiths. Peace be with you all."

For a long while Clarence felt very happy with life, but there was trouble brewing for him. A new president had been elected who had said some unsettling things about gun control. This did not challenge the Second Amendment in any way. However, there was a lot of talk about restricting automatic weapons, sawn-off shotguns and more stringent background checks. To add insult to injury, the maximum age for owning a cap-gun and water pistol would be put at 32 years of age. The National Gun Society was alarmed by this and doubled the amount of money they handed out to politicians of both parties.

"The gun is the emblem of America," they declared. "Without guns we would have to use bows and arrows. As a nation, we would never survive."

This message was placed on the front page of all the national and local newspapers.

The president was unswerving in her new policy, but it did not stand a chance of going through both houses as politicians of both parties did not agree with restrictions on water pistols. She therefore considered issuing it as an executive order to bypass this procedure.

This did not go down well. The Hell's Angels staged a cry-in; the Union of Porn Actors instructed their members to keep their clothes on; and the head of the Ku Klux Klan issued a strongly-worded statement. The National Gun Society appealed to Russia and China to help safeguard democracy in the USA. Iran offered to mediate in the dispute. And North Korea sent observers to ensure everything was above board.

It was while this febrile atmosphere was coming to a head that Clarence got into his Sherman tank and headed towards Washington DC. He had not reckoned on the fact that with a full tank of gasoline, he could only go about 120 miles. At least that was a good start, but the total distance was about 1,600 miles. But this was not a full picture, as he discovered that it was not legal to drive his tank on public roads. He would have to get there by going across country. He got out a map and drew a line on it which avoided all the roads, well, most of them. In some areas he would have to travel on the highway by night and hope he would not get caught.

It would take him a week or two to make the journey and he would have to refuel with gasoline about

thirteen times. That would work out very expensive, but it was a just cause, he felt.

The first part of the journey, the first field to be exact, posed no problems. He scaled the hedge at the end of the field without any difficulty. That was the beauty of travelling by tank, he thought. No-one was around, so he continued on his way churning up fields and destroying hedges and fences as he went. He was really enjoying this. The livestock he came across felt differently about it and kept well out of his way.

After a few hours the journey began to pall. Driving a tank was hard work and he was getting bruised being tossed about on his seat. An angry rancher at one point had come towards him, shaking his fist. Clarence had just enough time to change seats and point the tank's gun at him. The man stopped in his tracks and sped off as fast as he could and Clarence continued on his way, chuckling to himself.

At the end of the first day he stopped beside a stream, grabbed one of his packed half-pounders to eat and prepared to bed down for the night. He had been sweating profusely and decided to wash his clothes and hang them on the gun turret to dry. It was the sight of a naked man sitting beside a tank festooned with his clothing which attracted the attention of a female newspaper reporter in a car. She had stopped some distance away and was looking at him through binoculars. He waved at her, at which she drove off in alarm and returned with a highway patrol car half an hour later.

The cops approached him holding their guns in front of them.

"Watch out, he may have a concealed weapon," one of them warned the other.

"Ok, buster. Lie face down on the ground!" he shouted at Clarence.

He did as he was told.

"Where've you come from?" the cop asked.

"Shtzzzvlll," said Clarence, his mouth in a clump of grass.

"Wha'd he say?" said the other cop.

"Shz, or somethin' like that. It's gotta be in Mexico," the first cop said. "Where are the rest of you gringos? You come over here in huge crowds, we been told, ready to rape all our women and take all our jobs. Let's take a look in that tank of yours. I reckon there's a couple hundred in there at least."

They opened the hatch and disappeared for a few moments before coming out again shaking their heads in disbelief

"So, how'd you get over the wall?" the first cop asked Clarence.

The answer was totally incomprehensible.

"OK, sit up and answer the question, goddamit!"

"Ah don't know what wall you's talkin' 'bout. Ah'm from Shootzville in Texas."

"Shootzville? Is that the place with the Weewilly fast food joint? Best burgers around!"

“Yessir. Tha’s mah place.”

"Wowie, I jus' lurve burgers with all the fixins," chimed in the other cop, drooling heavily.

“Welcome, buddy,” said the first cop putting his gun away. "So, what can we do for you?"

Clarence explained that he was on his way to Washington DC to protest about the new gun controls and he needed some more fuel.

“Don’t worry ‘bout a thing,” said the cop. “We’ll get some gas for you and give you a lift there. We’ve got a big truck that can take you that-a-way.”

“What ‘bout mah tank?”

“No problem. I said we got a big truck. I mean big! This is Texas, remember. We’ll pick you up in the morning.”

Early next morning Clarence drove his tank as far as the nearest road where a huge transporter was waiting for him. He loaded his tank on the vehicle and they drove as far as the nearest filling station and then started on their journey.

“Are y’all from the police or the military?” he asked the driver.

“Neither,” he replied. “I just do this for fun and to earn a few bucks.” Clarence was going to ask how much he was going to charge him for the lift. But before he could get the words out of his mouth, the driver continued: “Of course, for you there’s no charge. None of us want any gun controls. It’s taking away our liberty.”

Clarence nodded whole-heartedly. “All of us Americans don’t want no gun controls,” he said.

On they travelled out of Texas into Arkansas, then Tennessee and Kentucky and into Virginia. By this time, word about the one-man tank protestor had spread, and crowds of well-wishers lined the streets of towns as they passed holding up signs like: *Guns not Government*, *Defend our Constitutional* and *We have the right to bare arms* (to which some wag had scribble) *and bare legs too*. As they passed, they caught sight of newspaper hoardings reporting another shooting here, a massacre there. Clarence and the driver were of the same opinion. We need more guns to stop them happening – the truth was obvious to them.

The driver was going to Norfolk, Virginia and dropped Clarence and his tank off at Richmond. From here it was a direct route along Interstate 95.

“Ah cain’t drive along thayre,” said Clarence “It ain’t legal.”

“Sure you can,” said the driver. No-one will stop you. They’ll all think we’re at war and keep well out of your way. But maybe you’d better change into your army fatigues in case of trouble.”

He dropped Clarence and his tank off at Bryan Park, about 5 miles north of town where he could spend the night. Just as long as he did not park on the grass, there were no restrictions on tanks. It was

very peaceful here, just the song of the birds to lull him into sleep. But this was not to his liking. He hated birds, and the silence was too much to bear. Unable to sleep, he got up in the early hours of the morning and went into the azalea garden for some target practice with his machinegun. That calmed his nerves considerably, and he was able to return to the tank and get some well-deserved sleep.

He arose at dawn and set off towards Interstate 95. It was only 75 miles to Dumfries – an easy jaunt in a car, but in a tank travelling at around 25 miles an hour, it took him much longer than the time he had expected.

Interstate 95 is one of the arteries of the east coast of the USA. It runs from Miami in Florida right up to the border crossing west of Woodstock in New Brunswick, Canada. As such it runs through the most populated region of the States which is reflected in the number of vehicles which use it. A tank travelling along it at such a slow speed was therefore liable to cause all sorts of tailbacks and result in many accidents involving impatient drivers. The highway police would normally have intervened but they had been tipped off by the Texas police about Clarence's mission and supporting his stance, they turned a blind eye to the trail of destruction left behind by the tank's progress. As far as the general public were concerned, many of them were convinced that a war between the US and Canada might be taking place. As patriotic citizens, they could not possibly have any objections to any inconvenience they had been put under.

When Clarence arrived at Dumfries, he drove into the Prince William Forest Park, very close to the town. The sheer beauty of the surroundings irritated him intensely. He had not come all this far to relax and feel at peace with the world. Maybe the following day when he would enter Washington DC it would put an end to this sense of calm and rile him up suitably. He hated the thought of another quiet night, so he tried to grab a bit of sleep in the daytime, lulled by the sounds of passing traffic and the chatter and clamour of tourists. He had made up his mind to set off in the wee hours of the night to avoid any disruption to his plans. Causing a traffic jam, and being stuck in one caused by someone else, were entirely different things.

At 1am, he cranked up the tank's engine and lowered himself down the hatch. Traffic was still heavy, even at this hour, but that was nothing compared to how busy it got when he reached Springfield almost 20 miles away. At the Intersection he took the I-395 which leads straight to the centre of Washington DC. He made slow progress on this final part of his journey, and although it was only some 14 miles or so, it took him a long time. By now, his mood was grim determination to see his mission through. With growing anger and with the belief that God was on his side, he did not let any disruptions get in his way. He sure was madder than a wet hen, as they say in Texas. Smashing into cars and pushing trucks out of

the way, he proceeded as fast as the tank could go, until he finally had made it to the South Lawn facing the White House, where he came to an abrupt stop.

It was at this point that he realised he had no idea what to do next. He looked for the shells for the tank gun, but there were none. He had also run out of ammunition for his machinegun back in the azalea garden in Bryan Park. He had no other weapons on him, not even a water pistol. Undeterred by this he stood on the top of the Sherman tank and shouted: “Madam President”, as he put his right hand over his heart. “We wanna have our pistols back.”

The president had heard all the commotion and had come outside to see what was going on.

“What did he say?” she asked an aide.

“Something about wanting something or other.”

“Maybe he wants to go to the restroom. Why can’t he find a tree like everyone else. Ask him again what he wants.”

“Ah sayd we wanna have our guns.” Clarence shouted.

“Look, it’s no good,” said the president. I still can’t hear him. Ask him to come here and say it.”

The aide did so, but Clarence refused to leave his tank. A crowd was beginning to form now, and a number of bodyguards were looking on with a worried expression. No-one had ever done this before and they were confused about what to do. A short time afterwards one of them took a megaphone up to Clarence.

“We need our pistols, our revolvers 'n' our rifles,” stated Clarence. “You cain’t take ‘em away from us.”

Now able to hear him, the president, using a megaphone of her own, replied that she had not taken away any of his guns. She was just trying to stop people like him from using them. She then entered the White House and the vice-president came out in her place.

“We wanna have our guns so we can...er, kill thaings,” said Clarence raising his voice.

“Have you anything in mind that you want to kill?” said the vice-president calmly.

“Anythaing, anybody, and anyone who’s goin’ to stop us doin’ jus’ that,” yelled Clarence.

“That’s all very well but that’s what we pay our armed forces to do,” replied the vice-president.

“But it says in the Second Amendment,” said Clarence solemnly and again put his hand on his heart “that we all have a right to bayer arms. We demand our rights.”

“What you are forgetting,” said the vice-president “is what comes after that in the Second Amendment. It clearly states: *Only joking.*”

This was too much for Clarence. He went back down the hatch of the tank and loaded the gun with left-over cheeseburgers and fired them relentlessly at the White House. Now joined by the president

again, the vice-president and the aides hurled vol-a-vents back at him.

At that moment a squadron of fighter jets appeared coming towards them. The president had called them in with instructions not to use bombs as it would disfigure the lawn but to fire their guns at the tank.

They struck and immediately the tank started to shudder and smoke began to rise from it. A few minutes later flames could be seen coming from it. Clarence jumped off the top of the tank and started to run towards the White House. In defiance he pointed his finger at the president. There was a loud Bang as the tank exploded. The president fell to the ground as her pet chihuahua, startled by the noise, got under her feet. A bodyguard convinced that Clarence had shot her with his finger caught hold of him and wrestled him to the ground. He was taken away by the police and charges were laid against him:

Doing damage to the South Lawn of the White House;

Trampling various flower-beds in the same area;

Running 20 red lights in Washington DC;

Destroying 2 police cars, a fire-truck and numerous automobiles; and

Dispatching cheese burgers past their sell-by date. He was incarcerated for 30 years in Guantanamo Bay.

The president recovered from tripping over her dogs. She had cut her nose and bruised an arm as well as seriously injuring her dignity. She did not back down on her gun control measures, though and an additional offence was created: aiming a loaded finger at the president. No-one since then has ever done that again.

Footnote: Every day 310 people are shot by guns in the US, including 21 children and teens (aged 1-17). Every year 113,108 people in the US are shot by guns in the US, including 7,783 children and teens. Gun violence is estimated to cost the US economy at least \$229 billion a year. (Source: Brady)

NOSTALGIA'S NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE

"The next stop is Brighton where the train will terminate," said the conductor. "Change here for going to the beach and all sex operations."

He was feeling very jolly. In half-an-hour his dinner would be on the table and he had a week's holiday coming up.

Mavis Macaltry did not feel jolly. She had been standing next to her suitcase since Gatwick and was getting very tired. The carriage was packed full, most of the seats were taken by people, with huge stacks of luggage piled up beside them on adjoining seats.

An 83-year old woman really shouldn't have to stand, she thought but no-one had offered their seat to her, and she was wedged in and could hardly move. "You'd have thought that a train that called at such a busy airport would have more room to put your suitcases," she commented to the woman next to her.

"Be sure to take all your bags and personal belongings with you when you leave the train, and report anything suspicious to the staff on the station...or me, if you can find me." The conductor was clearly enjoying himself.

On one of the aisle seats sat a plain-looking young woman, completely in the nude apart from some white trainers. No-one paid any attention to her. Most people were too busy texting to even notice. Husbands very deliberately averted their gaze, and other men and boys looked out of the window even though it was dark outside. They had seen far better on porn sites. Some women exchanged meaningful looks with other women. Others just stared at the floor or the overhead racks.

The naked lady was a model in a life-drawing class, and as a bet with the art-teacher, had agreed to take off her clothes on the train home. It was worth the £20 she had agreed on. However, she did find it rather dis-spiriting and wished she could get dressed again but was worried that this might draw attention to her.

Mavis caught a glimpse of her and came to the conclusion that women in trainers looked so unfeminine - they looked like children. In her day when you went out, you wore shoes with a bit of a heel, she mused to herself. She distinctly remembered the *click, click* as she walked down the aisle to get to her seat in church on Sundays, which made all the young men look round at her. She smiled at the thought of it.

The train slowed down and soon afterwards came to a halt. Very few people noticed, except Mavis who was getting extremely fed-up. The conductor saw his chance to entertain the passengers and started singing:

"And now, the end is near, and we must face the final station..." The otherwise silent coach reverberated with the conductor's poor attempt at being a singer. No-one paid the slightest bit of attention.

It was not like this in the old days, Mavis thought to herself and gave a deep sigh.

The fireman shovelled some coal into the firebox on the 4-6-2 steam locomotive, *Spirit of Suez*, closed the fire-door, and stepped back, clutching his hip with his other hand. His lumbago was troubling him in this wet weather, and the effort required to do the job was getting too much for him. He was only in his forties but felt like an old man. Owing to staff sickness he had to rake the ashes out and prepare the fire before they set off, which meant getting up earlier. Because of the poor visibility in the rain, the train made a lot of stops and starts and on one occasion he had slipped up and burnt his hand. The train driver was not at all sympathetic and suggested that he was not working as hard as he should be. The big locomotives required a lot of coal, and he could hardly keep up with the constant stoking. It was a long journey - over eight hours. He hoped he could last that long.

Meanwhile in the first-class compartment, Lady Esmerelda Thorndyke was settled down awaiting the refreshments. She had insisted that her aged butler, Horace, came with her to attend to her needs. Horace was obliged to enter via a second-class carriage and then make his way to her compartment. Once the train was underway, he had gone to be excused and then opened up a window in the corridor to have a smoke. Leaning out of the window he was engulfed in the cloud of steam coming from the engine, and a speck of dust had got lodged in his eye. This caused him to blink uncontrollably, but the speck did not want to come out. He combed his hair, straightened his collar and entered the compartment.

"It's time for a cup of tea," Lady Thorndyke announced.

Horace took the flask of hot water out of a bag.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she said curtly.

He looked up at her and blinked. She was rather taken aback but tried not to show it.

"I hope you remembered to warm the pot!" she said.

"I did remember, ma'am," said Horace and blinked.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I just have a little problem."

She did not enquire about the problem but when he continued to blink at her she began to blush.

"Horace!" she said in a more conciliatory way.

He blinked.

She winked back at him and went red with embarrassment.

"Can I help you with your...er problem?" she cooed.

Horace was lost for words, made an excuse and went back into the corridor. His mind went back to the time he had surprised Mildred, the scullery maid, skulking in the scullery. He had been quite comfortable about that affair, as he was clearly above her in terms of status. But his engrained sense of deference to the upper classes overcame any thoughts of entertaining Lady Thorndyke. He tied a handkerchief around his head to cover up his eye and went back to the compartment.

Lady Thorndyke ignored him and drank her cup of tea without saying anything. She was lost in her memories of when she was young and had fallen for the chauffeur. What a wonderful time that was!

Clovis, the young chauffeur had recently purchased a new sports car, an Austin 7 Gordon England, to be exact, which had been proclaimed as the best sports car of 1927 in newspaper reviews. It had a sunshine roof which took a time to put up, so he preferred not to use it. He liked nothing better than to take his car for a spin on the open road to show off its paces.

Esmerelda was usually taken around in her father's Rolls. Nothing could have been more luxurious, but to a young woman it didn't feel at all exciting. She yearned to have a ride in the sports car, and one day her wishes came true. When Clovis had gone out to start the Rolls, he had discovered that one of the tyres had a nail in it and all the air had come out. It would take too long to mend the puncture since Esmerelda's tennis match in Little Furthington, a village about 12 miles away, was due to start in just 30 minutes time. He could not understand how a nail could have found its way into the tyre, for the only people who had a key to the garage were Esmerelda's father, Esmerelda herself, and himself. There was no question about it: he would have to use his own car instead which was parked beside the stables, well out of sight of the house. The tennis racket was tied on to the rear mudguard and off they went.

Esmerelda loved the wind in her hair and the thrill of being driven at speed down the windy country lanes with the handsome Clovis sitting beside her. But then the car ran into a pothole, and the string holding the tennis racket came undone and it fell off into a ditch. Clovis stopped the car to check the wheels and noticed that the tennis racket was missing. Not yet being confident about reversing the car down the lane, he walked back. Once he had found it and secured it once again to the mudguard, a lot of time had elapsed. In the meantime, a queue of other cars was forming behind his car, while in front, a herd of cows was making its way towards them, accompanied by an elderly herdsman.

"I'll just have to take a short cut through this field," said Clovis. "There's a gate the other end where we can join the road again."

The entrance into the field beside them was via a wooden gate which was tied to the gate-post with a bit of rope. It was easy to open and into the field they drove.

Driving a car on grass, especially when the ground is rather uneven, is not the same as driving on a road, as Clovis soon found out. The car started off across the field at full pelt with the driver and passenger vigorously bumping up and down and from side to side.

"Slow down!" Esmerelda shouted at him.

He was forced to do that anyway as the car felt as if it was about to fall to pieces.

"Nearly there," shouted Clovis back to her.

As they got within a few yards of the gate he uttered a moan. It was padlocked shut. There was absolutely no option but to return to the entrance gate.

Unseen to them in the meantime the herdsman had been shooing the cows into the field. The young calves were already close to the car and were making their way to the other gate too.

Clovis carefully avoided the calves but it was too late and he failed to spot a patch of cow-dung they had left behind. A salvo of mud and dung flew up from the front wheels into the car dousing the people inside. Esmerelda's white tennis dress and skirt suffered the worst.

"That's it!" she said feeling very annoyed. "I'll walk the rest of the way to the gate."

Clovis stopped the car. But before she could undo the car door there was a loud mooing as the mother cows, now cut off from their offspring, started advancing towards them with menace in their eyes. Esmerelda undid the fastening on her tennis racket and grabbed hold of it to strike back if they were attacked. When they could hear the pants of the cows' breath close by, they slunk down in their seats and waited for the onslaught.

The herdsman had seen what was going on and thought: "That should teach them a lesson," before he stopped the cows in their track and guided them around the car to join their calves.

This gave Clovis a chance to try and start the car again, but the engine was coated in gunge and it would not budge.

"We'll have to push it," he said despairingly. Esmerelda initially refused point blank, but her desire to get away persuaded her to put her hands on the car-boot and try to shove it. Clovis was pushing beside the driver's door, ready to jump in if it sounded like it was starting.

The tyres were kicking up even more mud and dung as the wheels were well and truly stuck in a groove that was now developing. From head to toe, Esmerelda was covered in the stuff. Her new white plimsols had become big brown blocks of sticky, smelly goo. She was not a pretty sight.

With great reluctance the herdsman gave a hand too, and the extra umph this gave, got the car free and on the move again. Clovis and Esmerelda left him to it, and at a more cautionary speed, they drove

to the entrance gate and returned home. Clovis was given the sack immediately and had to sell his car to make ends meet. Esmerelda was forbidden from seeing him again and was sent away to live with a maiden aunt, of which every family had a surplus supply.

Back in the field on that fateful day, Fred, the herdsman was an unhappy man. He was filthy dirty, the field had been churned up and the cows were in a distressed state. As he watched the car go, he cursed the invention of noisy, dirty motor cars and longed for his happy childhood days when he would accompany his grandfather on his horse and cart around the village.

Percy, the-rag-and-bone man loved his young grandson, Fred, and for a special treat would take him with him on the cart. His old horse was getting on a bit and did not have the strength he used to have, but he was good-natured and never let him down. The young lad used to like to hold the reins, which gave Percy a chance to light up his pipe.

He had drifted into the rag-and-bone trade when his job as a gardener in the manor came to an end. There was nothing else he could do, and he did not want to end up in the workhouse. His wife had worked as a domestic servant in the manor house but had died shortly before he was made redundant. Two of their children had died in infancy, five more had been adopted, and the remaining two had found jobs in the nearby town, one as a chimney sweep and the other as a factory worker. The latter had married and had six children. His favourite was Fred.

Fred had always loved animals, and long after his pet dog had died, he kept its remains in a box. His grandfather had told him that he would take him from him and bury him, but as soon as he got home, he put the dog's bones in with the rest of his collection for the day and sold them to a soap-makers.

Fred loved Gladstone, the horse, and would not whip him very hard unless he got tired and refused to move. Percy had already made arrangements with a knacker's yard to take the horse when he snuffed it, but resisted the pressure he was put under to give them the horse sooner than that.

Gladstone enjoyed ambling around. In his youth he had always wanted to be a race-horse, or a huntsman's horse, but he was too slow and became a horse around town. Anytime, anyone wanted a horse to transport something, they would ask for him. With age though, he got slower and slower, so there were fewer demands on his time, and he was eventually sold at a low price to Percy.

Percy had started off in the trade with a hand-held cart and built up a bit of a business. He saw new opportunities with getting a horse. Many houses in the village grew their own rhubarb and tomatoes, and there was always a demand for horse manure. Percy kept part of his cart reserved for dung. Unlike other people with horses, he kept a special shovel handy. When he ventured further afield to more

urban areas, where more rags were available, he used another sturdier one. It was most important not to use the wrong one. It was his grandson whose responsibility it was to perform this task.

"Not that one," he would often scold his grandson. "My city shitty shovel shovels city gritty shit. Now repeat after me..."

He never had any need to ring a bell to announce his presence, as he and his cart always smelled to highest heaven. It is no wonder then that people would know instinctively when he was in the area.

There was nowhere at home where he could keep horse manure, so he sold it to people without letting it mature first. Most people knew they had to let it mature, but there was a case of food-poisoning at one time when a few people died, caused it was said, by someone putting fresh horse manure on lettuce shortly before harvesting. Of course, this was not Percy's fault, but somehow, he got the blame and lost a lot of custom. The sight of rotting animal carcasses beside a fresh pile of horse manure on a cart was no longer seen much around the village.

The whole episode cast a shadow over poor Percy and he took to smoking his pipe more and more to comfort himself. To give the tobacco more flavour, he added some horse manure to it. This did the trick.

On his deathbed, he told his family how he longed for the good old days, when people would rush into the street holding their noses when he was in their area. Sadly, that did not happen anymore. Being ecological before his time, he donated his body to the knacker's yard.

The chief knackerman hated his job. His true passion in life was the business end of things. If there was a deal to be done, he would see it, even if the other party lost out - which they always did. You have to exploit the situation, he would tell his employees. He had learned this skill when still a teenager. His parents had lived at the time in the West Indies, where they had the reputation of having more slaves than anyone else. He learned early that the slaves absolutely loved what they had to do - his father had told him that enough times.

"Look, they're always singing," he was told. "They are so happy."

Ah, those were the days.

"They are very sociable, so that's why we have to cram a lot of them into very small huts."

Those were indeed the days.

"To make them really happy they like to work long hours. Have you noticed that some of them have manacles on their ankles - it's like your mother wearing all her jewellery. It's all in their tradition. They love it."

"Yes, father," he had said. "You can tell these are the happiest days of their lives. Many years ago,

when they would still have been in Africa, they would have been dead at the age they are now."

The slaves agreed that at their ages, it is likely they would have been killed by tropical diseases where they had originally come from. But all the same, that would have been preferable to their current lives. The thought of that made them very nostalgic indeed.

BRINGING UP PARENTS

This is a manual for bringing up parents, written by children for other children who may have mislaid the original version. When you have finished with it, please destroy it so that it does not get into the wrong hands – the hands of parents.

Children aged 1 minute to 2 years old

At the time of your birth, your parents will be in a complete state of exhaustion and shock and will not have a clue what to do. Hospital staff are pretty well-trained in seeing to your every need so you need not worry unduly about not getting your own way. This all changes when your parents take you home. So, treat your time in hospital as an opportunity to work out what needs to be done to get them raised properly.

You will notice that in the early days, all sorts of relatives will look at you and go “Cooey”, and smile at you. If you smile back, they will talk jibberish at you in a strange high-pitched voice which you may find very annoying. Do not smile back or gurgle – it only encourages them. The best approach is to dribble or throw up if you can. This quickly puts an end to it and gives you some peace and quiet.

One of the first things you will want is a good drink. Unfortunately, all you will be offered is milk. Your mother should know how to work the dispensers which she keeps close at hand. The good news is that it’s free, and there are two nozzles so if one goes wrong there’s a spare. This will see you through until the other one is fixed. A new washer will probably do the trick, but don’t tell your mother as she may not want the local plumber to look at it. In theory, the drinks cabinet is open 24 hours a day, but you sometimes have to wait, which can be frustrating. To speed things up, you can take things into your own hands, but on a crowded bus this may not work. The other solution is to cry for it. Crying is an art form which you do not have to learn – more on this in a moment.

You will notice that you do not get a choice of full-milk, semi-skimmed, or skimmed, or ever pasteurised. You can’t control the temperature either, and no amount of complaining about it will change that unless they give you a bottle instead. You should resist this. You do not know where it has been, or if it has been washed thoroughly. Go for the genuine article every time.

After a while, you will discover that there is another option you can choose – a milk-shake. To be given one of these you will have to crawl as far from your mother as you can when she is not looking. When she discovers you are missing, she will come running. A drink immediately afterwards ends up being a milk-shake. To get a refill, do the same again. Works every time. It would be nice to be offered

a biscuit, preferably a chocolate digestive to go with it, but you can give up on that idea. The nearest you'll get to it is one of those horrible rusks, which you can feed to the dog.

Now with regard to crying, a bit of practice will not come amiss. You will have plenty of opportunities to get this just right. Practice saying ba-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha in short breaths. Take a really deep breath and repeat, but louder and longer. Have another deep breath and make it louder and much longer. At the same time, screw your mouth up and pull faces. Carry on this whole procedure until you get attention. Your parents will then try and find out what the problem is. Keep them guessing if you like making them feel insecure. Sooner or later they will end up with the right thing, hopefully.

Crying can also be used if you feel tired and in need of some sleep. It can be awfully frustrating when you need a drink, but instead, your parents put you in a crib to sleep. Going to sleep on an empty tummy is not good.

Crying is useful, too, for indicating you need your nappy changed. It can be very uncomfortable to have to wear a wet or soiled nappy. Grown-ups do not wear them, so why should babies, you may argue. The ideal solution would be to have numerous toilets around the home – they do not have to be very big and when not in use they could be used as flower pots. But this is never done. The only way to kick up a stink about it is to...you guessed. In time, when you are no longer kitted out in nappies, you have to give in and use the toilet facilities that are provided and compete with the rest of the family for them. Life can be very unfair when you need to go.

The final use of crying is to show who's boss. If you are told to do something you do not think should be done, you can turn on the taps. Your parents will be so intent upon making you stop, they will either give in or give you something in its place. For instance, if you are told to stop hitting the dog, they may find a cat you can hit instead, which is almost as much fun...but not quite. Think of crying as having magical powers. Make the most of it, as you cannot do it much when you get older. Adults only cry if they're sad and not if they want a drink of milk or want to go to the toilet – well, some may do perhaps.

Of course, crying would be unnecessary if grown-ups understood babies' language – Babble. You cannot blame babies for that. It's just that most adults are terrible with regard to learning another language. Young children can understand each other very well, so the fault obviously lies with grown-ups. Instead, toddlers have to learn a new language to communicate with adults, a language which is much more complicated, with complicated rules of grammar and a big vocabulary. The point is – if you can understand what another toddler says without all this palaver, why go to the trouble of learning something much more difficult?

Maybe one of the problems for us youngsters learning to speak a grown-up language is that we grow milk teeth, lose them, and then grow some more. It's a lot to put up with and affects your power of

speech. Instead of being fobbed off with the tooth fairy, what we need is dentures until the permanent teeth have grown.

Until the age of somewhere between one and one and a half, we toddlers manage to get around pretty well by crawling. Where this is not possible, such as in the street, we are picked up and carried or pushed in a pram. This is the perfect situation. Why wear out your legs if you don't need to. The trouble starts when you are seen to stand up. Then everyone expects you to start walking. Perhaps all you wanted to do was to get a better view of things. That is a mistake. You should protest by sitting down. Sitting down, after all, is what adults do most of the time anyway. You should show how grown-up you are by sitting down and staying seated.

Sooner or later you will want your own bedroom. You should plan for this carefully if you are used to sleeping in your parents' bedroom.

When you wake up, and you will most likely wake up at all times of the night, be sure to make a lot of noise to make sure everyone else is awake too. Throwing things out of your cot will add to the noise, particularly if it is the cat. You may also have some fun by talking to your imaginary friend. Both of us know one does not exist, but it sure scares the grown-ups. But don't do this if they threaten to take you to a psychiatrist to see if you have got schizophrenia. For added impetus why not repeat what you heard your father say when he hit his thumb with a hammer, the last time he tried to do DIY. Say it loudly over and over again. If you do this routine for a few nights running, your parents will decide it is time for you to have your own bedroom.

One of the great joys of being a young child is that you are expected to be good at art. People will always buy you colouring books and crayons or paints. They always expect you to paint pictures of mommy and daddy or your house. When you have your own bedroom though you can try doing what you really want and paint on the walls. Why not copy a picture from the Kama Sutra which you found hidden away in one of mommy's drawers. Your parents will probably not understand what it is you have painted, or if they do, they will try and stop you from doing any more. One thing you will learn is that the creative spirit in children is knocked out of them as they grow up. So, seize your chance now and paint away while you can. One day you may end up as a painter/decorator and the early experience will prove to be very useful.

Children aged 2 years and 1 minute to 12 years, 364 days and 59 minutes.

This is the age when adults try and make you exact copies of themselves. Well, look at the mess they have created of the world and you will agree with me that you must rebel against everything your parents nag you about. Let's start with something trivial – table manners.

You are as aware as I am of the fact that most families these days do not sit down at a table and eat

together. I think we convinced them that doing that was stupid: you can't watch the television if you do that. But they still insist on us children sitting in a high chair at the table.

Don't they know how dangerous that is? Do you know how many children fall out of their high chairs each year? I don't either. But it's something that Health and Safety should clamp down on.

Then there are those stupid things they get you to eat your food with. We've got fingers, what more do you want? Instead of which you get knives which you can cut yourself with, forks which you can stab yourself with, and spoons which are never the right size for your mouth. Their only purpose seems to be to bang on the table, as they make a nice noise when you do that. It always gets other people's attention, which is all that really matters.

I must say that I do like bibs. As toddlers we can happily make a right mess when eating without anyone worrying about our clothes, the furniture or the carpet. That's all part of the fun. But then at some stage your parents no longer give you a bib and you have to get used to having a napkin on your lap. No wonder daddies always get soup stains on their ties. Everyone should have bibs, I say.

The whole topic of manners is a mine-field. You can't do this, can't do that. It's not surprising so many adults have mental problems with this negative attitude. The golden rule seems to be to say either "please" or "thank you" in every sentence. If your father says: "Will you stop doing that, for heaven's sake!" You should reply: "Thank you, father." Laying it on with a trowel never comes amiss. Alternatively, you could say: "Please?" He will either think you didn't hear him and repeat what he said, or he will say: "NO!" Whatever the outcome, your auntie will come to your rescue and observe what wonderful manners you have. You may have destroyed half the furniture in the room, but you will be known as someone with very good manners and you will be rewarded for it.

The best rewards are sweets. Sugar is good for you, your mother knows that, as it keeps you quiet for a while. Children love sweets because they taste good, and that is surely the object of eating them, and the brightly-coloured wrappers can be used in a constructive way to decorate the surroundings – adding a dash of colour here and there. Grown-ups often tell you that sweets are not good for you. In that case, why do so many shops sell them? If we children didn't eat sweets the shops would go out of business.

"You'll get fat if you eat sweets," your mother will say. To which the reply should be: "Then there will be more of me to love, won't there?"

With pocket money you can buy all the sweets you want when your parents are not with you. Regrettably there are no minimum union rates for pocket money. That's something we need to look into. Pocket money enables you to spend, spend, spend, or if there's nothing to buy, you can put it in a piggy bank and save up for a real pig. That would surprise mommy and daddy, unless you live on a farm. Keep a close eye on how much you've put in the piggy bank. Parents have been known to "borrow" from it

when the electricity bill comes in. You might need to invest in a padlock for security.

If you do have a piggy bank, make sure you get compound interest on it and it is untaxed. You can get these demands by telling your parents that you are preparing for the real world. They will fall for that.

Toys are the other thing you can buy. But if you play your cards right, they will be bought for you. You will most certainly be given toys as presents that you don't want. If you can't swap them at school, you can always place them under the tyres of your father's car when he is not looking. When he apologises to you for running over them, you can then make a demand for something else in their place.

The big opportunities not to miss are birthday and Christmas present lists. Parents do not want their child to be deprived, compared to other children, so go for the most expensive things you can think of. Odds on, you will be given them.

That leaves school. Strictly speaking, this manual is not about training your teachers, but viewed in another way, school does involve your parents. The object is to play around in class and enjoy disrupting the lessons. Don't worry, all the other kids will be doing the same thing. You are having practice at living in the community. When a teacher reprimands you, all you have to do is to tell your parents and they will automatically take your side and assault the teacher at the first opportunity. It's a win-win situation for you.

Children aged 13 to 20 years, 364 days and 59 minutes old

These are the years when you discover just how inhibited your parents are. The problem all boils down to their hormones and is caused by aging neurons in the frontal-cortex of their brains. This makes them so irrational to you. You have to stand your ground and don't give in to them.

What can you do and what can't you do at this age? Well, one thing it seems is that you can't keep up with fashion if you listen to your parents. You should point out to them that your music has to be loud to compete with the loud pop music that middle-aged people play. No wonder so many of them go deaf.

Wearing head-phones to listen to your music is ideal. You can hear all the nuances in the music which your parents are unaware of; you don't hear what your parents are saying to you; and you look really cool.

Remember that you have a perfect right to dress like everyone of your age does – you don't want to look like an oddball and get mocked for it. That is the worst thing that can happen to you. Follow what pop stars and football players wear and you can't go wrong. If skirts are going to be waist high, that is what you must wear. If you want more holes than material in your jeans, you must follow suit and even up the ante. If you want to dye your hair puce, have studs in your nose and tongue and say "like" more than any other word in talking to people, there is nothing stopping you. If you have tattoos on every inch of your body, go ahead. Don't give a thought that when you apply to become a high court judge your

appearance may raise a few eyebrows. You are only young once and who knows, the judge may look the same as you.

Being a teenager brings with it special skills. You will instinctively be able to cross over the road and get on and off buses without taking your eyes off your mobile phone. Better still you will be able to send text messages at such a rapid pace the keyboard on your phone breaks.

Your parents will understand this as they can do that now too. Hmm! Time to find something that they can't do and don't understand.

It is a sad fact of life that examinations take part in this part of your life. They can so easily get in the way of worthwhile events such as parties, festivals, and sleep-overs. So, ask yourself: would I prefer some happiness in the prime time of my life or should I study for exams, go to university and be landed with a huge debt to pay off and end up being unemployed anyway? It's a no-brainer. Your parents know that, but they are afraid to admit it to you. They may have been in the same situation themselves once. But they keep up the pretence of being responsible people. Ask them: would you prefer to go on a year-long world cruise, or continue working 9-5 in your dead-end jobs?

Age 21 or maybe 25, 30, 45 or never

As soon as you reach this age something mysterious happens. You succumb to amnesia and all the wisdom you have accumulated over your past life vanishes. You become an adult, maybe even a parent yourself. And so, the cycle goes on and on from child to parent. Scientists have tried to understand this but to no avail. There are no drugs you can take to prevent it. Sad, really, isn't it. Makes you want to cry.

ETHELATED-SPIRIT

“Do you think he fancies me?” Ethel whispered to her friend, Agnes, who was sitting beside her. She was looking at a man who was a few seats in front of them on the other side of the bus.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it,” Agnes replied. “Just look at the way his zimmer shakes whenever he sees you. I think your hotpants turn him on.”

Ethel had only recently taken to wearing hotpants, as the short skirts she had been wearing were too chilly in the present weather.

“You think it’s my cellulite that attracts him?” she said.

“Maybe,” said Agnes, trying to sound non-committal.

Ethel giggled uncontrollably and only just avoided her dentures from shooting out.

Horace, the man in question, did not have his zimmer with him today, only a couple of walking sticks to make it easier to get in and out of the bus. He had written an *L* on the one and an *R* on the other to avoid any confusion. He was unaware that Ethel was sitting only a few seats away, partly because he was smoking a joint at the time which had made his glasses get steamed up. He got off the bus at the next stop, while Ethel and Agnes continued on their journey. This was to be a special treat for Ethel on her 85th birthday.

When they arrived at the parlour, the tattooist asked them what they would like.

Agnes told him she wanted St George on horseback on one buttock to show her sense of patriotism. She was not certain about the other one, but eventually plumped for a dragon. The tattooist followed her instructions and added a lance and a lot of gory detail on the dragon where the tip of it had pierced it. He then turned his attention to Ethel.

“I’d like a set of miniature footprints going up my leg,” she said.

“I see you already have some long tattoos on it,” he observed.

“Don’t be silly. That’s my varicose veins,” she said. “Better make it two sets of footprints, one on each leg and the word *Welcome* on my tummy.”

The tattooist did as obliged, and the ladies were so happy they returned to the bus stop like spring chickens.

In the meantime, Horace had found his way to a men’s clothes shop where he bought a hoodie and a pair of jeans with holes ripped out over the knees. He did not worry about his knees getting cold as both of them were replacements. Looking at himself in the mirror, he prided himself on his street cred

appearance. Having made the purchases, he went home and got ready for going out to the nightclub that evening.

Phoenix, at the tender age of 21, had just got back from college and was changing into a suit and tie before going to the Bingo session. He polished his shoes, put on his overcoat with a warm scarf and cloth cap, and quietly closed the door behind him. On the way there, several mobility scooters passed him, and he heard the *thud thud* of the pop music coming from the riders' headphones, which had been turned up to the highest level to compensate for their deafness.

At the bingo hall he ran into his class-mate, Mia, who had just had a permanent wave. In her new floral-patterned midi dress and chunky cardigan, she looked stunning, he thought. And the pearl necklace, leather gloves and comfortable lace-up walking shoes added a certain something.

"I hope it's going to be warm enough tonight," she confided in him. "But in case it isn't, I've brought my hot-water bottle."

They ordered a couple of cocoas and went to their seats, now padded by special demand, and settled down to play the games.

The hall was packed with people their own age and they recognised many of their friends.

"There's Layla over there – she always wears her dungarees to everything. And there's Finn isn't it, in his track-suit trousers and fluffy slippers," said Mia. "You know he's been in bed for the last two weeks with flu. Can't be too careful."

"Isn't that Xavier there beside the toilet door. Doesn't he look dashing in his sports coat and cravat. And if I'm not mistaken that's Kaylee with him in the maternity dress. Oh no! She isn't, is she? They haven't...! Oh my God. That is so immoral. They've only been married a few months."

They had a pleasant evening. They did not win at all but had lots of fun. This is much more enjoyable than the whist drive I went to yesterday evening, thought Phoenix. To be honest Mia would have really preferred to have stayed in all evening with her knitting, but she had to admit that she had had quite a good time.

It was nine o'clock when they left the hall and walked back together. They both could not stop yawning, but the walk was invigorating and perked them up a bit. On the way they reminisced about the good old days when they were in school together. Those were the good old days, they said, even though it was less than three years ago.

The nightclub down the road was very busy with loud pop music and flashing neon lights. Horace had been joined by his mate, Bernard, at the bar. Unlike Horace who had been a skinhead for nearly fifty

years, Bernard still had a bit of hair and sported a Mohican haircut which had been dyed blue and pink, and in his ears were several pairs of gold earrings. The effects of overeating all his life were noticeable in his rounded paunch, barely concealed by his low-cut jeans. With pints in hand, they ogled the women on the dancefloor. Agnes who was dancing with Ethel was gyrating wildly in six-inch heels, while Ethel was wearing some bovver boots and not much else. He caught sight of her tattoo and drooled all over his zimmer frame. Ethel pretended she had not noticed him and continued to fling her arms and legs around with gay abandon.

The floor was heaving with the dancers who joined in singing the rap numbers which they had learned by heart. When nature took its course and Ethel and Agnes made their jaunt towards the ladies' toilet they came across Horace and Bernard. Horace's zimmer could hardly control itself. He wasted no time and propositioned her. She promptly accepted, but had to visit the loo first. They took a taxi back to Horace's

According to what he told Bernard the next day they made love all night. The truth was however that Horace had mixed up his sleeping pills with his Viagra tablets, and fell asleep as soon as Ethel took off her boots. Bernard and Agnes fared slightly better...until he discovered her tattoos of St George slaying the dragon. Being an animal-lover, he was incensed by this and went home immediately, telling her he would be writing to the League against Cruel Sports as he slammed the door.

When Phoenix and Mia reached Phoenix's house, he invited her in. She was hesitant.

"But I've only known you for...10 years," she protested and showed him her #metoo badge.

"Can I at least give you a goodnight hug?" he said.

She pondered and fumbled about in her coat for a consent form.

"Write down exactly what you intend to do and I'll consider it," she told him.

It was a very long form and he had to go and find a pen, so asked her if she wouldn't mind stepping inside a minute. She reluctantly agreed.

While she was waiting for him to fill out the form, he put on some music for her – some Glenn Miller music, the Andrews Sisters, the Ink Spots, some Vera Lynn songs, and so on. After a long, long time he said to her:

"I've filled in my mother's maiden name, my passport number, my address and phone number, my father's occupation, and the date of my first visit to the dentist. Plus, a lot of other stuff, but I honestly can't remember when I was weaned."

"I'm afraid I simply cannot go through with it then," Mia replied. "Sorry, but you can't give me a goodnight hug." And saying that, she opened the door and left.

It had been a long evening for both of them. One day he might get a hug, but for now it was back to watching *The Sound of Music* by himself and studying. His dream of becoming a sex therapist would come true one day, but it might take a little longer than he had anticipated. Perhaps he should consult his grandmother about it - Ethel would put him right.

FUTURE TENTS

The Prime Minister rose to speak:

“Madam Speaker, my honourable friends,” (under his breath) “and the scum opposite.”

"I have an important announcement to make. A report issued today has stated that migration to this country for the year ending yesterday was just two people – a man and his wife, who caught the wrong plane in Dubai. They have now been found work with the Ministry of Transport. My government has therefore exceeded all previous attempts to reduce migration. “Shouts of “yay yay” and “Bravo” from his party seated behind him. He continued:

“We have to thank the publicity in the press given to the campaign for only speaking in English on trains and buses, or face deportation.

"And for the nation-wide posters with the slogan: ‘If they don’t look English, they may not be’ with details on how to report them, if assaulting them first doesn’t work.” Assorted raspberry sounds from his party.

“You will be pleased to know that all asylum-seekers and refugees have now successfully been sent back to their own countries and the concentration camps, I mean detention centres, have been able to close.”

“However, we cannot relax until all threats to our country have been countered. Thanks to the brilliant work done by our security services, threats from all foreign animals which have tried to enter the country have been countered, and on the advice of the Home Secretary, all animal-traffickers have been hung, drawn and quartered. But there remains one constant and ever-growing source of danger which we must now turn our attention to. I am of course referring to Birds. “

Politicians on the opposition benches looked askance.

“You will all be aware of the outbreaks of Avian flu which occasionally crop up. You may not know that there are at least 60 other diseases which birds and their droppings are responsible for. I’ll mention in particular: histoplasmosis, candidiasis, cryptococcosis, St Louis encephalitis and salmonellosis, not to mention E Coli disease. A more familiar one to you all is chicken pox caught from foreign chickens, dead or alive, which have not been washed in chlorine.

"I wish to be absolutely clear that I am not talking about British birds, of which we are immensely proud, but birds from overseas which migrate to this country to over-winter or to spend the summer months here. We must not relax our guard but face down this very real threat to the general public. It is

after all the will of the people that we bring to an end the freedom of movement which birds have abused for so long.”

At a meeting of the cabinet the following day the prime minister was leading a discussion on the issue. Many ministers wanted to know which birds were truly English and which weren't. The consensus was that all birds which migrated here for the winter or summer months, instead of braving it out like our native birds, would be considered to be foreign. The Defence Secretary said that although it would be nice just to shoot them in the air, it could cause a lot of ill-feeling in the countries they have come from, particularly those in NATO. But he was not averse to exploding a few nuclear weapons off the coast – something he had been itching to do for some time. This was not acceptable to other members of the cabinet, who thought the real target of nuclear weapons should be Brussels.

The Home Secretary felt that without accurate and up-to-date documentation on the birds they could not be allowed in. Any that managed to cross the country's borders should be buried alive. Nevertheless, there were a few that should be permitted to come: a solitary nightingale would be necessary to sing in Berkley Square; a couple of swallows should be allowed to fly around the country at the start of summer; and a small number of cuckoos should come on a short-term basis in Spring to satisfy readers of the Times (who overwhelmingly vote for the Party) . The birds in question would first have to be captured and a visa in their passport should be attached to one of their legs.

The Health Minister insisted that the whole country should be immunised against them until they had been stopped from coming. He wanted to know if enough anti-avian vaccine was available. Failing that the Flu-away jabs would have to do the job.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer wanted to know how much the measures would cost. But no-one listened to him. This was one of the worst crises that country had faced since the last one, and no expense should be spared.

After a lot of deliberation, it was proposed that it would be illegal for anyone to aid and abet any migrating birds coming to this country. A plan of action was also devised. The main points were:

1. Flocks of English birds of prey were to be enlisted to patrol the skies to keep migrating birds from entering the country.
2. A breeding programme for cats would be set-up to catch any birds which get through the defences and come down to land.
3. Squadrons of drones would broadcast the message: *Go Home* if they encountered any foreign birds.
4. Birds of prey and cats would need to be able to recognise the visa documents on birds which were

allowed in.

The proposals were put into a Birds' Bill which was successfully passed in Parliament and became law.

Needless to say, the four measures in the plan of action were not successful. Birds of prey were not used to cooperating together, and those that did keep an eye on the country's borders were more interested in killing rodents than birds. The owners of cats did not fancy the extra cost of having additional cats. And those drones which were not seen as potential food by larger birds tended to gravitate towards airports where they caused a lot of upheaval.

Regarding the requirement for birds of prey and cats to recognise travel documents on migrating birds, this was a non-starter. Where they did notice documents attached to the legs of birds, it tended to be racing pigeons and by pursuing them, considerable havoc was caused in Yorkshire.

To ascertain who might be interested in birds, some of whom may have migrated here, it was decided to send out a questionnaire to everyone in the country. To prevent arousing suspicions that it might be organised by the government itself, it was sent out on the government's behalf by the Royal Society for Birds, which was in fact a covert government quango. It is shown below:

Royal Society for Birds

Patrons: Robin Hood Donald Duck Di Rhea C. Gull

IMPORTANT SURVEY

In order to complete this survey of the present state of birdlife in England, we are enlisting the support of registered bird-watchers, non-registered bird-watchers, non-bird-watchers and people who don't give a toss about birds.

We would therefore feel that you could be of great assistance to us and we would like to ask your co-operation in kindly completing the questionnaire below.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

1. How long have you been a bird-watcher?

a) One day b) Four and a half months c) Between 70 and 90 years

2. What attracts you to bird-life in particular?

a) being able to fly b) you have an insatiable appetite for breadcrumbs c) you have always wanted to evacuate your bowels on the move and preferably three foot above your neighbour's BMW

3. Have you ever suffered from any of these ailments?

- a) thrush b) swallowing c) swanning about d) willow-warbling
4. Which of the following birds is a frequent visitor to your garden?
a) falcon b) albatross c) ostrich d) dodo
5. Have you observed any of these very rare species?
a) the single-winged Shropshire sea-gull b) the three-winged Manx shearwater c) the tail-less pied wagtail
6. Have you ever come across any of these eggs?
a) greater spoonbill's b) Midwich cuckoo's c) scrambled hen's
7. In your observations, what is the predominant colour of the:
a) blackbird b) golden eagle c) yellow hammer d) goldcrest e) red red robin
8. What singer best conjures up to you the song of the nightingale?
a) Jesse Norman b) Taylor Swift c) Jimmy Durante
9. Have you ever bought any product derived from our feathered friends, such as:
a) Bird's custard b) Swan and Vesta matches c) Kingfisher toothpaste
10. How long have you been secretly molesting magpies?
11. Do you ever enjoy a night-jar?
12. Does the night-jar enjoy it too?
13. Supposing you had been abandoned as a child, would you have liked to have been brought up by:
a) a pelican b) a humming-bird c) a vulture
14. Do you still like to dress up sparrows in doll's clothing?
15. Does anyone else apart from the police, the Flying Squad and MI5 know about you being a voyeur?
16. Have you been to the doctor about it?
17. Do you also fancy pigeons?
18. Do any of them fancy you?
19. As a bird-spotter, do you attempt to do this on all kind of birds or just the ones which look as if they need a few more spots on?
20. In no more than six words, describe the flight mechanism of a bird as it comes in to land.

Please return the completed questionnaire to the Royal Society for Birds, 10 Downing Street, Westminster, London SW1A 1AA

It was hardly surprising that no-one actually filled in the form. In desperation, the government then decided to hold a referendum.

The two questions on it were as follows:

Do you think birds are a danger to the general public?

Or not?

Most people did not realise that the option “Or not” referred to the first question and as a protest vote 95% of the public voted for this option.

The tabloid press were vociferous in their demands for “Or not” and the few people who voted otherwise were issued with death threats.

Parliament was now in a bind and looked to the Prime Minister for a way out. He consulted his best friend and came up with a simple solution. Build a wall around the country to keep the foreign birds out. It should be pointed out that the country now consisted solely of England and parts of Wales. Scotland was an independent country and Northern Ireland had opted to unite with Southern Ireland to create a bigger Eire-ia.

The government pointed to the employment opportunities for out-of-work bricklayers, especially since no new affordable houses were being built, (affordable to anyone at all, that is). Hadrian had already made a start at this but had not finished the job. It would just require building up a bit and augmenting it to cover the entire coastline.

As work began on this project it slowly became evident that an awful lot of bricks would be required, in fact many more than the country could produce. Asking Europe to help supply more bricks was not considered a good idea. So, countries further afield were asked. The US said it would sign a trade agreement provided all the mortar was genetically modified and American flags would have to be flown above the finished wall. Russia said it could provide special bricks with spy-holes strategically placed in them. But no countries in Asia or Africa offered to help, unless massive reparations were paid to account for what happened to them in colonial times. This was ruled out for financial and political reasons.

To make up for the lack of bricks, other materials were used: stones, planks of wood, panes of glass, corrugated iron sheets, floor tiles, lino, bottles, and whatever else people could lay their hands on. Disused hospitals, factories and schools were demolished to provide more things to add to the wall. Owing to widescale shortages of staff, there were a lot of these buildings lying vacant.

In spite of this building frenzy, no-one in Parliament had yet ascertained how high the wall had to be built. Most builders had assumed it would be tree-level since birds in their gardens tended to fly at this height. It came as a shock to them when even small birds like house-martins simply flew over the wall or perched on top of it. It simply had to be higher than this, it was finally realised. But scaffolding that could reach this high was difficult to find in some areas, so ropes secured at the top had to be used instead, and every builder was issued with a parachute for safety reasons and to reach the ground quickly when

needed.

As the wall climbed higher and higher an unseen problem was discovered. The immense shade cast by it reduced the temperature nearby and crops were unable to grow. Sunbathers on beaches behind the wall became very annoyed at not being browned off. And people with solar panels which no longer produced any electricity would have made a big fuss about it but they did not have the energy to do so. None of this worried the migrating birds.

Naturally enough, considering the scale of the exercise, there were places where the wall collapsed. This was often the case where it had been built on coastlines which were already eroding into the sea. The Highways department then had to patch them up, although the employees had not reckoned on the word being taken literally and many of them found that they had a fear of heights.

Because the demand for builders could not be met in coastal regions, they were recruited from inland areas, so that no new buildings were able to be constructed in their home areas. Women builders joined the labour force on the understanding that they would refrain from wolf-whistling at any passing men below. Most of them complied with this.

There was some resistance to the wall. Protestors, inspired by the fall of the East German wall, tried to chip away at it before they were taken away and imprisoned for life. Some chained themselves to the wall and were used as target practice by gangs of youths throwing manure at them. The bones of the protestors could still be seen hanging from the wall months afterwards. The government and the mass media described the building of the wall as a great patriotic act. and anyone sabotaging it was called a traitor. There were however a few people who questioned whether it was really such a good idea... before being publicly castrated in the case of men, and being forced to wear dirty clothes in the case of women.

A new post was created in the government – Minister for Bird-Proof Walls. His first task was to commission a report on bird-flight. He could easily have looked it up on Google but felt that a newly-commissioned report would carry more weight. The report disclosed that whooper swans can fly at 27,000 feet (8,200 metres), mallards at 21,000 feet (6,400 metres) and white storks at 16,000 feet (4,800 metres). Long-distance birds which migrate usually start out at about 5,000 feet (1,524 metres) and then gradually climb up to 20,000 feet (6,096 metres).

As a comparison the Empire State Building is 1,453 feet (443 metres) to the very tip. Assuming a bird would be coming into landing once it had reached England, especially if it was going at speed, it would need a wall at the very least 5,000 feet (1,524 metres) high to stop it – a wall that is quite a bit higher than the Empire State Building!

The information in the report was suppressed and the Minister for Bird-Proof Walls resigned as soon as he had read it. Rather than give a specified height to the builders, they were urged instead to build

higher and higher. Oxygen masks were supplied to all builders and Roman Catholic builders were given the last rites before going to work.

In spite of these problems the general public still remained very much in favour of the wall being built. Everyone, it seemed, was now an expert on the dangers of bird migration. There was not even much opposition in parliament itself as the country had now become a one-party state. Any opposition to it was banned.

An unforeseen problem began to raise its head at this time. Helicopters and some light aircraft were unable to fly over the wall and there were a growing number of accidents involving passenger planes flying into the wall. But this was worth paying the price for, the prime minister assured the public.

All over the country, which now had full sovereignty and was nearly free from all foreign threats, cases of claustrophobia rocketed. Tourism halted completely and living standards dropped like a stone. Thanks to the stoic nature of the public everyone put up with everything and, according to one newspaper, *people have never been happier*.

Then, out of the blue one day a fierce storm blew up. Torrential rains poured down for days on end, and floods which were bottled up by the walls caused massive flooding. This was accompanied by hurricane-force winds over a wide area. The inevitable happened. At a weak point on the south coast, a section of the wall was blown down scattering bricks and other materials over the town behind it. This exposed the ends of the walls beside it to a terrible battering before they too blew over, and the domino effect this created then saw the destruction of the wall as it gradually spread around the country. There were no government records of the huge amount of casualties as disclosure was prohibited by the Official Secrets Act.

Everyone was expecting a mad rush by birds to enter the country, but not a single bird was seen. They were simply no longer interested in migrating to this country. Birds which would normally migrate to other countries from here at this time, however, were seen flocking to the coast in a hurry to leave. Even native birds joined them and there was no more bird song over the land.

You would have thought that the government would have been toppled, but it was not. It continued to hold on to office in parliament, as politicians in those days never resigned. Lessons were not learned and no-one took the blame for what had happened. Outside Westminster, though, anarchy ruled. And has continued to rule to this day. The woods are still silent. There is no longer a dawn chorus.

And cats have gone back to chasing mice rather than birds.

But at least one thing had changed. People of all descriptions had learned how to build walls. Although it must be added, no-one ever wanted to see another wall in their lives ever again. And that, my son, is the real reason why everyone in England now lives in a tent, where caves are not available.

SOCIAL NICETIES

A lot of people go through life, not knowing how to deal with different social situations. This makes them lack confidence in themselves and prevents them from reaching their full potential. They are bashful in the presence of members of the opposite sex, they are never promoted in their work and they find themselves ridiculed by others.

To help such people, I have compiled a short guide to help deal with all sorts of circumstances they may find themselves in. This relates primarily to the UK and may be especially useful for foreign visitors to this country.

On trains

Greet everyone in the carriage when entering and ask them about their marital or extra-marital relationships. You can follow this up by calling someone on your mobile phone and tell them in a loud voice all that you have been told. Fellow passengers will appreciate your being interested in them.

Be sure to look at other people in the eye – the longer you gaze at them, the more they will realise how friendly you must be.

On buses

Always pay for your fare with the largest note you have on you. £50 notes are by far the best. You will see that bus drivers have a lot of small change they are trying to get rid of, and notes are much quicker for them to add up after their shift has ended.

In public toilets

If there are three urinals in a row, always choose the one in the middle so you can chat more easily to anyone who joins you in the toilet. Remember to shake hands before you go.

In post offices

Counter-staff don't like having to deal with only one, or just a few things, for each customer. This is because these customers are likely to come back again and again to be served. When you visit a post office, it is advisable, then, to make full use of all the services they provide, such as issuing TV licenses, car licenses, selling stamps, withdrawing money, paying in funds to an account, and posting letters and parcels. This applies particularly in the run-up to Christmas when there are large queues in the post office.

In restaurants

Many people are confused by the array of cutlery in restaurants. The rule is this: eat large items with a big utensil, medium ones with an in-between size, and small items with small ones. This creates a much more interesting meal-time for you. A meal of peas, carrots, broccoli, roast potatoes and sirloin steak should take care of most of the cutlery. Use the spoons to scoop up the gravy. You can use the same spoon to eat your dessert with and to stir your coffee. Glasses and serviettes are provided for you to wash your fingers with afterwards. That is why glasses are shaped the way they are, so that you can get your fingers into them easily. Don't forget to ask the waiter for some soap.

People at adjoining tables will be thrilled if you join in their conversations, especially young couples who may not know exactly what to say to each other.

Waiters like to be given a tip so think of some good advice to give them before you leave.

Shopping

Shopkeepers always dread running out of change. To do them a favour and also to prevent credit card abuse, always pay for items in cash - the smaller the coins, the better. Buying a new car with loose change will really give the salesman something to remember.

Bear in mind when queuing up for the till at supermarkets that not only the baskets but also the trolleys should be placed on the conveyor belt. If you have any difficulty doing this, ask the next person to you to give you a hand.

Filling stations

All the attendants are skilled car mechanics, so don't be afraid to ask them to do a major repair on your car. Don't be put off by how they may be dressed – this is just for show. To avoid being sexist, ask the lady behind the till if she could change a wheel for you. She may say she can't, but she will be pleased you asked her.

In the cinema

It is often difficult for people to follow everything that is going on on the screen. You should therefore describe things in detail in as loud a voice as you can for their benefit.

Cinemas rely upon sales of sweets and popcorn to help break even, so buy as much as you can to eat while you watch the film. To show how you are helping them out, always choose sweets with wrinkly paper which can be heard throughout the cinema. Belching loudly, passing wind and slurping your drink will send the same message.

At concerts

Musicians love to be applauded, so clap whenever any of them stops playing or begins to play. Shout

"Encore" after each number and sing along with tunes you know. This will be appreciated by the musicians who might otherwise lose their place in the music.

English musicians are very versatile and love to demonstrate this, so at a classical music concert shout out the name of the latest pop song for them to play.

On passing a school

Show that you do not intend any harm to the children by offering them sweets or cigarettes and remember to take a lighter with you. Teachers prefer to be given DVD's, particularly hard porn which they can use for biology lessons.

At parties

Taking along a bottle of wine or flowers is now considered to be patronising and can be regarded as sexist, depending upon whether it is the host or hostess that you give them too. Women may prefer the wine, and men the flowers. To prevent such social breaches of etiquette, what is now done is to stuff money into the hostess's cleavage. She will pretend to protest - but that is all part of the ritual. If you do not have any notes on you, coins will do, provided they are warmed beforehand. A gift of a video camera to the host so that he can film this would be very appropriate.

Small talk

If a woman asks you "Does my bottom look big in this?" you should realise that this is a rhetorical question and you should pay her the compliment she is looking for by telling her that it looks really enormous.

The weather

Everyone knows that English people like to talk about the weather. This is usually a way of starting up a conversation. You can therefore feel safe in ignoring the small talk and immediately launch into some other subject. For instance, if an elderly lady waiting at a bus stop says to you how it's raining cats and dogs, tell her about your hernia operation as that is what she really wants to know about.

Driving

The traditional day for an outing is on a Sunday. This is a day of relaxation, so drive no more than 20 miles an hour on country-roads whilst admiring the view, or 30 miles an hour in the fast lane of motorways. To acknowledge that you are observing this day of rest, other drivers will flash their lights at you and sound their horns. Wave back at them using the first two fingers of your right hand.

In Church

Just because some men like to wear costumes that look like full-length dresses in church doesn't mean that they are necessarily gay. They may just like cross-dressing.

You will hear “Ah men!” several times – this does not have any sexual significance, at least for most of the congregation.

On meeting people

When people say: “How are you?” be sure to tell them of any health problems you might have in great detail. If they should say: “How do you do?” the correct response if you are uncertain is to say “Do what?”

You will find that when people are not well, they will tell you that they are “fine” or “not bad”. This means that you should immediately call the ambulance. If on the other hand they really are well, they will also reply that they are “fine” or “not bad”. To prevent any ambiguity, you should act quickly... and call the ambulance.

At hospital

The word hospital is short for hospitality, so if you want a room for the night, this is the place to go. Look for the sign A&E, which is short for accommodation with entertainment.

In a pub

If you follow someone to the bar, they will inevitably buy you a drink. After it’s been drunk, it is obligatory for you to then buy a round of drinks for everyone else in the pub.

Queuing

British people take pride in this. The custom is that the latest person to join the queue goes to the front.

Bumping into anyone

If you should accidentally knock or hit another person by accident there is no need to apologise. The person you have hurt will immediately apologise to you for being in the way. However if you have a car accident you should always claim responsibility whether it is your fault or not in order to make life easier for your insurance company dealing with the claim.

On meeting royalty

If you should happen to meet the queen, she will curtsy to you. You should follow this up by asking her:

"So, what do you do?"

At a cricket match

Wave at the batsman as he is about to strike the ball. He will think you are being friendly and will probably come off the pitch straightaway to greet you personally. The match will then pause for a while until a new batsman goes out on to the pitch where you can wave at him too. This can continue for quite a while and you will make a lot of new acquaintances.

Spending the evening at home with people

When it's getting late, they will say: "Oh you can't go yet. Have another drink." It is rude to refuse. After a while, they may disappear occasionally to put the dustbin out ready for the collection and to let the cat out. Eventually they may go away and change into their pyjamas. "Are you sure you won't have another drink?" they may say. The correct thing to reply is to say "Ok, just a small one thanks." A little later they may offer you "one for the road." This is just for the road outside. Remembering there are many other roads in the country you may remain there without moving until you have had enough for all the roads in town. By this time, you may think it would be polite to take your leave...if you are in a fit state to do so. However, they may insist you stay overnight, especially if you are driving home. You might as well take them up on the offer but not before telling them what you like for breakfast. It would be inconsiderate not to tell them.

These simple rules will help you become more confident and life will never be the same for you again.

THE RENEWABLE ENERGETIC MAN

Horace was never the same after he got solar panels on his house. He became totally obsessed with knowing how much electricity they had produced each day and would check the readings every hour and enter them in his little notebook. He regarded his semi-detached house as a sort of power-station, exporting electricity to the rest of the world.

He was also fanatical about wind turbines whenever he passed them in his car on the odd occasions when he went out. He could not see how much electricity they were generating but had to take a guess, depending upon how fast they were turning. If by chance they were not moving, he knew something was wrong and thinking about them kept him awake at night.

One day things changed when he had an accident in his car and it was declared a write-off. Instead of buying a new one, he decided to do without one as he was retired and it was too expensive to run one.

He missed seeing the wind turbines and toyed with the idea of installing one of his own in the back garden. He was most disappointed when the council did not give him planning permission for one, not even a teeny-weeny one. He had to console himself with concentrating solely upon his solar panels.

All this time doing nothing more than solar record-keeping eventually drove his wife up the wall and she urged him to get out more. Not being a person to do anything by half-measures, he joined the bowls club, and then the croquet club, and followed this by becoming part of the darts team at the local pub. He was elected on to the committee of the horticultural society and became a bell-ringer at the church. It was also up to him to do the shopping which he did bi-weekly. This meant he had to do a lot of walking round and was happy to see the wind turbines again. But he could no longer keep up his rigorous observations of the readings for the solar panels which distressed him a great deal.

There were no street lights in his part of town and he had to carry a torch with him at night. This was a nuisance as he had various other things to carry, including some bowling balls, croquet mallets, a set of darts, assorted plants and church bells, not to mention shopping, but obviously not all at the same time. His salvation came when he saw in a catalogue an advertisement for some special shoes. When the heel struck the ground, it was converted into enough electricity to power up a light. He explained it to his wife: "You see: pressure on the pizza-electric crystals causes electricity to be produced in the crystal lettuce." *

"Very nice, dear," she replied. "And don't forget to buy some Brussel sprouts when you go to the shops."

He sent off for the shoes which arrived a week later. That evening, he put them on and walked down the street to the post box. True enough, they did create lights radiating out from each shoe which helped him to see the road better, but the lights were too low to see anything higher, and he could not find the post box. Still, it was a start, he thought. And he did avoid stepping into some dog poo.

Geared up by this development, he wondered what else he could do. Gazing lovingly at his solar panels one day he had a brainwave.

If they work on a building, he thought, they must work on something that moves, such as me when I am out walking. He worked out that he would need one panel on the exterior right-hand side of his trousers and the equivalent on his left leg. That would still allow him enough manoeuvrability to do other things beside walking. And he would need two for his top – one at the back, one on the front. He would have to put the top on over his head like a tabard. The important thing was that the solar panels would have to be light-weight and rather flexible.

He hunted online and found some solar panels that fitted the bill perfectly in addition to a charge controller to ensure that the power had the right voltage and current for a battery, which was also needed. Then there was an inverter which would be necessary to change the direct current produced by the panels into alternating current, which would be useful for whatever purpose he needed the power for.

He fastened the panels to a jacket and pair of trousers, connected the cables together and attached them to the charge controller, battery and inverter. After a lot of trial and error attempts, he finally managed to get things to work. He donned the jacket and trousers and went out for a walk in the bright sunlight. It made him feel full of energy, which indeed he was. Back indoors he was able to charge up his mobile phone, laptop and camera. He was delighted. But there was no need to charge them up every day, so he had a think what to do with the spare capacity.

He was aware that on a summer's day wearing solar panels on top of a jacket and trousers got very hot. Maybe he could use the power to produce some air conditioning to cool himself down. He accomplished this by wearing a couple of undershirts sown together at the seams and two pairs of long-johns stitched together in place of his underpants. By using an electric pump on his waist powered by the panels, cold water could be pumped around in the space between these undergarments. He was very pleased with the result and found he was only marginally warmer than if he had been wearing just a shirt and pair of shorts.

The next addition to his outfit was a bowler hat. To the top of this he attached a small wind-turbine. The hat had a wide brim which he bent upwards to form a moat, so that when it rained, the water would accumulate in it. The turbine would then open a small sluice gate in the front, and the cascade of water that flowed down would turn a small wheel, which could produce enough hydro-electric power to operate

a pair of miniature windscreen wipers on his spectacles. He was very proud of this highly ingenious system. This was very successful when it was raining hard, but the stream of water shooting off his hat down his forehead could be annoying. But at least his hair was kept dry, what little of it there was, and he could see where he was going in the torrential rain. The only other drawback was that when it was just sprinkling with rain the wipers did not work, but at least his glasses did not need to be wiped dry so often at such times.

You might have thought that this was the end of his endeavour to harness mother nature. But no. He realised that when he was walking, not only his legs went back and forth but also his arms would swing up and down, as they do. Surely, he could utilise this movement? The thought struck him that the friction caused by his clothes rubbing against each other when walking would convert kinetic energy into thermal energy, ie heat. It was now obvious to him. In the cold weather he would simply have to make short steps so that his trousers rubbed together and swing his arms very vigorously to rub against the sides of his coat. In hot weather on the other hand, he would have to make sure to take long strides to avoid any rubbing and to hold his arms up well away from his sides.

He was now fully equipped. The weather, whatever it threw at him, could not stop him from walking round and in all this gear he became very noticeable to other people, for some reason or other. For a short while everything went well. He was an example to follow for other people who wished to cut down their carbon footprints, he mused.

But then things started to go wrong. Sad to say, his way of walking by digging his heels on the ground caused too much pressure to build up, and one day his right shoe exploded. If he had not stopped in his tracks the left one would have done the same thing. The explosion not only injured his foot but also burnt a hole in the ends of his long-johns causing the cooling water to flow out over his shoes. The lack of water in his long-johns created a surge of power to the cooling water in his undershirt, such that it rushed around his torso before creating a massive fissure above his shoulders where the water shot out. Most of the water hit the blades of the wind-turbine which sprayed it around, soaking people standing near him. What was left went straight up in the air above his head and after a short while fell back on to his hat, quickly filling the brim, turning the sluice wheel and making the windscreen wipers on his glasses go back and forth at an alarmingly fast pace. The electric cables became soaked in water, which gave him nasty electric shocks all over his body which made him jerk up and down uncontrollably. He leapt around thrashing his arms wildly about which produced so much heat they caused a spark which set his clothes alight.

Fortunately, the water doused the flames before he was badly burnt, but he found himself within minutes standing naked in the shopping centre jumping up and down, swearing loudly and glowing a

deep blue colour.

This was not the end of his exploits, as you may think. He began to receive bookings for parties to put on this show and even appeared on television once. His new career in fact was just starting. The Renewable Energetic Man, as he dubbed himself, had found his niche in life.

**He meant "piezoelectricity" and "crystal lattice".*