



SILLY SHORT STORIES

by Paul Busby

volume 3

Silly short stories

Volume 3

by

Paul Gordon Busby

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A COW AND BULL STORY

"We've done it!" said Sam in a loud voice, clutching a letter in his hand as he burst into the kitchen.

His wife, Sue, was making breakfast and had her back to him.

"There's no need to tell all the neighbours," she said sharply, "and that was well over an hour ago."

Sam was clearly very excited. "We've finally done it. After all that effort. Whew!"

"Calm down!" she said. But there was no stopping Sam.

"We've heard from the television people. They are going to film it. The whole thing. Isn't that fantastic!" he said.

"That'll be the shortest programme that's ever been made."

"No, I'm talking about the football. They are going to come and televise the entire match. "

Sue turned around to face her husband and saw the letter in his hand.

"Are you sure it's really from them?"

"Definitely. It's signed by Toby Vude– that's the man I've been communicating with for the last year. And there's a TV logo at the top of the page. It's genuine enough."

"Well, congratulations. What can we do to celebrate...how about a glass of wine with your corn flakes?"

"Better still, put the wine straight into the cereal dish. It'll make a change from milk. I'm not

going to work today, so what the hell!”

Sam Shorthorn was the manager of the local football team in Bulltown, population 8,000, in the north of England. For five years the town had been twinned with a similar-sized one in Northern France, called La Vache Dans Les Chiottes, which translates as the Moo in the Loo, although the name of the town was usually shortened to La Vache for convenience. Many reciprocal visits had taken place, but this project – a football match between the different teams – was the most ambitious so far.

Sam had been in touch with the local television company about it, but up until now they had shown no interest. No-one will want to watch it, he was told repeatedly. The Bulltown Bombers were not even in any of the leagues. They had also lost every match they had played this season, but the players were not daunted by this – they simply enjoyed kicking a ball around.

Sam had tried various incentives to appeal to the television company (free drinks for the TV crew, hot meals for them, overnight accommodation, and so on.) He had also thought of advertising the TV company on the players’ shirts and spelling out the company’s name in flowers at the entrance to the pitch, but all to no avail.

Then, a fortnight ago, an idea had struck him. Women’s football was becoming very popular. What about two women’s teams competing?

It was then pointed out to him that the French team would not take kindly to being called The Cows. But what if the French team were male and the home team, female? There were some objections to that idea. Some people thought that it would not be fair to match women against men in sport as men tend to be taller and stronger. On the other hand, as other people suggested, women can be very agile and good with the ball. This argument won the day, and, as Sam had just found out, the television company had been won around and were very eager to cover the match.

All that he had to do now was to find enough women to make up a team, that is, if he could

not persuade all of the male players to wear drag. A few of them had no objections to this, in fact one of them did so all the time. But it soon dawned on him that this was a non-starter.

His next instinct was to see if the wives and partners of the men's team would be suitable. They would probably know a lot about the game already and could be coached at home if necessary. But on approaching them, he found that without exception they refused to go along with this. It's enough to have to wash one muddy football kit after each game as it was, without having an extra set to wash. It was not all in vain, however, as the mother of one of the men, Freda, was very keen on playing, and as she was suffering from severe sciatica and could not get around very quickly, she was assigned the role of goalkeeper.

Finding other team-members was quite a job. Any female joggers, easily recognised by their ponytails, were press-ganged into joining the team. Betsy, the barmaid at the Duck and Whistle, was also an obvious choice as she was used to standing up for hours on end and rushing from one side of the bar to the other. She also had huge biceps through pulling pints all evening, a quality it was thought could be important, but no-one knew quite how. It was later found out that some people had thought it was for a rugby match, rather than football.

Word soon got around and in the end Sam was spoiled for choice. His instinct was to go for the better-looking women until his wife had a word with him. She pointed out that in facing a team of men, what was needed was big brawny women, preferably unattractive ones. In fact, to put it bluntly, the uglier the better, which would serve to repel the men on the French football team when it came to tackling. The few good-looking women on the team could act as decoys who would attract the men, leaving the others free to sneak in and score the goals.

As soon as a full women's team had been hastily assembled, a practice session was arranged. The biggest problem was getting the players to leave their mobile phones in the changing room.

"There's not enough time to text someone else that you are going to pass the ball to them," explained the coach. (Sam held this position as well as being the manager.) "You'll also find that you can play better if you leave your handbags in the changing room," he added.

Some of the women felt this was sarcastic and sexist and threatened to walk out. Sam had to quickly think of a compromise.

“OK,” he said. “You can bring your handbags onto the field if you tie them round your waist. But I do draw the line at handbagging your opponents, by which I mean literally bashing them over the head with your handbags.”

“Oh, come on,” said one of the team. “If you’re serious about winning the match, we need all the help we can get.”

But Sam held his ground and went on to outline the rules of the game: “The referee would regard handbagging as a penalty, almost as bad as being offside.”

“I’ve looked up the rules and I can’t find anywhere that it says you can’t hit anyone with a handbag,” remarked one of the women.

“OK, we’ll leave it up to the ref,” said Sam, wanting to move on.

“Who is the ref?” someone asked.

“I wanted to find a referee who could be completely impartial, so I’ve hired someone from Germany,” Sam answered.

“Is the ref male or female?” several people asked.

“Well, a bit of both, if you see what I mean. Their name is Hans Orff. Born a man, changed into a woman when a teenager. Didn’t like how women were treated, so changed back into a man and is now unhappy with that and is in the stages of changing back into a woman.”

“So erm, will they go to the men’s or women’s toilet?” queried someone.

“A good point. We’ll have to make both of those Hans-free zones and hire a portaloos just for him, her, I mean they. I should add that they doesn’t speak a word of English or French and they doesn’t know anything about football, but they has a great talent for whistle-blowing, which is all that matters. In fact, they has a degree in it.”

Everyone said: “Wow!”

“As the match is going to be on telly, can I dress up for it?” enquired one of the younger ladies.

“Only those women who are acting as decoys,” answered Sam. “It might be good if they wore high-heels, fishnet tights and short skirts. You know what French men are like!” (None of them actually knew any, but they had read about them and all nodded their head enthusiastically.)

“Other players should wear regulation shirts, shorts, socks and football-boots,” Sam continued. “Elsie, the goal-keeper can wear her slippers as all the action will be well away from her. Any more questions? No? Well let’s kick the ball around a bit as we’ve only got five minutes left.”

“Just a moment. What exactly is the offside rule you mentioned,” a voice piped up.

“If I were to explain it, that would prevent us from having any practice at all today,” said Sam. “And besides, Hans doesn’t know what it is either, so you can safely forget all about it.” And with that, he led everyone onto the pitch.

As soon as he had received the letter from the television company, Sam had telephoned his opposite number in La Vache to tell him of the plans and to fix a date. Valéry Vachères got his team together and told them the good news. Unfortunately, the date was in the middle of the wine harvest and several of the players could not afford to have the time off. A few others were busy making cheese or having to ride about town on their bicycles with a string of onions around their neck. The remainder all seemed to be taking part in strike action or were going on protests. That left very few players, so other men had to be dragooned into joining the team - the ‘Vacheries’.

A number of retired men from the boules club offered their services, provided they could bring their walking aids with them. A trawl of the town’s outdoor cafes brought in a few more, mostly men who were worse for wear and were biding their time before the bars in the town opened again. Then there was an artist, Claude, who wanted to combine the match with drawing action-shots of football, and lastly, the mayor of the town, Marcel Marguerite, although his close friends, in particular Claude, referred to him as 'L’homme gentil'.

Having assembled enough players to make up a team, Valéry got them all together and told them what the objective of the game was. Most of them understood.

“You do realise that you will be playing against a team of women,” he said. “English women – think of...Margaret Thatcher.”

“Mon Dieu!” said the artist. “We shall be massacred.”

“There’s no need to worry,” Valéry reassured them. “Just think of Napoleon. We shall easily defeat them.”

“Where will we be staying?” asked an elderly man.

“You will be sleeping overnight with the families of the English women’s team. The women’s husbands have agreed, albeit reluctantly, to do the cooking.”

“Merde!!!” said everyone at once.

“No cause for alarm,” Valérie said. “Apparently, all the husbands regularly watch a TV programme about cooking presented by someone called Nigella Lawson.”

That seemed to put their minds at rest, whoever Nigella Lawson was.

A few weeks before the day of the match it was discovered that the playing field in Bulltown had been booked for a boot fair on the same date. It was impossible to change the day of the boot fair as people were coming from far and wide and some of the proceeds were going towards the local school. Rather than choose another date, it was decided to hold the match in the evening after the boot fair had finished. The football pitch had overhead lights, so there was no problem. The change of timing fitted in well with the French team as they would have more time to make their way there from Dover, and all of them could have an afternoon nap in the coach. The television company grumbled about it, but agreed to do a live broadcast, if needs must.

The rest of the planning went ahead with no hiccoughs. On the day itself, the town’s local

dignitaries – the parish council and the vicar – welcomed the arrival of the coach and there was a meal laid on for them in the *Duck and Whistle* with copious amounts of ale for the French team to wash down the tripe and onions, followed by rhubarb pie and custard. Sam had prewarned the English team not to eat or drink very much as there was only a single toilet for women on the ground, and he had forgotten to order more toilet paper.

Everyone was then taken to the football pitch where the vicar blessed the players and the infant school choir sang *God Save the Queen* and *La Marseillaise*... as best as they could. They were rather handicapped by the fact that their music teacher had a terrible speech impediment and their French teacher was tone-deaf.

Finding a coin to toss to start the game was a bit of a problem. A pound coin and a euro coin were both deemed unsuitable. The matter was resolved by the vicar finding a shekel in his pocket, left over from his recent trip to the Holy Land. The French team won the toss, Hans blew his whistle and François, a 93-year old philosophy student, took up his position behind the ball for the kick-off.

“Ees thees a real ball, or ees eet jus’ een ma ‘ead?” he said to himself. “Eef eet ees jus’ een ma ‘ead , I may ‘ave to keeck ma ‘ead to move eet.”

Hans blew his whistle twice.

As François puzzled over the existence of the ball, the smoke from his cigarette curled slowly upwards.

“But eef the ball ees real, why ees eet not moving. Ees a ball steell a ball eef eet does not move? Surely, the purpose of a ball ees to move, n’est-ce pas?”

Hans blew his whistle three times. The other players clapped his virtuoso performance.

“Ah ha!” said François. “I theenk, therefore I keeck.”

But it was too late as Marcel, the mayor, had given up waiting and had himself run towards the ball and kicked it. Marcel and François collided as both touched the ball at the same time, which sent them both flying.

The ball landed in front of the barmaid, Betsy, who only just stopped herself in time from picking it up to wash. Satisfied that it was not an empty glass, she changed her mind and gave it a hefty boot forward. The ball rose high into the air before falling to the ground where it struck Henri, one of the elderly boules players who had forgotten to bring his zimmer on to the pitch with him. He fell backwards with a loud plop, and several of his team-mates had to muster round him to help him up again.

The ball meantime had rolled a fair distance away where Jessie, one of the English decoys, was jogging up and down. It should be pointed out that the original tactic suggested by Sue had failed as the French team, comprising mainly of very elderly men, habitual drunks and gays were simply not inclined or even capable of chasing after women in short skirts. Jessie made a quick run towards the ball and kicked as hard as she could. The ball remained where it was, while her right shoe went flying towards the French net. Pierre, their goalkeeper, who was already pining for a drink, saw an object coming towards him, and hoping it might be a wine-bottle, caught it. He soon found out it was not when the stiletto jabbed his palm and he vigorously flung the shoe away.

His cry of pain caught the attention of the vicar on the terraces who immediately ran on to the pitch towards him. Seeing a pool of blood on the ground, the vicar gave Pierre the last rites. As priests were in short supply in Bulltown, he had to officiate at both Anglican and Roman Catholic services, as well as helping out in the Methodist Chapel when needed. The power of healing prayer was not enough to stop the blood, however, and so Pierre took out his handkerchief and tied it round the wound, which seemed to work better, or at least quicker.

Meanwhile, Louis, an out-of-work mime artist had arrived at the ball and did a good job of imitating a footballer. He did such a good job that the ball shot off in the direction of Jules, a retired accordian player who tried to retrieve it, but in the process stumbled over Edith, a heavy-weight spinster who ran the town's sweetshop. A look of intense joy appeared on her face as she fell beneath him.

The ball continued rolling towards the English half and was propelled further by Jacques, a former award-winning croissant-maker, who was then tackled by Beatrice, the unsmiling, stern headmistress of Bulltown school. But she was stopped in her tracks by Claude, the artist, who

had dropped his sketchpad and was stooping to pick it up when she ran into by him.

With the ball now only a few yards away from the English net, Marcel saw his big chance and prepared himself to make history. Freda, the English goalkeeper, had seen him coming and had put down her knitting. In the excitement of the moment she had forgotten about her sciatica and was preparing to make a mighty leap towards the ball when fate intervened: the lights suddenly went out and complete darkness engulfed the football pitch.

There was a moment's silence before a babble of voices could be heard. There were shouts, groans, and all manner of snorts. There was a plethora of French swear words that none of the English team knew, and vice versa. And there were bangs and bumps and scrapes and ripping sounds, and there were also a few sighs and even laughs and cries of delight. This went on for minutes and minutes which gradually added up to half-an-hour or more.

Off the pitch, Sam, who had been joined by the French manager, Valéry, were quite perplexed what to do. Very few people had turned up to watch the game as they had preferred to stay home and watch it on television, so they could not rely on the few scattered spectators to help. After a long while, Sam had a brainwave and asked all the school-children to shine the torches on their mobile phones onto the pitch, but the children were too busy texting their friends, telling them about what was going on.

Valéry wondered if the vicar could sing a hymn, but the only one that came into his mind was "Nearer, my God, to thee," as he had conducted a funeral service the day before. This did not seem entirely appropriate. His singing could not be heard anyway, as Hans was performing a selection of Wagnerian arias on his whistle to entertain everyone.

The television crew were also at a loss as to what to do. They had continued filming after it went dark, imagining that any moment the lights would come on again. The commentators kept quiet as they could think of nothing at all to say, but their microphones picked up the various sounds emanating from the pitch. This continued for some forty minutes when they decided to call it a day.

Minutes later the lights came on again. It revealed several people lying on the ground, some sitting down waiting to be rescued and some walking round and round in circles. But fortunately,

no-one was injured, bar a few cuts and bruises as people bumped into each other in the dark. Everyone was in good spirits after the initial shock had worn off and there was a general feeling of bonhomie as everyone had shared the same experience. Everyone had faced adversity together.

The game was declared a draw, thanks to a miraculous save by Freda. The sudden movement had released her trapped nerve and she felt like a new woman for a few seconds before getting tangled up in the net, and spent the rest of the time dangling a few feet from the ground. The French mayor got over his disappointment at not scoring the goal, but remembered with pride the kick he had made, which someone remarked to him was truly “magnifique”.

The players went off to have their evening meals - mostly take-aways from the local fish and chip shop, it was later revealed - and then a good night’s sleep before the French team set off for home the next day.

Following the game, the television company had been besieged with telephone calls and text messages. A few - a very few in fact - made complaints about the obscene programme, full of writhing bodies and wanton behaviour. The vast majority of calls, however, praised the show for its realism, particularly the writhing bodies and wanton behaviour. This was in response to the dark, blank screens which had been broadcast for much of the match.

At the meeting of the Board of Managers of the television company the following day, the coverage of the football match was deemed to be exceptional. Other television networks had heard about it and were sending in their congratulations. Some of the sports programmes on national television had also asked if they could use the footage of the match.

“I think we have made a big impact,” said Toby Vude, the chairman. “We must build upon this success. Let us have a fresh look at more ways we can cover sports events and find a few more sports that we can cover.”

Everyone who was present agreed with him.

“But before we adjourn, there is something I’d like to know.”

He turned to the camera-men who had been at the match. “Do you have any idea why the lights went out?”

“Sounds ridiculous, but it was to do with the organiser of the boot fair – a woman called Rosemary, I believe.” answered one of them. “She turned on the overhead lights to the ground when they were packing up as it was getting rather gloomy and she didn’t want anything left behind. She was still checking things over when the match started. When she was satisfied there was nothing left hanging around, she went to the toilet, and afterwards turned off the switch for the ground-lights – it was right beside the ladies’ toilet, next to the exit door. On reaching home, she couldn’t find the key to her house, and so she drove back again to see if she had left it in the toilet. This meant she had to switch all the lights on again, and as there were other women queuing there, she left them to turn off the lights when she went home again.”

“We have her to thank for our good fortune,” commented Toby. “Why don’t we invite her on to the board. We could do with a person of her exceptional abilities.”

The idea was accepted unanimously. The future looked decidedly Rosy, as you can find out for yourself in the next story.

Glossary

La Vache Dans Les Chiottes - The Moo in the Loo (English) / The Cow in the Toilet

Vachères – Cowherd

Vacheries – Cowshit, nasty or mean remarks

La vache – literally, the cow, or Oh my God! (slang)

(Une) marguerite – a daisy (a common name for a cow in England)

L’homme gentil – a nice man, or a daisy

Merde! – Shit!

THE DAY RAIN DIDN'T STOP PLAY

"Finally, I'd like to introduce you all to Rosemary Bootsie, a new member of the Board. She was responsible for the exceptional viewing figures and high ratings we had for the last football game we broadcast," announced the chairman of Up North Television, Toby Vude, to the other members. "Rosemary, would you like to share with us now some of your ideas for future sports coverage?"

"Thank you, Mr Chairman," she said, rising to her feet. "It is an honour to be here. But please call me Rosy. People have complimented me on looking good in beds...flower beds, that is, and on my alluring perfume, but I also have sharp thorns if not handled right."

There were some polite laughs at this rather disconcerting start to her tenure, but she seemed to have won over the reluctant board members who had never before been joined by a female colleague. People did, however, take note of her final remark and wondered how exactly she might like to be handled.

"The lesson we learned from that unusual football match, most of which was held in the dark, is that we should have a new approach to certain problems, such as adverse weather conditions. A lot of money and effort is put into covering a game, whatever it is, and in the past that money is thrown down the drain if it happens to rain, or snow or if a storm blows up unexpectedly. What I'm saying is that instead of ceasing to broadcast the event at such times, we should find ways to continue filming so no-one is left feeling disappointed or out of pocket."

Her speech was applauded and the meeting came to an end. Rosy had indicated her intentions. Now she had to find ways of implementing them.

It was the middle of April, the start of the cricket season in England, when Rosy got a chance to put her plans into operation. April can also be a wet time of the year. In his day, Chaucer described it as a month marked by “shoures soote”, but not many present-day hikers, holiday-makers, gardeners or even cricketers, regard the downpours as being “sweet showers”. All too often the rain is heavy and prolonged, especially in the North of England. When it rains during a cricket match, play is adjourned until it stops and the dreaded phrase “Rain Stop Play” puts a damper on things. What can be really annoying is when one team is doing well and looks as if it might win the game, but then play is abandoned when it starts to bucket down and the match is declared a draw. The better team might be awarded more points but that is not much consolation to the spectators who were expecting a relaxing day off-work, only to get thoroughly drenched before the end of the game.

But Rosy was not thinking of the spectators, but the viewers. When the television company was asked to cover a cricket match in April, she persuaded the rest of the board to say yes, provided that suitable precautions were taken to prevent any bad weather from interrupting the day’s play. This required a meeting with the captains of the home team, the vicar of Bulltown, and the undertaker of the opposing team in the town of Sheeply. Satisfied that everything would go ahead as planned, the television company agreed to cover the game, and on the appointed day the cameras and crew arrived at Bulltown, ready to start shooting.

As there was only one recreational ground in Bulltown, it had to serve various functions. Users had to put up with the presence of rugby goal posts and football goals on the pitch as they were permanent features, together with a few tennis nets and fences for the gymkhana around the perimeter, but this was generally not a problem, provided people remembered what sport they were supposed to be playing at the time. There were a few instances when tennis players mistook the football goals for the tennis net, and a horse-rider once tried to jump the rugby posts, but these mishaps were few and far-between.

It started out as a lovely sunny day. The Sheeply team were the first in to bat and the Bulltown players took up their positions in the field. The opening batsmen both wore sunglasses and suntan lotion. The Bulltown baker, a man who was more adept at swimming than playing

cricket - as his bowling demonstrated - delivered the first ball to the Sheeplly butcher, who held his bat as if it were a leg of lamb. Nevertheless, he somehow managed to block all the balls, so that at the end of the *over* (after the sixth ball), no runs had been scored. At this point, the arrival of some ominous black clouds was noticed in the sky.

The fielders changed their positions for the second *over* from the opposite end. The Bulltown bowler was a hairdresser, wearing a very nice shoulder-length blond wig, pitted against a farmer from Sheeplly, who gave the impression that he was pitching hay rather than batting. He put on an entertaining show, but missed all the balls except the last one of the *over*, which he sent flying into the air. It was caught by a Bulltown fielder, but not before the first drops of rain had begun to fall. Within minutes the rain had become a steady downpour and the umpires made the decision to stop play momentarily and adjourn to the pavilion.

This was the moment the camera-men were dreading, but they erected a shelter over themselves and managed to stay dry, except for imbibing several of the cans of beer which they had brought with them.

In a short while, the cricketers came back on to the pitch, all wearing anoraks, and took up position for the game to be resumed. The new Sheeplly batsman taking the place of the dismissed farmer was the undertaker, who took up position near the far wicket, awaiting his turn to face the bowling. He could not be mistaken as he was the only player dressed entirely in black.

It was now down to the Bulltown baker to bowl again to the Sheeplly butcher. The bowler felt too encumbered wearing an anorak, so he got one of the fielders to run up to the wicket alongside him carrying an umbrella. It would have been a better idea if the fielder had not been so rotund and could have run as quickly as the baker, as they soon got out of synch. The baker had to slow down virtually to a walk before bowling a ball that hardly seemed to move. The batsman had plenty of time to see this coming, or would have done if he had remembered to remove his sunglasses, and he struck out at it in all directions...and missed. The ball hit the wicket and he was out.

The next Sheeplly batsman who was in to replace the butcher was a carpet-fitter. He took one look at the crease (the white-painted line in front of his wicket) and decided it needed some work done on it. He battered the grass down with his bat until no blade was left standing before

signaling he was ready to face the ball.

The bowler, in the meantime, had chosen another fielder to accompany him with an umbrella – a young fit gym-instructor. When both of them started running, the gym-instructor took up a commanding lead ahead of the baker, who faced the full force of the rain without any protection. He was sopping wet by the time he bowled and the ball hit the ground half way down the pitch and then veered off to the side. The batsmen - the carpet-fitter - seized the opportunity to go for a run, and then another until the ball was retrieved and thrown to the wicket-keeper. When the batsman sprinted back to the wicket he slithered on the wet muddy ground and ended up with his bat wedged in the wicket.

The next batsman out to replace the carpet-fitter was an interior-designer. He had been forced to come out of the pavilion, as he was not used to being outside in the rain. The umpires decided this was the moment to deploy the stock of wellington boots for the Bulltown team, seeing that the ground had become far too slippery to run on without falling over.

The baker, now suitably attired in his wellingtons, chose yet another fielder to run with. The problem this time was that the person he chose was much shorter than him, although they did manage to run at the same speed. The run-up to the wicket proved disastrous for the bowler as the umbrella was so close to his head it totally obscured his vision, and the ball went a long way off at right-angles to the wicket. Thinking this was a devious spin that the bowler had put on the ball, the batsman - the interior-designer - ran after the ball as far as the boundary line. Not remembering whether he was bowling or batting, he threw the ball to the wicket-keeper who immediately stumped him, and he too was out.

A painter-decorator was the next Sheepley batsman to come out. By now, the rain was coming down in torrents. The baker-bowler had finally settled upon the ideal umbrella-carrier amongst the rest of the fielders. They reached the wicket at the same time and the baker delivered a good ball to the batsman. Just as the ball left the hand of the bowler, the mobile phone in the pocket of the batsman rang. He instinctively took it out. It was his wife threatening him with blue murder if he got his clothes messed-up. He promised her he would be very careful, when the ball struck his phone and knocked him over into the mud. This was the first recorded case of being declared out as a result of MBW (mobile-before-wicket).

Out came another batsman to take his place. This was the Sheepley Indian doctor. He hit his first ball to the boundary, giving him six runs. He gave the second one a mighty whack as he had spotted a wide space with no fielders close-by. The fielders ran after it as best as they could in their wellington boots and eventually reached it, but not before the batsman had made twelve runs out of it.

The *over* was over and the fielders changed position for the other bowler, the hairdresser, to bowl from the opposite end. The rain had played havoc with his blond wig. To keep it from falling off he had tied the lank ends together under his chin. This was not comfortable for him but he put on a brave face and dispensed with the offer of an umbrella-bearer. In fact, he rather enjoyed being soaked to the skin. It made him feel so manly.

The Sheepley undertaker, who was now batting, expected a slow delivery, judging by the appearance of the bowler. But he was taken aback by the speed of the ball as it approached him. At this stage of the game, the ball had acquired a thick coat of mud and grass around it, and when the ball bounced on the ground in front of him, he was suddenly covered in the stuff. Moments later, the ball struck his bat. The ball rolled a few feet away and he risked going for a run. From the opposite wicket, the doctor was obliged to run too, but when they arrived in the middle of the pitch, they both got stuck in the churned-up mud and deep puddles which had formed there. Meanwhile, a fielder pounced on the ball and threw it at the wicket before the two batsmen could finish the run. The ball hit the wicket and the wicket-keeper picked it up and immediately threw it at the other wicket. Both batsmen were duly out.

It took a time for two more Sheepley batsmen, a banker and an estate agent, to reach the wickets because the whole ground was by now under water in places. The banker had taken precautions and had put some flippers on his feet in case the water-level were to rise – this might prove to be a wise investment, he thought. He was first to face the bowling from the hairdresser who was clearly buoyed up from having just taken two wickets. The banker gave the ball a sharp prod and attempted to make a run. However, after a few steps his flippers got well and truly stuck in the mud and he could not move. This gave a fielder the chance to knock the stumps off the wicket to dismiss him. It took most of the fielders to free the batsman from the mud and he had to walk back to the pavillion barefoot, minus his flippers.

The next man in in the Sheepley team was a telephone sales representative. For the following three balls of the *over* he played defensive shots with no runs, as he was too much preoccupied in chatting to those near him, asking how they all were and trying to drum up business. On the last ball of the *over* he scored a run and faced the bowling again in the next *over* from the opposite end. Each ball in this *over*, apart from the last one, he hit to the boundary. For the last ball, he again limited himself to just one run. In this way, he faced the bowling yet again and did the same thing, over and over again. In short, the Bulltown team could not get rid of him. After many *overs* had gone this way, he eventually made a mistake by scoring two runs on the last ball. This meant that the estate agent now faced the ball, by which time he was past caring, and was bowled out with the very first ball.

The last man to come out to the wicket was the driver of the coach who had brought the Sheepley team to Bulltown. He had offered to play as the eleventh man in their team could not make it, owing to sickness. The partnership between the coach-driver and the telephone sales representative produced a huge number of runs, which only ended when the sales rep, thinking he might have sold some double-glazed windows to the wicket-keeper, took off his glove to shake his hand and was caught out - by the wicket-keeper himself.

The Sheepley innings had finally come to an end and they had amassed an enormous score. There was very little time left for play and the Bulltown team conceded defeat. The fact is that all the players wanted to return to the pavilion and change into some dry clothes. Their anoraks had helped keep them fairly dry down to the waist, but all of them had wet trousers. Their misery was matched by their annoyance, and in some cases, anger. Someone voiced it for everyone when he remarked: "It's just not cricket."

The television crew packed up their equipment and left, knowing that any remaining time in the schedule could be taken up with replays of action shots in slow motion and then in even slower motion, linked together with shots of the rain coming down.

Back in the television centre, Rosy was well pleased with the result. It had been an entertaining day's play, unlike any other cricket match. She was already planning the next outside broadcast in her head. She had free reign to do as she liked and no-one dared to cross

her.

The weather forecast was predicting heavy snow for the following week. During that week there was meant to be a championship golf tournament.

“We’d love to cover it,” she said on the phone to the captain of the golf course. “We never let things like bad weather stand in the way. The golf ball may disappear in the snow, but finding it will be riveting for the players and for our viewers.”

...Indeed, it was.

Footnote

For those readers who are unfamiliar with cricket, here is some basic information for you.

The game of cricket goes back several thousand years to the time of the Celts in Britain, or even earlier. We know this because there is an ancient cricket field in a place called Stonehenge. What you see there are several *wickets* made up of standing-stones joined together at the top by lintels.

The game did not catch on at that time because no bowlers could be found that were strong enough to knock the standing-stones over and cause the lintels to fall off.

Another problem was that the ball had to be very wide so that it did not go in between the stones, that is, the *stumps*. It was not until the wickets were miniaturised that cricket really caught on.

The number of *stumps* used also varied until the Christian era when it was ordained in holy writ that pagans could still play the game, provided that there were three stumps, encompassing a distance of nine inches (three times three) when they are placed in a straight line. The number three has holy connotations.

The height of each of the stumps is 28 inches, and for a good reason, since the purpose of the

game was to seriously maim anyone standing in front of the wicket using a hard ball or other object (curled-up hedgehogs, for instance). This height would do the job well.

Two *bails*, short pieces of wood, were balanced on top of these stumps to make them resemble the lintels at Stonehenge. This formed what is known as a wicket.

In time, another spare wicket was added twenty-two yards away in case the first wicket became broken. Why this distance? Because a clergyman called the Reverend Gunter had invented a new *chain* which he wanted to use. It should have been twenty-one yards long to conform to religious standards, (seven times three) but the final link in the chain overran this by a yard. He had to do penance the rest of his life for getting this wrong.

Although the Christian religion has played a part in the games' development, its pagan background is not forgotten. The two wickets, which are akin to altars, are usually aligned on a North-South axis. The former is used for viewing the sunrise, while the latter is reserved for sunset. These traditions are upheld by *night-watchmen* who are the last batsmen in at the end of the day and the first ones in at the start of the next day.

The practice of keeping a spare wicket was soon deemed wasteful and for a time, both wickets were used at the same time. Unfortunately, this caused considerable confusion and numerous injuries, but it did shorten the time played by half. It was then abandoned and the wickets began to be used alternatively, every six balls, (three plus three) showing the influence of the church again.

A man in a bowler hat would throw the ball at one wicket six times after which the umpire would shout "*over*" – in other words, if you don't stop now your life may be over. (Bowling can be a very strenuous business.) Following this, another player would then throw the ball at the other wicket for the next six deliveries, and so on.

Throwing was eventually replaced by *bowling* as the hats tended to come off in the process. In time, the hats were dispensed with altogether even though the term 'bowling' paid lip service to them. Underarm bowling proved to be too gentile for bowlers who were trying to maim the batsmen who were guarding the sacred wicket, so *overarm* bowling took its place. Overarm bowling also made the bowler appear much taller which served to scare the poor batsmen.

Nowadays, two teams of eleven men per side compete in the game. On one side is the bowler and a *wicket-keeper* whose task it is to retrieve the ball if the batsman misses it, or catch it if he hits it in his vicinity. Having a strong liking for standing hunched over in knee-pads for hours on end is a necessity.

The wicket-keeper can also knock the bails off the stumps if the batsman strays from his allotted space, demarcated by a white line – the *crease*, or to be more exact, the *popping crease*. If he is away from his safe zone he may have to pop back quickly to safety.

The rest of the players on the side of the bowler and wicket-keeper are known as *fielders*, and the name given to each depends upon where in the field they are positioned. There are, for instance, *slips* who have to stand in a slippery part of the field, *a square leg, long leg and a short leg* in honour of disabled fielders, *silly mid-off and silly mid-on* fielders for fielders who tend to look ridiculous, and a host of other names.

The task of all the fielders is to try and catch a ball which the batsman has hit before it reaches the ground, and to retrieve the ball and throw it to one another if they get bored. When the bowling changes ends, the fielders have to regroup to accommodate this, which gives them some much needed exercise if they have been standing still for a spell.

On the other side, there are the *batsmen*, two of whom take up their positions – the one who is not being bowled at stands beside the wicket from where the bowler is delivering the ball; the other who is facing the bowler stands in front of the other wicket, bent over with his bat positioned on the crease.

He may choose to hit the ball if he can and score a *run*, in which case he has to run to the other wicket. At the same time, the other batsman has to run towards the first wicket and replace the first batsman in facing the next ball that is bowled. If the batsmen go for two runs, the first batsman will again face the bowler.

If he gets a chance, he may try and hit the ball towards the *boundary* – the edge of the cricket field, marked by a white line. If he does it without the ball touching the ground, he scores six runs; if the ball rolls part of the distance towards the boundary, he will score four runs. Thereagain, he may choose not to make any runs at all, particularly if he has just had a heavy

meal.

In the hands of a fast bowler, the ball may travel at close to a hundred miles an hour. To protect himself, the batsman therefore wears a hard helmet, gloves, knee-pads and hard shoes. Some of them also wear a box, as there is no joy in scoring a hundred runs if you end up as a eunuch – that tells you where it is worn.

Absorbent underpants may be an additional item of clothing. Spin bowlers do not deliver the ball as quickly but when it touches the ground in front of the batsman it can change direction and catch the batsman off-guard. Life is not easy for a batsman and it makes you wonder if the game was invented by a sadist.

The batsman can be *bowled out* if the ball touches the wicket, or he can be *caught out*, or he can be *stumped* if he is outside the crease, usually by being *run-out*. Fielders who believe the batsman may be out may make an appeal to one of the Celtic gods, *Owzat*. The god then informs the umpire who announces the result.

If the batsman is *out*, he has to walk back to the pavilion and the next player comes on to the pitch to take his position. This goes on until ten out of the eleven batsmen are out, which is described as *all out*, since the game needs two *not out* batsmen for play to continue. This, then, is the end of their innings and it is the other team's turn to bat and score more runs if they can.

I hope this guide clears up any confusion in following the story. Anyone who is more confused than ever should know that many other people are also baffled. Watching an actual cricket match may be the only solution.

WALKIES

Toby Vude, the chairman of Up North Television, was full of praise for his right-hand woman, Rosy Bootsie, for boosting the viewing figures for various sports. But he knew that very soon the enthusiasm for watching football in the dark, cricket in the rain and golf in the snow might wane. There was also a growing number of complaints from sports players about the new policy. Other strategies would have to be used to keep viewers' interest up. On account of her prickly nature, he had to be careful not to cross Rosy, so he suggested instead that there might be other sports and games which could make excellent programmes: dog racing or slow-walking, for instance. Rosy was less than enthusiastic about this as she felt she was being demoted from covering the most popular sports, but she agreed to look into them, even though slow-walking sounded rather weird to her.

She had assumed that by dog-racing, Toby was referring to greyhounds racing around a track.

“That’s old hat,” Toby had said, when she asked him about it. “Nowadays, people want sports with more of a human interest to them, or rather dog-interest. People want to identify with the contestants and not feel that their own little doggie is inferior to them.”

He gave her the phone number of a local dog obedience class which was going to hold its graduation ceremony in a week’s time.

“We would love to have it televised,” the course tutor told her. “Just turn up next Tuesday and I’ll explain it all to you as we go along.”

One of the TV cameras took up position at the starting line and the camera man was instructed to follow the dogs. Another camera was situated at the finishing post, ready for the exciting

finish to the race.

It was thoroughly explained to Rosy that this was not only a race, of sorts, but a test of their obedience, and marks could be added or subtracted accordingly to this. The dogs' owners held on tightly to their dogs' leads, but they were not allowed to interfere in any way in what they got up to.

All together there were four dogs competing – a Jack Russell terrier, a chihuahua, a rottweiler and a bulldog. The difference in sizes was not a factor to be taken into consideration. They were all male dogs, since it was argued that female dogs might have co-operated together instead of competing against each other.

On the starting-line, an official took out her handkerchief, raised it in the air and then quickly lowered it...to blow her nose. Whether this was the start of the race, or to cover her face when she sneezed, is immaterial as the dogs set off anyway. That is, all except the chihuahua, who jumped into the lap of a spectator sitting behind him and had to be cajoled into joining in the race by someone tossing a dog-biscuit in that direction. As for the other dogs, it was not long before the terrier took up a commanding lead as the bulldog seemed more interested in the hind quarters of the rottweiler.

A few yards from the starting position was a tree which the competitors were meant to ignore, but in spite of the efforts of their owners to stop them, all the dogs in turn felt the need to sniff it and then raise their legs to spray it, several times. Marks were deducted for this, but as they all did it, it balanced out.

A short distance further on, the bulldog picked up the scent of a squirrel which had been hiding in the tree until it had judged that it could make its escape along the ground to another tree. The bulldog made chase, followed by the rottweiler and the terrier while the chihuahua curled up on the ground to have a sleep. The dogs' owners had to break into a run to follow their pets, but in the melee, the leads got tangled up and the woman holding on to the terrier's lead slipped up and threw her arms in the air.

This served to startle the squirrel which changed its mind about where it was going and it darted back the way it had come and was immediately followed by the bulldog, rottweiler and

terrier, which woke up the chihuahua, which then joined the chase, followed rapidly by the dogs' owner. The cameraman who had been keeping out of harm's way suddenly found he was directly in the path of the dogs, and became caught up in the leads before being collided into by the owners. His utterances were picked up by the microphone which added somewhat to the enjoyment of the viewers.

The owners tried to keep their dogs under control by shouting orders ("Sit!" "Still!" "Go for it!" "Here, boy!" "Wait!" "Stop it!" and so on). But the dogs were by now thoroughly confused by the barrage of orders and showed their excitement by barking loudly. Somehow, the squirrel managed to reach the tree and climb on to the high branches, and after a while the dogs forgot about it. All of this was too much for the rottweiler which decided that he would take time out to do his business. His owner was very embarrassed by this, but had the foresight to bring some plastic bags with her for such an eventuality. She endeavoured to look as dignified as possible as she scooped up the poop, while being filmed closely by a television camera.

The terrier, in the meantime, had decided that it did not care for the bulldog one bit and went for him. While the two were fighting, the chihuahua had noticed another lap in front of him, just beyond the finishing line, and he made a beeline for it. He was declared the winner and was awarded by being given a huge bone. The two dogs which were fighting were disqualified and the rottweiler was rewarded with a consolation prize – an empty poop bag, in a straight swap with its owner for the full bag that she was carrying.

Rosy, who had been doing the commentary all along, felt relieved that the whole thing was over. There were more than a few complaints about the dog-race by some who were expecting greyhound racing, and by others who saw the words 'obedience classes' in the billing for the show and were disappointed that it was not about S&M. Rosy took a few days off and then turned her attention to the next suggestion: slow-walking.

"Surely this isn't an actual sport?" she asked Toby.

"Indeed, it is – it's just been declared one and it may even be an event in the next Olympics. You know how difficult it is to do something much slower than you are used to doing. This is an

example of this. An organisation of pensioners has been instrumental in setting it up as a competitive sport. I'll give you the details about the next slow-walk ecar."

"What's an 'ecar', for heaven's sake?"

"It's the opposite of race. The object is not to finish first, but last. The winner is the loser, if you see what I mean.

The venue for the competition was not the usual race-track. The starting position was sitting in a car. Competitors had to get out of the car, walk a few steps, climb a short flight of stairs, take a few more steps and then sit down in an armchair, which doubled as the finishing-post. The only stipulation was that walking sticks and zimmer-frames were not allowed, as it would give an unfair advantage for people with them over those without.

There were only two competitors on the day that the television crew came. One of them was a portly 85-year old woman with lumbago and arthritis in her knees. The other was a 25-year old man: tall, muscular and slim. The betting was heavily on the woman to win, as the man looked as if he would not stand a chance.

The starting-gun went off and almost immediately the police arrived and arrested the official with the gun. On hearing the bang, the young man jumped out of the car and made a break for cover. The woman waited a while before opening the car-door and then swung one leg slowly out of the car and then picked up her other leg with both hands, and with a lot of puffing and panting placed it outside. It took her several attempts to stand up and then she had to hold on to the door for some minutes to regain her sense of balance.

The audience, mainly a party of elderly folk on a coach outing, applauded her movements and her amazing form. The man by now had arrived at the stairs and was checking his mobile phone for messages. He did not see the woman gradually sneak up on him until she was already beside him.

He attempted to climb the stairs very slowly but could not resist the temptation to climb the

first four, two at a time. Realising that he was going about it too quickly, he hesitated and then at a snail's pace put his right foot on the next step. When very slowly lifting his left leg off the stair below, he noticed that his shoelace was undone, and he tripped up over it, falling down the steps he had already climbed. All this time, the elderly lady had, with much effort and a lot of groans, managed to find her way to the top, where she stood for a while to recover.

The young man picked himself up and very carefully climbed up the stairs again. At the top, they were neck and neck and the shouting and stamping from the pensioners watching was deafening. When the noise abated, the sound of Vera Lynn singing songs from the second world war seemed to spur on the woman. But for the man, it was a distraction and he stopped for a moment to put his headphone on to listen to some hip-hop music.

The woman had by now reached the armchair and was hovering her bottom over the seat. The man strolled towards her and discovered there was only one armchair, not the two that he was expecting. He thought of pulling it away from her, but chose instead to sit on the arm of the chair, but too late, the elderly lady was already sitting down. The man realised that he had come second, and consequently had won, against all odds, and received the prize – a voucher for some mobility aids. The lady was very disappointed, but was too exhausted to show her displeasure, although she did her utmost to push her opponent off the arm of the chair.

Viewing figures for this competition were phenomenal. There can't have been any care-homes in the north of England which had not shown it on television. But it also resulted in a torrent of complaints about how the man had cheated by being allowed to have his mobile and headphones with him. The residents of each care-home had all bet large sums of money on the woman to win and they all were very upset that it had not worked out that way. A rumour soon spread that the reason the man fell downstairs was that he may have been drunk or using illegal drugs. Young men do not tend to fall downstairs, it was said. But in reality, anything can happen when a young man is trying to move slower than an elderly woman who has built up considerable expertise in doing so.

The judges of the competition were in a quandary: should they allow the result to stand in spite of the complaints, or should they overturn it and risk the wrath of younger viewers who

they were constantly trying to appeal to?

Rosy was not comfortable with the uproar that this competition had caused. She felt she had been blamed for all the ill-will which resulted from the result even though it was not her fault. She was summoned by Toby, the chairman of the television company and told that her services were no longer required. He then had a quick re-think and offered her the job of doing a documentary about the security services: no-one else wanted to do it and it would at least get her away from the popular sports programmes and it would only attract very few viewers. She accepted. Her experiences are related in the next story.

PEOPLE-WATCHING

Rosy Bootsie had been assigned the task of making a documentary about the 'Security' Service by her boss at Up-North Television.

“Their job is people-watching,” said Toby Vude, the chairman of the company. “I want you to find out more and make a programme about it. But you will have to travel down to London for this assignment.”

He had not been happy about the sports programmes she had been involved in, which had given rise to numerous complaints. This appointment would get her away from the sports agenda and remove her far away from the television company he ran. To get her started he had provided her with the contact number of a man from the Government’s Security (i.e. Secret) Service.

The man in question was head of the surveillance department of that organisation. He said that there may, or may not, be files on one in every so many adults in Britain. Rosy was astonished that he was being so open.

“This means a lot of people-watching, which includes not only observing them, but listening to their conversations in the flesh and on phones, as well as reading their emails and other correspondence. This is done so that people will feel safe and they can go about their lives without the state interfering in their privacy, as happens in less democratic countries.”

Rosy was very much in agreement with these noble aims. She had read on their own website that it provided protection against ‘actions intended to overthrow or undermine parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means.’ She fully believed everything that the Prime Minister said, and was so glad that there were people at the heart of government who believed so

strongly in the process of parliamentary democracy in this country.

The man continued: “To add incentives for our people to find out this information there are competitions, a form of sport if you like, to see how much information can be collected on different individuals within a certain time-span. The person who wins gets to be promoted... if they are not bumped off first.”

She laughed, nervously. He invited Rosy to a training session which she eagerly accepted and asked him if he objected to it being filmed for television.

“Not at all,” he replied. “But you must fill in this dossier on yourself and the rest of the television crew, together with all of your families and friends, neighbours and acquaintances. That should save us some time. And while you are about it, we’ll require samples of all of your DNA, urine, blood, fingerprints and biometrics as well as your shopping lists for the last six months. A stool sample would also be appreciated, but remember, it must be shaken, not stirred.”

He had seen most of the James Bond movies and wanted to show her his street-cred, although he knew only too well that shit is never shaken, but can occasionally be stirred.

The venue chosen for the training session was a pub in the West End of London. Participants were asked to observe people but without making it obvious.

“Don’t stare at someone for longer than half-an-hour and don’t take their photographs when they happen to be looking at you. That is just plain rude. In this country you can lie, cheat, bribe and bamboozle; in fact, no-one minds if you totally destroy democracy; but one thing you cannot do is to be rude. And I’m talking about rudeness as interpreted as such in the south of England. If you are rude, your life won’t be worth living. Anyway, as I was saying, you can also watch people by use of smoke and mirrors – hide behind the fireplace and observe them in a mirror. If that is not possible, set up an easel in front of them and paint their portraits – they will think you are an artist and won’t suspect a thing. For good measure, you should also jot down details of their appearance and mannerisms – always useful if you ever want to ‘use’ their identity for

some purpose in the future,” the tutor said.

“A bit like acting, I suppose,” remarked Rosy.

The members of the class took in what he had said and sat observing the only other customers in the pub – a middle-aged podgy man in a lumberjack shirt and pin-striped trousers, and his companion, a blond woman in a very tight jumper and short skirt, who were having a quiet drink together. One of the class stared hard at them, another got ready to photograph them, while another one sat a few feet from them and started to draw them in his notebook. Others were loitering beside the fireplace keeping a hazy eye on them, or looking at their reflection in various mirrors around the room. They were joined by the television cameraman, who was attempting to make himself invisible.

“Remember what I said about rudeness,” urged the instructor, at which all the class suddenly swung round in their seats and looked out of the window for a few moments before regaining their original positions. The couple, who had been deep in conversation, looked up when everyone suddenly moved, before turning to each other again to carry on talking.

“OK everyone,” called out the tutor. “Gather round me again.”

After a few moments he continued: “The next thing you must learn is that it is not just appearances which are important. You need to eves-drop on what people are saying. Listen very carefully to see if you can hear any mention of these keywords: ban, bomb, human rights, global warming, feminism, world development, equality, protests, packed lunches.”

“Packed lunches?” queried someone.

“Yes, packed lunches – the essential ingredient of every demonstration. If you hear this or any of the other words you will know instantly that trouble is brewing which must be nipped in the bud.”

“So, everyone on a train carrying a packed lunch is probably a terrorist?” someone enquired.

“You may be right,” the tutor replied. “Now what you need to do is to record what they say. This is where video cameras and mobile phones come in handy. If you can’t actually hear them talking, the footage will show their mouths, which our specialists who can lip-read can interpret.

You may need extra lighting in dark conditions so be sure to carry round a few extra candles or sparklers in your pocket. If you have to use a microphone, place it somewhere discretely, for instance in the flower vase on their table. “

The sound-man with the television cameraman really appreciated this piece of advice and searched for a plant large enough to conceal his huge microphone but could not find one and thought he might have to resort to using the branch of a palm tree when the occasion arose.

“You can also use a reel-to-reel tape-recorder, or cassette or even a digital recording device if necessary. Let’s see, then, what this couple are talking about.”

As people honed in on the couple in the pub, the tutor read his newspaper and pretended he was nothing to do with the others.

The couple’s voices were picked up by all of the learners.

“Oh no, I didn’t.”

“Oh yes, you did.”

“No, I didn’t”

“Of course, you did.”

This went on for a very long time before the woman was heard to say: “I know you did, because you are a ...” The rest of the sentence was undecipherable. With that they left the pub through different doors, leaving the future spies to pack up their equipment and to head off home.

The final part of their training took place in a room in the organisation’s headquarters.

“See this envelope,” the tutor said. “To find out what it says in the letter we have to open it – it doesn’t matter how you do it. When we have made a copy of the letter, we put it back in the envelope and post it to the intended address. But first we have to put some tape where you ripped open the envelope. The recipient will naturally assume that there had been a mishap in the post and think no more of it. As for emails, which we can monitor, we don’t have this problem, and once a copy has been made of the message, we can send the email to its intended address.

Things are so easy for us these days. We also monitor social media sites. Most people on these sites tell everyone all about themselves, together with pictures too. You’d think they were working for us. And if we do need some extra help, we can always plant a bit of software on their computers, which is very easy to do.”

The pupils relished this game and soon discovered such things as the cancellation of the flower-show in Biddleston-on-Sea; how nasty Karen’s boss is; what Martha had for breakfast yesterday; and what the size and shape of Rupert’s private parts are, as shown in numerous photographs.

All the details they discovered were put on file in case they revealed any secret codes and the class were dismissed.

Having completed the training, Rosy planned how her documentary would proceed. She would obviously include some live ‘action’ which the training had prepared for her. This would be augmented by interviews with the head of surveillance whom she had met on the first day. He agreed to be interviewed, but only if he could wear a black mask. No photographs of the building were allowed from the outside. The only place inside which would not give away too much detail about the building was the toilet, which is where the interview took place. Being located in the heart of the building it was very warm in there and he stripped down to his waist. To get some air and to complement his mask he carried a black whip, which he said, worked more efficiently than a fan. His answers were restricted to yes and no, and these were replaced on the recording by the voice of an actor. In the editing process, the questions and answers got out of synch, but this merely added a touch of mystique to the whole thing. No-one who listened to it afterwards could make any sense of it, but it did provide a lot of amusement, so the interview was left in.

For the action-shots outside, two venues were chosen. One was a demonstration by a mixture of pressure groups in which supporters and opponents came together. Face-recognition cameras came in useful at this event, and a million people were instantly photographed and put on file.

The other venue was in a crowded tube train. At each station many people got in or out, so it was difficult to concentrate for long on individuals, especially since the jostling resulted in a lot of shaky footage, but this did provide a lot of evidence of packed lunches. The microphone proved to be unnecessary since there was complete silence as everyone was too busy staring at their phones to speak. A colleague of Rosy who was monitoring emails and text messages, later revealed that most of them simply said: 'Where are you?' while the rest just stated the name of the nearest station.

When Rosy had finished collating all the material she showed the final result to the man from MI5. He thought it was a very good documentary. But on second thoughts, decided that for security reasons it could not be shown on television. She could not argue with him in the circumstances, particularly as MI5 now had a large file on her, together with her blood, urine, DNA, fingerprints, biometrics, shopping lists and (unstirred) stool samples.

The only thing she could do, then, was to return to the north of England. Toby Vude, her boss at the television station was so annoyed that she did not have a documentary to show for her stay in London, which was very expensive, that he sacked her. Back in her home in Bulltown, she realised she had had her fifteen minutes of fame and went back to organising boot-fairs again. The only difference now was that all of the stall-holders were covertly photographed, and hidden microphones picked up their conversations. She then compiled a black-list of people who were forbidden from holding stalls in future.

When there was no-one left to man a stall, Rosy gave up and started her very own secret service. I'd like to inform you about this, but I simply cannot – it's...secret.

THE RELUCTANT WAITER

On the wall opposite his desk at the Herman Flynne Advertising Agency in central London, there was a sign which read: **Time is Money** and beneath this in smaller italics were the words: (*Flynnne's Theory of Relativity*). Today, however, Herman's chair was unoccupied and it was already coming on for noon, and it was a Monday. This was highly unusual.

What normally happened was that Herman would get up at 5.30am and have a shave and shower before the rest of his family wanted the bathroom. At 6am he would be fully dressed and would quickly eat some breakfast, usually cereal and coffee, and at 6.15am he would leave the house to travel to work. He would arrive at the nearest bus-stop at 6.20am in time for the 6.21am bus which would take him to the railway station by 6.39am and from there, he would catch the 6.42am train. The train journey would take a half-an-hour, after which he would have to walk the remaining distance and be at his desk by 7.30am, ready to start work.

This routine had taken a long time to perfect. If he left it any later to get up, the rest of his family would hog the bathroom first, which threw everything else out. In that event, he would be lucky to arrive at this office until 8am, having missed his normal bus and train. He hated being late, and more than anything else, he hated having to wait. The thought of changing the routine, for instance, by having breakfast first, could not be tolerated and it would make him feel unsettled for the rest of the day. He had to follow his set pattern, just like his father and grandfather did before him.

Nine times out of ten, the schedule went as planned, but there was the odd occasion when the bus or train was late, which made him hot under the collar. When he had a spare moment once, he worked out what the delay would mean over the course of forty years – the time he expected to work at his present office. Twenty minutes waiting to get into his bathroom amounted to 100

minutes for his five-day week or 5,000 minutes per year, accounting for his 2 weeks annual holiday, or 20,000 minutes over a period of 40 years, completely wasted.

If either the bus or train were to be twenty minutes late, that would be another 20,000 minutes gone for a burden. And if all of these eventualities occurred, that would be 60,000 minutes or over 90 days, that is nearly three months down the drain.

He felt himself fortunate that he was able to work on his laptop on the bus and train, so this time was not really wasted. But he could not do anything about the time spent walking, and all sorts of idle thoughts would occupy his mind. If I can't put in my time working, the money I bring home will be less, and the Cheerful Choosey Chewing Gum account, not to mention the Yappy Happy Dog Biscuit account will be given to another company. It was enough to make him shudder.

Today, though, things did not go as planned. For a start, his teenage daughter beat him into the bathroom, followed immediately by his wife. Over breakfast, he switched on the radio only to hear that there was a bus strike. Cursing, he switched off the radio immediately and grabbed his coat and laptop. The only alternative was for him to drive to work, something which he hated doing as he found it far too stressful. But that could not be helped today.

Traffic was heavy as many other people had made the same decision. It was a busy country road, not even a dual carriageway to begin with, and on account of roadworks, there was a long delay at one point. Not long afterwards, he heard a thud coming from the engine. He pulled on to the grass verge and took a look under the bonnet*. This was a typical reaction that men have, and women expect it of men.

If his wife had been with him, he would have looked knowingly at the engine and told her that the flimmerbessel had minkled, or some such, and they would have to order a new one. His wife would have looked suitably impressed, knowing perfectly well that he had not got a clue about anything remotely mechanical.

As there were no garages nearby, he had to ring the breakdown services. They told him they would send a mechanic as soon as they could, but there were a lot of other cars broken down that day, so it might take some time.

He thought he could use the time profitably by working on his laptop, but found he could not get online. To make matters worse, the battery had very little power left in it and after a short time it stopped working. He threw the laptop on to the passenger seat and swore loudly. His words seemed to reverberate around inside the car, and to get away from them he got out and stood by the side of the road, expecting to see the breakdown vehicle coming at any moment. But it did not. This made him feel on edge – all this valuable time wasted and nothing he could do about it.

Fortunately, it was a dry day and very mild, considering it was still only March. The leaves of the trees had not yet emerged and the hedges were bare. The weeds, like the ones that blighted his own garden, had not surfaced yet. Even the birds had abandoned this derelict spot. He looked around. To his right there was a sharp bend and to the left, a far gentler curve. There were no houses in sight or indeed any other buildings.

All he could do, then, was to observe the traffic as it proceeded along in front of him, as if performing on a tarmac stage. Without anything else to do, he studied the different vehicles as they whizzed past. Apart from ones he was familiar with, there were a lot of others, of various sizes and colours, which he had not noticed before. Most of them were a few years old; some a good deal more. Each one produced a different engine noise, with the vans and lorries producing the tenor and bass parts of this cacophonous choir. If he been a composer, he might have been tempted to write a chorale or even a symphony using this array of different sounds. Perhaps he could make use of the different noises as a background to the baked beans advertisement he was currently working on.

He was amazed that in the vast majority of cars there was only one occupant, totally cut off from the outside world in their warm bubble, listening to their favourite music. Over a half of them appeared to be women, looking very smart and feminine from what he could see through the side-window. He wondered what the rest of them looked like. Judging by the clothes that his daughter wore – crumpled-up frazzled jeans and muddy boots, he did not think he would be terribly impressed.

He blamed this on the lack of full-length mirrors about these days. In the advertisements for vacuum-cleaners he always used an attractive, smiling young model, wearing a floral dress and

high-heeled shoes. The same applied to his adverts for lawn-mowers, and, well, pretty-well everything else. It tended to be effective, as it was mostly men who bought these appliances. As most men are attracted to good-looking, smiling, young women, they will also be attracted to vacuum-cleaners, lawn-mowers and other things which the women are holding or draped around, the thinking went, in the same way that most women are attracted to things endorsed by handsome, male film-stars and other male celebrities.

His musings were interrupted by the sight of a very snazzy, open-top, blue sports car being driven by a stunning-looking lady, her blond hair blowing in the wind behind her. The mature part of his brain thought – you’ll catch the death of cold. The rest of his brain went – COR!!! The image became etched in his mind. Her car was very closely followed by at least three cars driven by wide-eyed men.

After a bit of a lull, the cars doing the school-run showed up - a procession of harassed-looking mothers and their off-spring rushing down the road in their over-sized cars to get to school in time. This seemed to go on for at least a quarter of an hour before petering out and leaving the road clear for slower-moving elderly drivers and a few commercial vehicles who were not in any sort of hurry.

In the opposite direction a car passed Herman with the words *Charlie’s Cosmetics* printed on the side. Charlie himself had exceptionally red lips and red nail varnish, Herman noted. A little way behind him was a bright pink van with *Dolls R’Us* emblazoned on its side. The male driver, wearing a pink shirt, gave Herman a toot on his horn as he went by. Herman felt uneasy about this and got back inside his car.

As he did so, the sound of a siren could be heard. The driver of a police car weaved its way between the traffic and soon disappeared.

Herman’s mind went back to the sports-car. Maybe the car behind her had given it a prang and a pile-up had resulted as the cars that were following had been unable to brake in time, he thought

Sometime later, another siren could be heard approaching – this time an ambulance - the driver, another woman, skilfully negotiating her way past the other cars. There was a lull for a

while, and then more sirens broke the silence as another police-car went passed him one way, and a short time later came back the other way, followed by the ambulance. Herman's imagination was running riot and he hardly noticed the arrival of the breakdown van which had parked behind his car. The mechanic, a young woman got out. Herman could not help but notice that she was not dressed in a floral skirt and high-heels, but rather, a very smart uniform with brown trousers and smart lace-up shoes. She opened up the bonnet of Herman's car to look at the engine.

"You know what the problem is," she said. "Pretty obvious really. It's your flimmerbessel. It's got minkled. When was the last time you had your chipsom tested? "

Herman thought hard. "Not for at least three months," he said, trying to look as if he knew what he was talking about.

She tutted. "I've not got a spare part on me. I'll have to tow your car back to town. She attached the front of his car to her pick-up truck and motioned him to sit beside her as she drove back the way she had come.

"Lots of things happening today," he said, and told her about the police-cars and the ambulance. "Do you know what's been going on?"

"Apparently there was a burglary in the toy shop and the thief drove off down this road," she replied.

"She wasn't a blond woman in a sports car, was she?" Herman said.

"No, it was a woman who had her young son with her. She mingled in with the school run to avoid detection. On a tip-off, the police arrested all the women in the school-run until they eventually caught the culprit. When they pulled her car over, they saw a body of a small infant on the back seat who was not breathing. The police-woman called up reinforcements in case she needed help and summoned an ambulance. Turns out that the body was one of the dolls the woman had stolen."

"So, it had nothing to do with the woman in the sports car?"

"As far as I know, she was an accomplice, acting as a distraction for the other woman. The

plain -clothes police were suspicious about her and were following her closely. It's far too cold to go about in an open-top sports car this weather, don't you think?"

Herman agreed that she indeed must have been a distraction - she certainly had been for him, he admitted to himself. He thanked the mechanic for taking him back to town. "Normally, I go to work by train," he added, "but in view of the bus strike today, I had to drive, and completely forgot that I hadn't had my chipsom tested."

"Oh, so you don't know," the woman commented. "The bus strike was called off after just a few minutes - it was on the news."

Herman felt gutted. He had had to take a day off work, which was pretty drastic. But when he thought about it, he had learned a lot that day. It completely changed the way he portrayed women in his adverts. Out went all the dresses and high heels to be replaced by torn jeans and muddy boots. He put this into practice for his new assignment, an advertisement for champagne, set at a wedding reception.

The ad did not go down at all well and the client took their business to another advertising agency. As a result, he lost his job. Ironically the only employment that came his way was in a restaurant, waiting on tables. He felt it went against the grain, but he had no choice but to accept the job. On reflection he had to admit that time spent waiting equalled money in his pocket. Or to put it another way: Money is Time. He labelled this: *Flynne's Second Theory of Relativity* and wrote it on a poster which he put up on the wall of his bathroom. No-one else in the family, or indeed any relatives, had a clue what it meant. Only him.

*the bonnet of the car in England is the hood in America

DOCTOR'S DILEMMA

A man goes to the surgery.

“Good morning, Mr Smith,” said the doctor. “How are you?”

“I’m very well, thank you,” he replied.

“And what seems to be the problem?”

“I just told you. I’m very well.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Goodbye.”

“No, you don’t understand. I’ve come to see you because I’m very well.”

“Oh, I see. Are you in remission? Let me check your records.”

The doctor looked at his computer and looked for the man’s details.

“I don’t seem to have anything here about you at all. Are you registered with this surgery?”

“No.”

“Well which surgery are you registered with?”

“None of them.”

“None? You really should be. When was the last time you saw a doctor?”

“I don’t remember ever seeing a doctor.”

“That’s most unusual. “

“I know. That’s why I’ve come to see you.”

The doctor looked puzzled. "How old are you?"

"Eighty-two."

"Eighty-two, and you've never had to see a doctor? Most unusual! But why have you come to see me?"

"My mother told me to come."

"Your mother? How old is she?"

"She will be a hundred and two next month."

"Is she well?"

"Never been better."

"You and your mother must take very good care of yourselves."

"We certainly do. As my father used to say, drink a bottle of whisky a day and you'll be alright."

"And do you?"

"My mother and I get through one each."

"I suppose you must have a very healthy diet, then. Lots of fruit and vegetables, no fatty foods, very little sugar.?"

"I was told that that is just scare stories."

"Who on earth told you that?"

"My mother."

"Then what do you eat?"

"I usually have bacon, eggs and sausage for breakfast; a couple of chocolate bars for a mid-morning snack; a fry-up for lunch; a huge slice of cake for an afternoon snack; a big plate of pie and chips for dinner; and a couple of jam doughnuts in the evening so I don't get hungry

overnight.”

“No fruit and vegetables, then?”

“Can’t stand them. But I do make sure to have five portions of fatty foods a day, and I take whole milk and three spoonfulls of sugar in my tea.”

“That’s odd,” said the doctor. “You don’t appear to be overweight. You must do a lot of exercising.”

“Not if I can help it. Why should I walk when I can drive myself around and save the effort.”

“Do you smoke at all?”

“Not now. I used to smoke twenty a day. But I gave it up.”

“When was that?”

“At the end of last week.”

“You mentioned your father. When did he pass away?”

“He’s not dead. He’s 105 now. He left my mother last year and went off with another woman.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“A gold-digger.”

“No, he was a postman.”

“Well, Mr Smith. All I can say is that you have an incredible metabolism.”

“Thank you, doctor. It’s given me five children.”

“So, at the risk of sounding as if I have dementia, can I ask you once again. Why exactly did you come to see me today?”

“Because my mother told me that if I noticed anything unusual about my health, I should see a doctor. And you, yourself, said it was unusual.”

“You say you feel fine. So, all I can suggest is that you go home and carry on as you’ve been doing... No, on second thoughts, I think you ought to see a specialist.”

“What for?”

“To find out what is the matter with you.”

“But the only thing wrong with me is that I feel well.”

“Precisely. A specialist might be able to find out how you are still alive with a life-style like yours.”

“Is that something to worry about?”

“Let me put it this way – if I had your life-style, I would have died a long time ago.”

“There are other people just like me.”

“True, but there are no statistics about that. Only about people we see who are ill.”

“I see. I’m not a statistic. That means there really must be something wrong with me. I knew it all along. Well thank you for seeing me, doctor. I’ll wait until I hear when my appointment with a specialist will be. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

With that, Mr Smith went home. His appointment was not for a month’s time. The day before, he was found dead in his bed.

The coroner recorded that he died of well-ness as there was no apparent sign of ill-health. But his mother told the coroner that since visiting the doctor he had been worried stiff about not feeling ill. He was survived by his five children, his mother and father, mother-in-law and a recent addition to the family – a three- month old sister-in-law.

Dedicated to my mother who is 103 years old, has no chronic illnesses, never been to hospital and thrives on a diet of cakes and biscuits. (She doesn't drink whisky, I should add.)

WHICH WAY TO GO?

Tony had always loved a joke and in some ways, it served him well. In his early sixties he had had a heart attack and had to have bypass surgery.

“I hope there won’t be any roadworks on my bypass,” he had commented as they wheeled him into the operating room.

He was assured there would not be any, and neither would there be any speed restrictions for the blood flow. “We don’t do speed cameras there,” the anaesthetist had told him.

Tony was used to problems on the motorway as he had to commute on one in rush hour, twice a day. This made him tense up, which might have contributed to the heart attack.

Following surgery, he had a short period of rest before doing cardiac exercises every week. This took up his time, but he could no longer carry on working, so the exercises helped to plug a gap in the extra leisure time he now had, as well as assisting his recovery. The exercises were quite hard work, but he felt they were doing him good and even when he got exhausted, he was still able to joke about it with his fellow exercisers.

“It’s really tiring when you stop,” he would quip. “I need to do some more rowing to have a rest.”

Gradually he began to regain his strength and felt so much better than he had done for a long while. But exercise was not the only thing he had to make adjustments to in his life-style. Diet was the other major factor. It was easy to joke about the exercises, but he did not feel like joking about the food restrictions he now faced.

Instead of a fried breakfast, he had to make do with a small bowl of cereal or porridge. For a mid-morning snack, he was permitted to have a banana, and for lunch he could have whole-meal bread with avocado spread on it - he hated avocado – with some raw carrot sticks and an apple to

follow. Mid-afternoon snack consisted of a few grapes, after which dinner, usually white-fish or chicken with a small portion of vegetables and then more fruit, made up the rest of his permitted diet for the day.

He lost a good deal of weight by following this new regime and he nearly lost his sense of humour, but it occasionally surfaced. It had to or he might have gone crazy. The sadistic dietician was a young skinny woman who seemed to survive on hummus dips. "If it were skinny dips, I'd be more interested," said Tony. But he gritted his teeth and did as he was told, except when no-one was around when he got himself a cheese-burger and then felt guilty for weeks afterwards.

It might have been the heart-friendly food, or it might have been the cheese-burger which kept him going, but he survived in good shape until he turned ninety. His jokes didn't improve with age, but his good spirits did make a difference to his temperament.

For a few years prior to his ninetieth birthday, his wife, Chris, had noticed that he was getting more forgetful, although he made light of it. There were also occasions when he did not understand what she was saying and found it difficult to follow the instruction on food packets. She persuaded him to go to the doctor who did some tests on him and then informed them that he was in the early stages of dementia.

This, understandably, came as a severe blow to Tony. For years, he had been surviving mainly on rabbit-food, as he described it, and now he had ended up with dementia. I would have preferred to have enjoyed eating proper meals and died happy than to become an old vegetable myself, he thought. But his basic personality did not change. In fact, as many people have found throughout time, making a joke of something really bad is the only way to cope with it. And this is what he fully intended to do.

His wife certainly had a sense of humour herself, but often she did not know when he was being serious and when he was joking as he had a very dead-pan way of doing so. The worse he became, the more he felt the need to joke about it.

“Why did you put the soap in the fridge?” she once asked him.

“Sorry, I thought you told me to put the oxtail soap in there,” he replied

“No, it was the oxtail soup. And don’t tell me, what did you do with that?”

She rushed up to the bathroom. There was no sign of the soup there.

When she got back to the kitchen, she saw a saucepan on the hob. She was relieved.

“Just warming the soap – it’s been in the fridge, you know.”

She quickly pulled the lid off the saucepan. The oxtail soup was simmering nicely. She never did discover why he put the soap in the fridge, but had to take into account that he had a bit of a hearing problem too. It was wearying for her. But it was a way of coping for him.

The next occasion when they had to visit the doctor, Tony felt overwhelmed by the seriousness of it all and felt the need to rebel.

“Would you recite the months of the year backwards for me please,” the doctor said.

Tony stood up and turned around and said: “January, February...”

“No, I mean face me and recite the months of the year backwards, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Tony thought hard. He continued from where he had got to. “hcrAM, lirpA, enuJ, yluJ...”

It took a moment for the doctor to catch on. Then he said: “OK, let’s try something else.”

Tony was enjoying this.

“Tell me what is going on in the news lately,” the doctor said.

“Annie has locked herself out again. Martin has been kicked off the island. Katie has split up with Mervin and gone out with Emma...”

The doctor looked befuddled. He did not realise that Tony did not follow the news, but did watch all the soap operas.

“How many fingers have I got here?” asked the doctor, holding up one hand with the third and fourth fingers raised.

Tony thought this was a stupid question. He’s got ten fingers, or if you like, eight fingers and two thumbs, like everyone else. He plumped for eight.

The doctor now seemed to know that Tony was quite well-gone.

“No,” he said, like a school-master. “I have only two fingers here.”

Tony was asked to sit down in the waiting-room while the doctor conferred with Chris.

“I think Tony is in quite a bad way,” he said. “I will arrange for him to have a few weeks in a care-home to give you some respite.”

The care-home had a dementia unit, euphemistically called, The Falling Leaves. Tony was taken there and left. The man next to where he was sitting was cutting out all the articles in a newspaper. A woman, dressed in three jumpers, was painting without any paint on her brush. And two other women were talking at tangents, one of them continuously asking what the time was, while the other was telling her about her parakeet. In the background he could hear songs from the first world war on an old gramophone. Carers were attending to everyone by giving them cups of tea and biscuits. Tony had really missed having any biscuits and took several of them. Finally, I get to have a chocolate digestive, he thought, after all these years. The carer smiled.

For the three weeks he was there, Tony tried to keep himself to himself as much as possible. He did join in when they had sing-songs, although the music was not to his taste. He also did a 3,000-piece jigsaw with another man once and discovered that they had to force the pieces to fit

together, but it passed the time. He pulled the leg of an elderly lady who picked up her food with her fingers by telling her that the knife was for repelling anyone else who might try to steal her food. He even fought a duel with her to ram home his point. At the next meal, he was not given any cutlery.

The days were long and he spent most of them sleeping in his armchair. By the end of his time there, he too was cutting out newspaper articles and dressing in multiple pullovers. This was the new norm.

When his wife collected him to go home, she asked how it had been.

“Wonderful,” he replied. But his sarcasm was lost on her.

“Nice to be home again,” he said as they arrived at their house.

His wife looked sheepish. She did not dare tell him that she had arranged for him to stay in the care-home permanently, starting in a few days’ time.

A few days later, an ambulance pulled up outside their house and he was taken to the care-home again. Tony made up his mind to take full advantage of the big meals he was given. He had not had any sausages for years. Or cakes. Or any sugary desserts.

After a year, he had another heart attack and spent his last few days in the hospital. His wife brought him some raw carrot sticks and some grapes. He did not get to finish them. If only, he had thought, shortly before he went. If only I had eaten what I had wanted to eat all along I might have been spared being in the care-home and gone sooner. At least I would have died happy on a full stomach and gone to meet my maker in my over-sized trousers. It had all been a moral dilemma for his wife. But for him it was nothing less than a mortal dilemma, he mused. He was very proud of this word-play and could not help himself chuckling at it. The last laugh was on him, however.

ALL CHANGE

Frankie had suspected there was something different about Charlie, something she could not put her finger on, well, paw actually, as she was a Great Dane. Charlie was an average-looking guy: brown hair, blue eyes, somewhere between five and six-foot tall (dogs find it difficult to use a ruler).

At home and at work he always wore casual clothes. “Where did I put that blessed T-shirt?” he would often mumble. On hearing this, Frankie got very confused. Spelling was not her strong point, but she knew for certain that Frankie neither played golf, nor did he have anything to do with tea. In fact, he was a barman in the Queen’s Legs pub in Kemptown in Brighton. An ale-shirt would have been much more appropriate, particularly as that is the way it smelled when he came back from work.

But in spite of his macho appearance, pulling pints with his rippling muscles and laughing at all the dirty jokes the customers told him, there was something which did not quite fit. It started when he started wearing nail-varnish, supposedly to protect his nails, he told people. He also suffered from dry lips and often had to use chap-sticks on them. But in time this was replaced by lipstick, pale at first but becoming more and more reddish over time, which became quite noticeable when he also began to use powder on his face.

All of this was quite normal, especially in Kemptown, and besides, when you see someone regularly you do not notice small changes to their appearance. But when Charlie bought a handbag and took it to work, Frankie, as well as the pub’s customers, knew straight-away about Charlie’s orientation.

It did not stop with these superficial manifestations. At home, Charlie would often change into a long shirt with a belt around it which closely resembled a short dress, and he swapped his trainers for heeled shoes, adding inches to his height.

“You know,” he told Frankie, “I’m a barmaid in a barman’s body.”

Frankie did not know what a bar was, but she did know that Charlie was not happy in himself.

One day, Charlie said to Frankie: “I can’t go on like this. I simply have to have the op.”

Frankie was totally at a loss as to what he was talking about, but guessed something was brewing when Charlie arranged to put her in kennels for a few weeks, a short time afterwards.

Meanwhile in the London borough of Islington, Joey was observing his owner, Andy, who was behaving a little oddly. Andy was a hairdresser. She came into contact with a lot of women and was told all about their holidays, their love-lives and all the fashionable tittle-tattle.

She had become very fond of many of her customers and felt that the majority of men she met were repugnant. She had no boyfriends, but did see some of the men she encountered as sort-of role models. Her mannerisms were distinctly manly, but this was not particularly noticeable in Islington, where women felt they had to be quite aggressive to be taken seriously. This amounted not only to behaviour, but also included wearing manly clothes so as not to appear vulnerable or weak.

Joey noticed that Andy was becoming more and more masculine in her ways, and the bond between them was no longer as pronounced. As a cat, Joey was used to observing his owner at close quarters, and could not avoid overhearing her speaking to her friends on the phone, although he did not let on that he knew what they were talking about. Cats don’t.

When Joey heard Andy making arrangements for a neighbour to look after him while Andy went away for a while, he tried to distance himself from her by sulking. But it made no difference. Andy had decided to go the whole hog and get something done about it.

Charlie and Andy met in a clinic in Romania – Transylvania, to be precise. They got on well from the start and as they were in the same boat, albeit rowing in different directions, they felt there was no need to beat around the bush.

“Look,” said Charlie, “I’ve a willy going spare you can have.”

“That’s very kind of you,” said Andy. “In return I can give you my boobs.”

It is not known whether the surgeons carried out these transplants, but soon enough the new female Charlie and the male Andy were proudly becoming acquainted with their new bodies. Charlie was a bit disappointed that he did not look exactly like Marilyn Monroe and Andy felt upset that her appearance was not quite in the same league as Clark Gable. But the deed had been done.

As the two had become good friends, they agreed to move in with each other on their return to England. As they could not agree whose house they would live in, they compromised by finding a house in a rural setting in Sussex.

Moving-day was rather hectic, so it was not until the day after that they both went to collect their respective pets. Frankie was overjoyed to see Charlie again and immediately took to Andy, but was rather put-out by having to share his owner's affections with a cat. Joey welcomed his owner, Andy, and had no problem with getting extra strokes from Charlie, but was very wary of Frankie, the dog.

Ill-feelings between the two animals did not go away. Frankie admitted to himself that it was not the fact that Joey was male, but he was a cat. Joey admitted that it was not so much that Frankie was a female, but she was a dog. Both dog and cat had no problems with their gender, even in the year 2020. They just resented having to share their house with another animal – ‘speciesism’, if you want to give it a name.

The resentment felt by both the dog and the cat towards each other was put down to jealousy. Frankie saw how Joey would be invited to sit on the laps of both humans, and she heard him

express his contentment by purring loudly. Joey observed how the man or the woman would take Frankie out for long walks and saw them playing ball with her, her tail wagging happily.

Frankie noticed the cat-flap and the freedom this bestowed up Joey in being able to go out when he liked, whereas she had to stay inside until the door was opened, and even then, she would have to wear a lead. Joey saw how Frankie ran to the front door to greet any guests and would then receive a lot of attention, whereas if he ran to the door, he would most likely be put outside as if he'd only done so in order to do his business.

When Frankie barked to notify her people that there might be danger afoot, she was told in no uncertain terms to shut up. Yet when Joe purred, people thought it was wonderful and even encouraged him to keep purring by stroking him.

From Joey's point of view, he was aware that Frankie was given a lot of tuition in doing things like sitting, waiting for traffic to go by, and collecting sticks that had been thrown for her. But most of the time, Joey was ignored and as a consequence he just slept most of the day.

Both animals wondered what they could do to right these wrongs. Spontaneously they jumped to the same conclusion at roughly the same time. Frankie told her humans that she wanted to become a cat herself. Of course, they did not understand her, which only made it more frustrating for her. So, she practised meowing, which was not at all easy. Purring was even more difficult. She took to running up to her humans and jumping into their laps which nearly resulted in severe injuries. And she tried her utmost to get out of the cat-flap, even if it necessitated breaking most of the door to do it.

Charlie and Andy were totally at a loss as to what was the matter with the dog. But they were also bewildered by their cat's latest antics.

Whenever either of them went out for a walk, Joey would leave the house and accompany them and bring his ball in his mouth for them to throw for him. Whenever he heard words like 'Sit!' or 'Fetch!' he would immediately obey, even if he had a lot of difficulty carrying a long, heavy stick in his mouth. He would also greet visitors by running up their trouser leg and rubbing his head in their groin. Joe wanted to be a dog, nothing less.

The vet was puzzled what this was all about. She could not physically change a Great Dane into a tabby cat, any more than she could do the reverse. The only thing she could do was to have a word with Charlie and Andy regarding how they treated their animals.

“You must not call your dog a dog anymore, or your cat a cat. You must call them by a species-neutral word like ‘pet’. You should treat them equally, so they do not feel they are being trapped into behaving like a normal dog or cat, but more like a hybrid animal: a catdog or dogcat. And you should not objectify any part of their anatomy. Their mouths may be a different shape and size but you should give them food which both of them can handle.”

Charlie and Andy listened to her advice and went home.

“What a load of rubbish!” said Charlie and Andy agreed.

But all was not lost. Something had happened to the dog and the cat since they had been acting out each other’s roles. They now had developed a sense of empathy and were perfectly at peace with one another.

As you can see then, it was a happy ending all round...which lasted until one night when the dog accidentally bit the cat. The cat scratched Charlie who hit Andy who in turn slapped the dog. The dog then bit Charlie who scratched Andy who slapped the cat. And then, the cat bit Andy who hit the dog who scratched Charlie. After that it was a free-for-all.

The kerfuffle awoke the neighbours who reported the matter to the police and the social services. Charlie and Andy were prevented from owning any more pets. Not long afterwards they split up, due to irreconcilable differences between them.

Frankie and Joey have now found new owners. Frankie has become the symbol of the Cats Protection (League) charity in Felixstowe, while Joey has been hired to help round up sheep on the Isle of Dogs. Both are fine examples of the move towards ending discrimination, wherever it arises.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CAT

At the time of the Second Dynasty in Egypt, around about 5,000 years ago, there was a cat goddess called Bastet, the daughter of Re, the sun-god and the goddess, Isis. All domestic cats like to trace their ancestry back to her and all of them like to be reminded that they are also gods and goddesses.

I recently came across an interesting document. It was written in hieroglyphics which I could not understand so I took it to my local museum.

“This was not written by a human hand,” said the curator and directed me to the building next door, which turned out to be a veterinary surgery. The vet had a good look at it and told me that because of the paw-like symbols it must have been written by a cat.

“Cats do not know how to write,” I said.

“Well this one can,” she said. “I’ll get my assistant to translate it for you.” \On saying this, she handed it to her assistant called Kitty, who took it away, and I received the following translation the next day.

Saturday morning, 8am - The human (I’ll call him Hugh, for short) got up late today, which was extremely annoying as I was getting very hungry.

“What do you want for breakfast this morning,” he said, knowing full well that although I have a much better sense of smell than him, I still cannot smell through tins or plastic wrapping. I do, however, recognise the different colour labels and remember what the food tastes like inside the containers. Without waiting for me to respond, he went and opened a tin of beef purée.

Surely, he knows I cannot eat beef on a Monday, but only on a Wednesday because both beef and Wednesday have an 'e' in them. Similarly, I cannot eat any tuna in June, July, September, October, November or December because these months do not have an 'a' in them, as tuna does. This is proclaimed in the diktat of 'What Cats Can and Cannot Eat' in the sacred Cat-echism. He also does not realise that I cannot eat chicken any time after noon, or salmon, no sooner than six hours before midnight – another of the holy diktats. Don't they teach humans anything at school?

I had to leave the dish of food without touching it, but I did remember to create a to-do about it. Went to my chair of the moment to have a wash. I change chairs frequently in case the bits of dirt and fleas I get out of my fur don't get cleaned up after me. Washing can be a long ritual for me, depending on whether I've been out at night. When I come in from outside and it's been rainy and the ground is muddy, I try first of all to get rid of excess mud on the floor, and on Hugh's clothes, if he insists upon picking me up when I'm not in the mood for it. Serves him right!

The real business of washing can take a long time and helps to pass the time of day. When I'm particularly bored, I start all over again when I've finished just to make sure I am clean enough. Washing my...nether regions, to put it delicately, is something best done on the table as it provides a nice flat surface. I'm always make sure to lick Hugh's face when he then picks me up to put me down.

9am - Half-way through my wash today I suddenly remembered the mouse I brought in sometime during the previous night. I went over to the fridge and stared hard around it and underneath it. This is just to bring back happy memories for me, in the same way that humans look at photographs. It's gratifying to know that Hugh thinks there might be a mouse back there somewhere, yet I know that there isn't, because I carried it up to his bed when he wasn't looking. It's not the gift but the thought behind it that counts. 'Course I had to have another wash, then, before settling down for my morning sleep.

12am – Had a good long sleep – my definition of a cat-nap. Do cats dream, you may ask? All the time, is my reply. Today I dreamed I was a model on the cat-walk. My nickname is Puss-in-Boots, which is strange as I usually have to wear kitten-heels. Today I did the most seductive walk I could, and actually won an award for it – the Cat-ass-trophy, although it ended up in

disaster as I got the sack for it. Will have to stick to my usual dreams about catching birds and mice in future.

1pm – This called for another wash, by which time I was simply dying to go to the toilet. It was raining cats and dogs outside which made me reluctant to go. I could have opened the cat-flap myself, but preferred to be waited on by meowing at the back door. Hugh opened it obediently for me. Too damn wet! I went to the front door instead where it would probably be drier. I made such a fuss about it that he came over and obediently opened the front door. But unfortunately, the weather forecast from the mat-office was wrong and it was pouring down out there too. Hugh picked me up and tried to throw me out, but I turned around quickly and came back in.

This called for some psychology. This is inbred in cats, ever since Pavlov got bitten by his dog and turned his attention to cats instead. Anyway, I went over to his newly-vacuumed carpet and crouched down as if I was about to do it there and then. This is what I call 'hovering the carpet'. He didn't notice at first, so I did some meaningful digging and repeated crouching down.

“Oh no you don't,” he yelled and went and fetched a litter tray inside which he proceeded to fill with good digging material for me. I relieved myself and then, much to his chagrin, I covered it up again, as well as covering up everything else in the vicinity. He was not pleased. He wouldn't have been pleased if I'd done it on the carpet either. You simply can't please some people. Incidentally, why are they called litter-trays? Do I use them to pee in or to have kittens in – a bit difficult for me anyway as I'm a tomcat.

2pm – The effort made me hungry again – I still hadn't eaten anything all day. That called for a bit of tough negotiating. If he fed me, I wouldn't scratch the furniture. That would give him plenty of incentive to open another tin. This time it was duck – not my favourite, but better than nothing, so I had a couple of mouthfuls and left it at that. He complained that I didn't eat it all up, but honestly, would you fancy a tin of duck in jelly at 2pm on a Saturday? Still I kept my side of the bargain and did not scratch the furniture. I did scratch the back door, but I didn't say I wouldn't do that.

3pm - The postman had brought Hugh a letter and the envelope was crumpled up and put in the bin. I was incensed at this. I'm very much a green at heart although I'm grey and white

otherwise. I fished the envelope out and threw it around in disgust. It stayed put and I had to go after it again and kept throwing it around, hoping he would pick it up and put it in with the recycling. All he did was laugh. How a-paw-ling, I thought.

4pm – Some friends of Hugh's came around for a cup of tea. The young woman is strange. She has metal statues of cats in her front garden, so I assume she loves cats. Turns out she hates them. Hugh picked me up for a cuddle and I purred loudly (to rile the woman up) and looked as cute as I could, which is a lot. Then, when he put me down and went into the kitchen, I seized the chance to run up to the woman. She tried to keep me at bay by kicking me with her shoe, so I decided to jump up into her lap. She spilled her tea all over her clothes and screamed. Hugh came rushing out of the kitchen and apologised profusely. He offered to wipe her clothes down and said he would dry them off in front of the radiator if she took them all off, but for some reason she refused and slapped his face before leaving. I had also made my escape to the bedroom where I lay down and after a brief wash went contentedly to sleep.

7pm – I slept well, and out of gratitude for letting me sleep in his bed, I deposited a thick covering of fur all over the sheet. He would be kept warm when he goes to bed. I had intended to finish off the rest of the duck and jelly, but the dish had already been taken up and washed and the rest of the food dumped outside. I therefore had to make a fuss to have something else to eat. Finally got Hugh to give me some sardines, which he had left on the work-top ready to eat himself. If he wants something to eat, he can jolly well get some of the duck from the back garden.

8pm – Decided to make peace with him, I spent the rest of the evening on his lap, or rather, on his laptop. He complained that he couldn't work while I was there so I purred extra loudly and he forgave me, even when I changed all the settings on his laptop by walking all over the keyboard. What I was really after were the videos on youtube made for cats showing birds and mice. Didn't manage to find them, so when Hugh went to bed, I made my exit out of the cat-flap and looked for some real ones. There is now a pile of dead mice and voles which I can present Hugh with one day at a time - that is if the neighbour's cat hasn't stolen them first. Sometimes we do fight over things like that, but most of the time we tolerate each other as long as he stays in his garden. What I could do with is a cat-a-pult. That would scare him off.

1am – We cats have got a reputation for having good vision at night, in other words, cats' eyes. But it's no big deal, only if there's something worth seeing. Most of the time I prefer to just curl up somewhere and sleep, but be on my guard in case anything interesting comes my way.

6am - The most annoying time of the day for me – the dawn chorus. How am I expected to sleep with all that noise going on? It would be different if I could catch the buggers, but they are all singing away on the high branches of trees. If I attempted to climb up there, I would most likely get stuck at my age. The fire brigade would have to rescue me and I do not fancy being carried down a ladder, thank you very much. Might as well just curse the birds from where I am.

Ah well, only a short time to breakfast, now. I wonder what he will give me that I can't eat today? To me, it's just a continuous cat-ologue of errors. Still, I'll have to put up with it. He does serve a useful purpose. Try as hard as I can, I can't open those blessed tins, but he has no difficulty in doing so. Better the devil you know, and all that, even if he is an inferior being. You can't have everything.

XXY and XYX

“Four more years!” exclaimed Geoff.

“I hope you’re not talking about the American presidential election,” Mark said scornfully, “or I’ll be obliged to leave quickly.”

“No, no. I’m talking about lifespan. It’s been suggested that women live four more years than men because of their double X chromosomes.”

“That sounds like an injustice – oops, I must be careful what I say these days.”

“No need to worry. We’re the only two people in this laboratory and no-one is going to read this anyway.”

“The point is: would women like men to live an extra four years?”

“If they became seriously ill themselves, it would provide them with someone to look after them.”

“Good point. So, what are you proposing we do about it?”

“Well, there have already been various experiments on animals in this field, so we can dispense with that and turn our attention to human beings.”

“Is that ethical?”

“Is it ethical not to do so and deprive men of four extra years?”

“That’s a debateable point.”

“Well just remember that this is pure fiction, and you can do anything in fiction. Well, almost anything.”

A few weeks later they had a chance to do something about it, but decided to tackle men and women: women to be given a Y chromosome and men an extra X one. Giving a woman a Y chromosome might result in her getting equal pay, while an extra X chromosome for men should not only give him a longer life, but may make him more willing to do more housework around the house.

In the laboratory they succeeded in isolating a Y chromosome from a man's DNA. A 60-year old woman was injected with this chromosome. It was thought that it would find its way into the DNA of a cell and then replicate, giving her all of the advantages that men have over women. A year later they went to see the woman. She was still in the same job – a beauty consultant - earning much less than her male colleague.

“Have you noticed any differences at all?” asked Geoff.

“Yes, I have. Each morning I have to shave my beard off. I've also developed a passion for motor-racing. Would you like to hear a joke - there was this actress with big knockers and a very well-hung window-cleaner...”

“We really must be going,” interrupted Mark. “And besides, I've already heard that joke.”

They next isolated an X chromosome and injected it into a male lab-assistant. After a year, they paid him a visit to see how he was.

“I'm developed a rather embarrassing condition,” he confessed to them. “When I go swimming, I start to lactate. Must be all the extra movements I do in the water, but it's not funny when it turns the water in the swimming pool milky-white. Mind you, it's handy when my partner is not in the mood for feeding the baby. She just hands it over to me to do it.”

The experiments were not going as expected. For a start, a single X or Y chromosome was not enough. They needed one for every cell which had a nucleus in the body, that is...an awful lot!

“We need to get back to basics and introduce the X or Y chromosomes at the time of conception,” said Geoff.

“You surely don’t mean we become voyeurs when a man and woman are going for it, and then interrupt things at the crucial time,” said Mark.

“No, of course not. What we do is to hand over responsibility to the man to give it to her.”

“Thank goodness. My wife would not take kindly to me being part of a threesome, or should that be foursome?”

“No question of that. The only stipulation is that the man must obviously wear Y-fronts to keep his mind on what he is trying to do.”

“Wouldn’t that rather interfere with things?”

“Not necessarily. You can still go to the toilet wearing Y-fronts. It’s the same principle. What we must be sure to do is to provide him with a few spare X or Y chromosomes from the lab and leave it up to him to get on with it, however he likes.”

“Or she likes.”

“But on second thoughts, it’s all a bit fiddly. I wonder if there is another way to get our hands on those chromosomes to make it easier to administer.”

“I’ve just come across an interesting scientific article that might help. It is headed ‘What are little girls made of?’ – that’s the X chromosome, I presume. The answer, it seems is: ‘Sugar and spice and all things nice’, by which it must mean things like chocolates, cake and bunches of flowers. Maybe we could grind them all up and make a drink out of them that the woman can have as soon as she’s got dressed.”

“That reminds me of a similar article I read in a medical journal recently: ‘What are little boys

made of?’ No question that’s the Y chromosome. It says: ‘Snips and snails and puppy dogs’ tails,’ although if you can’t get hold of any snips you could substitute frogs. I’m a bit worried about the puppy dogs’ tails. Perhaps we could use the tails of lambs that have been docked. Sounds a bit of a job, but perhaps they could be ground up to form a soup for the woman to have immediately afterwards.”

“Well, let’s go for it and see if it works. We can then examine the offspring at certain intervals, say, 6 months, 2 years, 5 years, 15 years and 30 years to see the results.”

It took a few months to round up various volunteers who were willing to go through with the experiment, but nine months after their conversation they were ready to examine the first two six-month old children.

Apparently, the girl’s first words were “Daddy” and “How about it, then?” She also could not stop herself from wolf-whistling at boy babies. The boy, on the other hand, showed a lack of self-esteem and starved himself to get a slimmer waist-line.

At two years of age, the girl was already developing a deep voice and had become very aggressive in playing with her siblings, bashing them round if they did not do as she wanted them to do. The boy liked to spend most of his time curtsying or doing somersaults in slow motion so that his dressing-gown would fall down over his underpants.

At five years of age, the girl was already known as a hooligan and could down a bottle of beer in just a few minutes. Strangely enough, she could speak French fluently, which was put down to having the snails in the soup. The boy preferred cups of tea with his dolly and won an award at school for the jam tarts he had made. He could also recite by heart several of Shakespeare’s plays.

Physical differences started to become very clear at fifteen years of age. The girl now sang bass with a barber-shop quartet and was the leader of a local gang which terrorised the

neighbourhood. The boy made his own clothes, modelled on those worn by a pop-star, and was developing bumps in his chest which really should not have been there.

When they were both thirty years old, the woman, as she was now, was persuaded by her partner to start a family, but without any success. She had started to go bald, had a beer belly and had developed a five-o'clock shadow, which she had to get rid of every evening. The boy, or rather man, had a full head of curly hair which he wore down to his shoulders and had an hour-glass figure.

When Geoff discussed the findings with Mark, he seemed to realise that they would never find out how old the man or woman would live to, as he and Mark would both be dead long before then.

“We’ll have to leave it to other younger scientists to find out,” he said reluctantly. “But I do wish we had thought of that beforehand.”

They need not have worried. The woman, who had become mentally-deranged, shot the man before turning the gun on herself. She had resented not being able to have children, even though she did not really want them. This paradox plagued her until she could not stand it anymore.

Geoff and Mark were very sad about this turn of events. But they did have to admit that in one respect they had been right. The man and woman had lived to the very same age, barring a few minutes. From a fictitious point of view, their experiment had been proved right.

From a realistic standpoint, it should never have been tried. But one day, it may. Let’s hope for better results if it does.