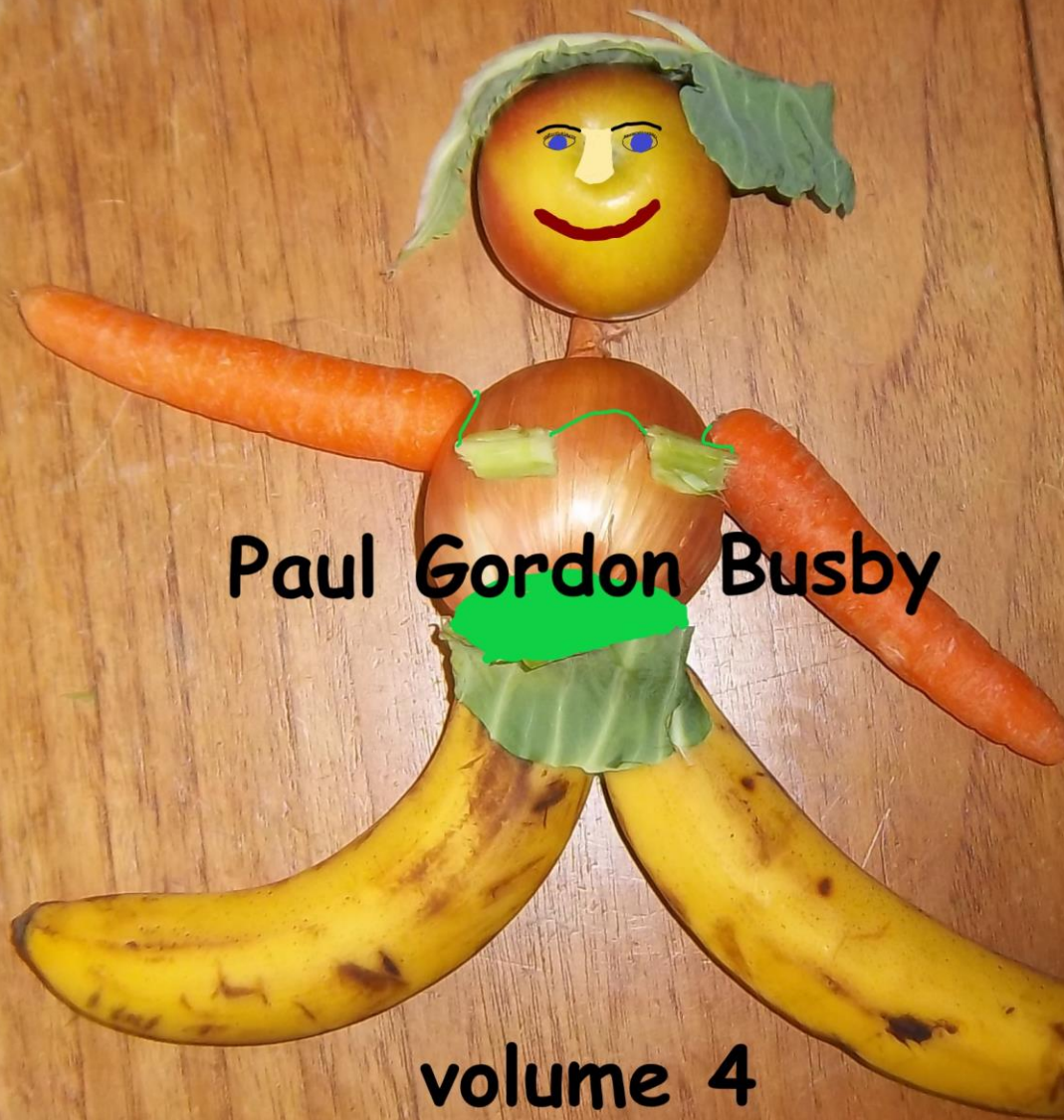


SILLY SHORT STORIES



Paul Gordon Busby

volume 4

Silly short stories

Volume 4

by

Paul Gordon Busby

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THE VOYAGE OF THE ARNONAUTS

by Paul Busby

“We’ve had an epistle from Luigi Usa,” said Julius to his son, Augustus.

“Luigi - wasn’t he the captain of the galley we sent to Britannia with fresh supplies for our soldiers a few years ago? If I remember right, the ship never turned up there. It just vanished and no-one has heard anything about it since it left Rome,” said Augustus.

“That’s the one. Out of the blue I was given a sea-mail yesterday. It had been tied to the leg of a very tired, bewildered goose. The message arrived in Gaul, or France if you prefer, and was forwarded on to me here.”

“Presumably it must have been a mail goose. It would have been too expensive to come via fee-mail. Anyway, what does the message say?”

“Apparently they got as far as the Mons Calpe. You may know it better as one of the twin pillars of Hercules, that big rock at the bottom of Hispania opposite Tingis, which I believe is pronounced Tangier. It’s a pretty narrow stretch of water there and can be quite dangerous. There are some signs up in the water saying *Please sail slowly through the Straits of Gibraltar. Maximum speed 30 knots*. It appears that the navigator got confused by that and went straight on instead of turning right towards Britannia.”

“Oh dear, I would have thought they would have fallen off the end of the world after a while.”

“No, they just carried on going across the ocean and after several months ended up in a strange new land. Luigi thought of naming it after his surname but changed his mind as that would have sounded a bit weird. As they still had some supplies left, they opened up a number of restaurants for the locals. What they wanted us to do was to send them some more olives to go on top of the

pizzas.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard to do…”

“You’re wrong there. All of our boats are currently in use and if there were any available, I wouldn’t want to waste any in sending them off to somewhere they may not even be able to find. We’ll delegate that to somewhere else to deal with. There’s too much going on in Rome, and while Calpurnia, my wife, is at the hairdressers I need to attend to an affair in Egypt.”

It fell upon Florence, or to be more accurate Florentia, to undertake the task of locating Luigi and his crew. Julius had chosen Florence as he himself had founded the city only a short time beforehand as it seemed a good place to settle some military veterans. But knowing how to wage war is not the same as knowing how to build a large galley. The ship had to carry a lot of cargo, but the city had no experience of building such big ships, unlike the ports on the west coast. Granted, Florence was located on a river, the Arno, but river flow could be erratic and sometimes be reduced to not more than a dribble. What was needed was some expertise.

Luckily for them a very enterprising person lived in the general area. He had no experience of shipbuilding, but he could turn his hand to virtually anything. He had one vice though – he loved his wine. His name was Leonardo da Vinci. This was not deemed a problem, however, as there is a saying in Latin, *In Vino Veritas* – In Wine there is Truth. Truth, that is knowledge, is what was needed in order to build a boat.

Leonardo was keen to help out. He suggested he knew ways in which the boat could fly or even go underwater. But these were not deemed practical ideas as airline pilots and submarine captains were in short supply at that time. What was plentiful, though, was an abundance of wood from the forests nearby. Planks sawn from the trees were laid out on the ground in a clearing in the woods and assembled together to form the hull. It was thought that there was no need for a keel, which would just get in the way when it was being built, and no-one knew what one was for anyway.

The galley gradually took shape. There would be only one row of oarsmen on each side - making

it a monoreme in technical terms - a raised section at the rear with a covered cabin and two sails – a large mainsail and a smaller triangular foresail. Extending in front of the bow was a corvus - a thick plank which could be used as a ladder to disembark from. The ship could accommodate two hundred people plus a large cargo area running down the centre between the oarsmen seated on opposite sides.

When finished it was declared a veritable work of art. The only problem was that it was nowhere near the river. With a lot of effort, it was put on the top of an immense chariot and a line of fifty horses were attached to pull it along. This did not prove very easy, particularly in going around corners and across uneven terrain crossing various streams. The horses got very fed up with it and after a gruelling few hours refused to budge. Another solution had to be found.

Leonardo came up with the way forward. Holes could be cut in the hull in front of where the oarsmen sat. If everyone sat inside and put their legs through these holes and lifted together, they could carry it between them. It would be possible then to walk it to the river. Once on water, wooden hatches could cover up the holes and it should float.

It was quite a job finding enough strong young men in the area to man the boat, but when they were told about the free pizzas they would get when they had completed their journey, enough volunteers came forward to act as crew.

When the galley reached Florence, the cargo was loaded on board. An enormous quantity of amphorae, containing wine, cereals, tomatoes and what-have-you were stored. A couple of cows were tethered to a post in the stern to provide fresh milk. And a number of free-range chickens were let loose to supply the crew with fresh eggs.

The ship was launched officially by the local magistrate amongst great celebrations and letting-off of several large Roman candles. The galley was named the Arnonaut after the river, and the crew, under their captain, Silvio, became known as the Arnonauts. Leonardo bade his farewells to everyone and then Silvio cast off the painter – the mooring rope.

The river, however, was at its lowest ebb. It took a few days before the waters rose enough for the ship to float and begin its journey down to the coast. At Marina di Pisa it entered the Mediterranean or the Mare Nostrum (our sea) as the Romans called it. The sails were set and the

crew started rowing in earnest.

There were no navigational aids at the time and to gauge where they were, they kept close to the shore and ticked off the landmarks they passed on their journey planner. Etruria (North Western Italy), Massilia (the south of France) and Tarraco (North Eastern Spain) came first. From Tarraco they edged closer to the Baleares where they could see young people from Britannia enjoying the delights of Ibiza (and each other). In Minorca they observed the local inhabitants of Ibiza who had fled there. The last landmark was Saguntum (South Eastern Spain) before they reached Mons Calpe (Gibraltar) where they stocked up on more provisions and stayed overnight to give the rowers a chance to rest their arms and to visit Hercules' Pillar and other pubs. Some may have also visited the local oar-houses to inspect their wares.

The moment the galley left the calmer waters of the Mediterranean and entered the Atlantic there was literally a sea-change.

In spite of the cargo acting as ballast down the centre, the ship became very unsteady. Whenever a big wave made it tilt alarmingly to one side, the captain ordered everyone to run to the other side to act as a counterbalance. This involved stepping over, around or on top of the collection of amphorae and other items, including fellow members of the crew. This went on a long time and took people's minds off other matters.

When the sea calmed down a lot, a pressing issue came to the attention of the captain. One of the rowers was getting agitated and finally shouted out: "I need to use the bathroom." (He had come from a very refined family which frowned upon vulgar words.) There were no toilets on the boat as it was assumed that it would be ok if people just stood on the sides and let forth. But with everyone now required to row hard, they were forbidden to leave their seats, even sleeping in them at night.

"Can you piddle as you paddle?" Captain Silvio asked.

The seaman looked very embarrassed and said he could try.

“Then open up the hatch under your feet,” he was instructed.

Rather more water flowed into the boat than flowed out. This was followed by other rowers following suit. Soon the water-level was rising alarmingly.

“Close all the hatches immediately!” commanded Silvio with some distressing results. For the next few hours everyone had to bail out as the ship was very low in the water.

“In future, we will have a rota. As there are a lot of us on board, that could mean a wait of up to six hours for each one of you. The alternative is to use one of the amphorae containing wine, but you must drink all of the contents before you can use it for that other purpose.” That idea went down well.

It was getting near to dinner-time when things had returned to normal. The chef hit a gong and the crew took it in turns to line up in the cabin at the stern to be served. The wind had picked up and was blowing hard into the sails so for the time being there was no need for any rowing. The poor hens, who were all aware that they were landlubbers at heart, had been affected by the rough seas and all laid scrambled eggs. These were cooked by the chef using a device that Leonardo had rigged up – a wind-turbine which produced electricity to power a microwave stove. The scrambled eggs were washed down by copious amounts of wine from the amphorae which the crew took with them after they had eaten.

The strong winds lasted for several days and enabled the rowers to catch up with their laundry and to socialise over some wine. Meals were quite varied. No-one wanted the ready supply of milk, so the chef tried his hand at making cheese, which rather resembled Parmesan. He originated from Bologna, north of Florence, where he was well-known for his meat dishes. On the galley, he had been eyeing up the cows and when one of them died, he seized the chance to make, what others called, his Bolognese. It went down well with the crew members, especially when the Parmesan was sprinkled over it, although it was felt there was something missing.

Some days later, the rain started and poured down in buckets. There was no shelter for the crew – back in Florence they were used to sunshine for most of the year, so no-one thought it necessary to install anything to shelter under on the ship. The captain had a think about this and addressed his men: “You can either let the ship carry on sailing at a fast rate, in which case you will get very

wet. Or you can shelter under the sail but have to row like fury to make up for the lack of the sail.”

The crew decided they would prefer to stay dry which meant taking down the mainsail from the mast and draping it over them. This was not easily done on a swaying ship, and when they held it up above them all the water that had accumulated in it flowed down over them. It also interfered with their attempts to row at the same time. In desperation, they decided en masse to put the sail up again, which proved even more difficult than taking it down. As soon as this was accomplished, they all ran to the only place on the ship which had a roof – the cafeteria cum kitchen in the stern. This nearly made the ship upend, but by moving the one remaining cow and all the hens to the bows, it remained upright.

It was too early for a meal, so they waited patiently for the cabaret show to begin. The first act was the chef who gave a talk on Bologna, which did not go down well with the rest of the crew from Florence. Then Captain Silvio, who had once aspired to be a politician, read extracts from his diary and sang a song about leading a moral life, which he had written himself. By this time, the crew were more than ready to go back to their stations and row the boat again.

The rain eased off soon afterwards and the wind dropped. Some of the men used their oars to strike out at any passing fish. This was a welcome change to the normal diet. Their attempts to land a whale were not so successful though, and the whale managed to escape with just a bad headache. In revenge it blew a shower of water out of its blow-hole which soaked the men. “Mobus Dickus!” they shouted, which is a Latin curse which means: 'May your genitals be mobed'. Anyone who has had this misfortune knows it is not a joke.

Weeks passed by with a mix of stormy and mild weather until one day the galley ground to an abrupt halt. The captain put an oar over the side and ascertained that the ship had got lodged on a sandbank. No amount of rowing would shift the vessel. He therefore ordered the men to open their hatches, insert their legs in the holes and run. This only served to fill most of the boat with water which required a lot of bailing out again. Seeing this did not work, he told his men to shut the hatches and commanded most of the crew to jump overboard and push the ship. Some of them got stuck in the sand and needed rescuing, but this move did succeed in getting the ship afloat again and it rapidly drifted off, causing the men to swim after it... if they could. Those who couldn't quickly learned how to swim, there and then.

After this event it was only a short time before they spotted land ahead. A big colourful sign could be seen from a distance which read: *Luigi's Pizza Parlour*. Could this be the place we've been looking for, wondered the men. We might just as well have stayed at home and gone to *Domingo's Pizzeria* in Florence. Nevertheless, they carried on their journey and tied up the ship and then made their way to Luigi's restaurant. It had all mod cons: a toilet, a coat-room and a colosseum at the back.

Luigi and his men were delighted to meet them. "All the locals love my pizzas," he said. "What they have been used to eating is some bird called a turkey with some strange vegetables they call potatoes and sweetcorn. They were simply dying for something else to eat. By the way, did you get my message?"

"Not personally, but Jules told me about it," replied Silvio, who had friends in high places.

"And have you brought the olives I asked for?"

"Oh, damn it! I knew there was something we'd forgotten. But never mind, we've brought lots of other things: wine, tomatoes, wheat, cheese, some chickens and a cow."

"That's all very well, but what I really wanted was some olives. What could I possibly do with some chickens and a cow – open a hamburgerus jointus? No, I'm an Italian, which is what they call me around here. I need olives. Can you go back and fetch some?"

Silvio said they certainly could not, and if they were not wanted there, they would go elsewhere. With that he marched his men back to the galley and they immediately left. They followed the coastline for a few miles and then pulled into shore again where they unloaded the remainder of the cargo. The next day they started building their own restaurant – *Silvio's Burgerus Jointus*, but not before Silvio had captured a goose and tied a message around its leg: *Veni, Vidi – Mitte Nos Tauri*, which translates as 'I came, I saw – Please send us a bull'. Hopefully, Julius would get the message before the restaurant was due to open as the cow was looking decidedly worried and was getting quite lonely.

“We’ll start with milk-shakes and chicken-burgers and work our way up to hamburgers after the bull arrives. Now let’s give thanks we’ve arrived here safely and try some of that turkey stuff or it will be Christmas and there won’t be any left,” said Silvio.

And that is the real story of how Italian restaurants and fast food joints originated in America. It’s all thanks to a goose who got lost and a man called Julius, who is best known, perhaps, for inventing the Caesar Salad. I wonder whatever happened to him.

STOP BADGERING ME - OK, YOU CAN START NOW

OK, if you really insist, I will tell you about when I first met Mrs Badger and her family. But first, here's a little background information.

I was born prematurely and as a result I never did grow much. I was like the dwarf of dwarfs. Sure, being very tiny has its disadvantages. You have to have tiny-sized clothes and furniture, and waiting to get served in a shop is a nightmare as the shop assistants can't see you over the counter. Yet in some ways it does have its advantages. You can get into tiny spaces that others can't fit into, which is how I got my job mending washing machines – from the inside. But that's another matter.

Anyway, I've always enjoyed country walks where I can get away from the hurly-burly of modern life. Can you imagine just how frightening it is, walking along a busy road, if you are only two foot high. The cars are like huge monsters to me and when their tyres go in a puddle and it splashes up, it nearly drowns me. That is why I try to stick to footpaths in the countryside wherever I can.

I was having a pleasant stroll down one such footpath in the late evening last August. It runs alongside a little wood on a hillside. In one area there are lots of holes on the sloping ground beneath the trees, which I had to be very careful about.

I was skirting around a particularly big hole when I heard someone call out to me. I turned around and saw it was a badger. Normally, a badger would steer clear of human beings, but it might have been because of my small stature or my aftershave (the same one that many brock-singers use) that the badger sensed that I was harmless enough to approach. Fortunately, badgers have poor vision. Otherwise it would have thought differently.

“Hello,” the voice said. “Would you like to come in and have a look round?”

“That’s very kind of you,” I replied.

“You may not be used to being invited in by a female,” she said. “But have no fears. I am a married woman with many children and I wouldn’t think of taking advantage of you.”

With that she motioned me to follow her down the hole. It turned out to be quite a long tunnel with various other tunnels leading off on both sides in places. In one of them, a much smaller one than the one we were in, I could see a number of cubs, some of them curled up in a ball and others lying nose to tail.

“This is my new brood,” she announced proudly. “They are keeping nice and warm in there. They are coming up for two months old, and anytime now they will want to have a look around outside. My other children are all out at the moment.”

“How many cubs have you got?” I enquired.

“Well, there’s four here. Last year I had three, and the year before that I had five. All of them are now in full time work – foraging. Come along and I’ll introduce you to my mother and my other relatives. “

We went further along the tunnel and arrived at a bigger chamber where a few older badgers were lying down on their freshly-made beds, having a chin-wag and munching on some chocolate-coloured insects.

“You will excuse us,” said one of the elderly badgers. “We’ve just been doing some spring-cleaning, although we don’t wait till spring to do it, but do it every few days and change over bedrooms to let them air out. You may have passed the ones we’ve vacated on your way here. There are a lot more down this tunnel – more than we actually need in fact, but there are a lot of us here - twenty at the last count. Nice of my daughter to invite you in.”

I felt I ought to shake hands, but felt better of it. It was only then that it struck me that I had

been conversing with badgers. “I’m simply amazed that you all speak English. Where did you learn it?” I asked.

“Mainly from the television sett,” said one of the aunties. “Those are TVs which have been especially designed for badgers to watch. They’re all in black and white, you know. Some of us also have taken language courses online too. We call it the inter-sett.”

At this point, a very elderly badger made her entrance from another chamber.

“Guten abend,” said the newcomer.

“Grannie,” said the mother. “I’d like you to meet my new friend. “She turned to me and said “My grandmother and grandfather started this home of ours many years ago. They came over from Germany. Their ancestors were Lutherans but got upset with the Diet of Worms. They wanted a bit more variety of things to eat.”

“Where are the menfolk today?” I ventured to ask.

“They’re in the annex, sleeping it off.”

I was taken back to the entrance hole I had come in through and was ushered towards another hole along a well-defined path some distance away. On entering the entrance tunnel to the annex, I could hear a lot of loud snoring. Spread out on the floor were three badgers – the husband, father and grandfather of my hostess. On the floor were some rotting apples which had been fermenting and a smell of cider filled the air. I made my exit quietly and bade my farewell to the family and went home.

A few days later I was walking in the same area when I again encountered the lady badger not far from a fox.

“You know, this house of ours is quite old and we don’t need so many rooms any more so we’ve let some of them out to a fox family. They are not the best tenants – not as tidy or clean as us, but they sometimes share some old carcasses with us, so we let them stay. “

“Sounds like quite a symbiotic relationship,” I commented.

“That’s a new word to me. I must look that one up in the English for Wildlife dictionary.”

The fox was enjoying the last rays of the sun and seemed oblivious to some rabbits a short distance away.

“We’ve also given some rabbits a roof over their head. They don’t disturb us much, except when the male rabbit gets that twinkle in his eye and then they go at it like humans. They’re vegans, so we never compete for food with them. I really don’t know how they exist on all that grass with the occasional bit of lettuce here and there. It’s not proper food as far as I’m concerned. Mind you, we do appreciate the odd bit of grass they leave behind, which makes for some very comfortable bedding.”

“Don’t the foxes go after the rabbits?” I wondered.

“No, they’re too grateful for the ready-made accommodation, and besides, I wouldn’t let them.”

I was amazed at this attitude between animals of different species and thought of the way that human beings throughout history have exploited animals for their own good and killed so many of them, either to eat or for sport.

“Mind you,” she continued. “I’m quite partial to a nice snack of frog, or a small bird. Makes a change from the usual.” She paused and then said: “We’ve heard via the inter-sett that many badgers in this country have been gassed or shot to death. Is this true?”

I felt very embarrassed about this and said: “I believe that some people think that badgers spread TB to cattle.”

“That is what we, badgers, call fake moos, spread by cattle. Cows usually get TB from their own infected urine and faeces. Shooting the cows would stop the infection, or better still vaccinating them. Tell me. When human beings get TB, do they shoot or gas the person they get it from?”

“Of course not.”

“So, it’s one rule for the human population and another rule for animals.”

“That appears to be the case.”

It was then that I came to my big decision. I renounced my human citizenship and became an honorary badger. I have better eyesight than them and like to feel I can be of some use. But I sometimes get fed up with eating so many earthworms. I just have to close my eyes and pretend that it's spaghetti. I've been told that you can get used to anything in time.

THE REAL NURSERYVILLE

Jack Sprat and his wife were reminiscing about the old days in Nurseryville.

“Do you remember the old woman who lived in a shoe?” he said. “I don’t know how on earth they got planning permission for that, right next door to Old King Cole’s castle. But he was a merry old soul and didn’t complain about anything, just as long as he could be entertained by his three fiddlers.”

“You are dead right - huge, that shoe was, well it had to be as she had so many children she didn’t know what to do,” she replied.

“It was a lace-up shoe too, but she made sure they were always done up. You’d often hear her say to a couple of her children – One, two, buckle my shoe.”

“Did anyone ever know who the father was?”

“I’ve always suspected it was the Grand Old Duke of York.”

“I thought he was gay. I heard that he had ten thousand men.”

“He may have been gay, but all he did was to march them up the hill and down again. Nothing more than that.”

“If it wasn’t him, it certainly wasn’t Wee Willy Winkie.”

“I’m not so sure. Didn’t he used to run through the town upstairs and downstairs in his nightgown?”

“That was just to check that all the children were in their beds, when it was past eight o’clock.”

“I think he used to be a headmaster in a boarding school before his little accident.”

“Are you referring to when he nearly castrated himself that day when he went camping in the

Spring.”

“I gather it was a cold and frosty morning and he got frostbite on his nuts in May.”

“Tragic. Come to think of it. Wasn’t Wee Willie Winkie related to Little Jack Horner – the chap who used to sit in the corner all the time.”

“Oh, him. He had dreadful table manners, putting his thumb into the Christmas pudding and pulling out plums. I don’t think many women would go for someone like that.”

“I think the father is more likely to have been this old man.”

“Which old man?”

“The one who used to play knick knack paddywack.”

“Never heard it called that before.”

“Well, whoever the father was, he should have been paying the old woman some alimony. With that many children I’m not talking of just singing a song of sixpence. But big money.”

“Didn’t the social services pay her a visit once to check up on the children?”

“They certainly did. When they arrived, having gone around the mulberry bush, the old woman told Polly to put the kettle on so that they could all have tea.”

“Polly was one of her daughters, wasn’t she? But she couldn’t make any tea until Jack and Jill had gone up the hill to fetch a pail of water. They never did get to have any tea as Jack and Jill had a mishap coming down the hill. The social workers then had a look around inside the shoe. What they found was unbelievable. There were ten in the bed and if any of them wanted to go to the toilet in the night they would have to roll over, one by one. She kept ten green bottles hanging on the wall for such an event, but they kept falling down which must have been very messy.”

“I doubt if any one of them had much sleep. No wonder Frère Jacques was asleep all the time. Couldn’t even wake him up by ringing a bell. Wonder why he had a French name?”

“The old woman apparently used to like to watch the TV programmes about Jacques Cousteau.

“When the social workers were there the girls and boys came out to play in the garden. There was even a new-born child out there in the tree tops with one of the elder children having to rock-a-bye baby. They were afraid that when the bough broke the cradle would fall.”

“That’s not all. There was a pussy in the well. And one of the kids called Humpty Dumpty was sitting on a wall. Quite a chubby little fellow and quite egg-ocentric, if I recall. He fell off the wall while they were there. As all of the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put him together again, they called Dr Foster - but he had gone to Gloucester.”

“The gardening got too much for the old woman to look after, so she left it up to Mary. Mary was quite contrary, I hear.”

“Didn’t Mary also have a little lamb? Had a fleece that was white as snow and used to follow her about a lot?”

“From what I’ve been told she nicked that from Little Bo Peep who lost all of her sheep and didn’t know where to find them. Don’t worry, people told her, they’ll come home. All of them did except for one...”

“Don’t tell me, it was baa, baa, black sheep. They could have made a fortune out of him as he had loads of wool, but he was a bit of an outcast.”

“What else can you remember about conditions in the shoe?”

“Dreadful. When the clock went ‘hickory dickory dock’ (the cuckoo was a bit confused), anyway, at that very moment a mouse ran up the clock. “

“Was it one of the three blind mice?”

“No, it still had a tail.”

“Hardly anywhere to sit inside the shoe. Poor little Miss Muffet had to sit on a tuffet to eat her curds and whey.”

“I heard that a spider came and sat down beside her which frightened her away.”

“Was it an itsy bitsy spider?”

“No, it must have been a bloody great big one. The itsy bitsy spider was in the water spout outside.”

“Well at least they had some food, now you mention curds and whey. Not like our neighbour, Old Mother Hubbard. One of the children used to go to the baker’s man a lot to get some pat-a-cakes. And there were also plenty of oranges and lemons. Outside they kept a goosie goosie gander which they got from Old Macdonald.”

“Oh yes, he had a farm with a lot of animals on it. He once said to me: “This little piggy goes to market. This little piggy stays home. This little piggy has roast beef. And this little piggy has none.”

“But don’t forget the last little piggy who had a weak bladder, and went wee wee wee all the way home.”

“Perhaps he needed one of those green bottles!”

“Talking about little piggies, I’m absolutely starving. Are you going to eat up all that pork chop, Jack?”

“No, can’t eat the fatty bit. You can have it.”

“In the end, what did the social services decide to do about the old woman who lived in the shoe?”

“There’s nothing they could do. The old lady went and inadvertently swallowed a fly – I don’t know why she swallowed a fly. But she did and it caused her all sorts of knock-on effects.”

“Perhaps she died?”

“That’s just what she did.”

"And what about the children?"

"They all moved out and live amongst us now."

"And the shoe?"

"That became unlaced for the last time and went to join the great cobbler in the sky."

"Sounds like all of this is a load of cobblers."

"That's just what it is. Now finish up your pork chop and let's go to bed."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

THE RECENTLY-DISCOVERED ORIGINS OF FOODSTUFFS

The next time you feel hungry and get something to eat, have a think about how different items of food originated. Here is a brief history of some basic things we tend to take for granted, or in the case of cheese, take for grated.

RAW FOOD

Fruit and vegetables and nuts

Early man must have watched other creatures, like apes and birds, eating various berries and thought two things: 1) perhaps we could also eat them, and 2) I must get the wife to get some for me. The problem was knowing what could be eaten and what couldn't, without causing bad stomach ache or death. There are a number of poisonous berries in the wild, and it can be assumed that many people died eating them.

Perhaps, when the population began to be depleted, it was decided it might be better to feed these types of food to their animals, as a test to see if the animals survived. We can also assume that some animals died, but the vast majority of animals, being far wiser than humans, turned their noses up at some of the things they were given and refused to eat them. This was not a fool-proof test, however, as cows eat grass, but humans must have found it difficult to digest, so they chose instead to smoke it.

Another problem for early humans lay in the peel or rind or hard shells of nuts. It's easy enough to eat raw apples, blackberries, currants and berries, but what about bananas, grapefruit, mangoes, coconuts, oranges, kiwi-fruit and so on? Somewhere along the line, someone had the brilliant idea of peeling a banana or part of a banana, which is not difficult to do, before eating what was left. This was a major innovation.

In the case of other fruits like those listed above, it is more likely that the edible part was exposed following an accident, such as someone bashing their head on a mango, rubbing the wound and finding that the squishy stuff on their hand actually tasted good. Presumably, this did not happen quite this way with a coconut. Even if one had fallen on someone's head, it would have probably knocked them out or even worse. Other people would not then have chosen to eat the inside of a coconut, unless they really disliked the person who had been killed by one.

Human beings do have a habit of touching their mouths with their fingers quite frequently, perhaps to see if they still have teeth, and if enough fruit fell to the ground, causing the peel, rind or nutcases to split open, they might have tasted the fleshy part of the fruit out of curiosity and wanted more.

In passing, commiserations should be given to the many people who no doubt tried eating the unpeeled fruit or unopened nuts and lost a few teeth in the process – hence the habit of touching their mouths with their fingers originated.

THE ROLE OF FIRE

The use of fire in cooking revolutionised things. Whoever and however anyone discovered how to make a fire is unknown. Maybe there was once a Neanderthal boy scout who was rubbing two sticks together to whittle away the time. The resulting spark might have caught light to one of the sticks which then set his clothes ablaze. His friends probably laughed their heads off at this and told their dads. Fortunately, charred testicles did not catch on, although it might do one day.

True or not, in the end mankind did find a way of making fire. This was a useful tool in keeping warm, as the boy scout's friends realised to their delight.

Fire also kept away big cats, like lions and tigers, and prevented them from attacking, unlike smaller domestic cats who were attracted by the warmth – but that is another story.

With regard to using fire to heat up food, this was probably by pure chance. An apple might have fallen into the fire, giving rise to a baked apple, which was eaten with relish. Or an orange might have been cooked, which was not enjoyed quite as much. Or even the cat might have fallen into the fire and been cooked. But let's not go down that road.

Putting things on the fire before eating them became all the rage, although it produced an awful lot of burned fingers in retrieving them. Presumably, the fingers themselves were not eaten, unless of course they were covered with chocolate.

What was obviously needed was a stove, otherwise the fire could get out of control and burn up other boy scouts and their dads. That would be a bit of a pity, some of the women probably thought. However, they could see themselves in future being obliged to cook over a hot stove all day long.

Once impromptu stoves had come into being, often being just a few well-placed stones surrounding the fire, it was felt necessary for someone to invent something to put the food into on the fire. This invention was created by a man called Eric Saucepan. He had the brilliant idea of including a handle on the pan which would not be held directly over the blaze. For his achievements he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Kitchenware, posthumously. Eric Saucepan's friend, Wolfgang Kettle at around the same time had come up with the idea of heating water in a pan over a fire. When it boiled, he had to whistle to inform others that the T was ready – the T stood for trink, as he came from the area now known as Germany.

By combining their efforts, they found a solution to the food becoming burned and stuck to the bottom of the pan. This was by putting some water in the container alongside the food. After taking the food out, the water could be drunk too. This worked well with soup, but was not so successful with early attempts at baking bread.

At this time in England, Mr Reginald Cutlery was working on ways to eat the food, if the queen might visit. He came up with three prototypes: a forpoon, a knik and a spife. These did not catch on at the time. He had slightly better luck with his lapkin, a piece of cloth placed over his trousers to catch any food he dropped. Noticing that he would fall asleep straight after eating, he renamed it a napkin, which caught on immediately with the public, although there was competition from across the Channel with a similar device dreamed up by a Monsieur Serviette.

INDIVIDUAL ITEMS OF FOOD

Milk

People who lived near to wild cattle were fascinated by the way that the cows suckled their

young. They were very envious of the fact that the cows had four teats each, so that would mean that at least two of them would be surplus to requirements, compared to humans. They really wanted to get their hands on the udder-stuff, which they did, catching it in bucketfulls.

“When you sit on this stool and milk the cows, there’s so much milk that comes out you think it’s going to go past your eyes,” remarked a milkmaid.

Her children liked to play around with the milk, dousing sticks in it and skimming them across the surface or semi-skimming them just below. This had the effect of producing the first cheese, an event witnessed by an early photographer. Butter and cream were also produced from the milk, depending upon which of the teats was used in the milking.

Eggs

The first eggs were discovered by two children who mistook them for conkers. They tried to make holes in them to insert the string but the shells cracked and the insides spilled out. News about this rapidly spread on the social media of the day.

On discovering the yoke and the whites of the egg, people in different parts of the country cooked the eggs in different ways. Some of them fried them in their pans, some of them boiled the eggs in their shells, and others took off the shells and then boiled them, but that idea was poached by other people. Combining the milk and the eggs gave rise to a bit of a mess, which was rightly named scrambled eggs.

The difficulty many people found was trying to hold the hen over the stove long enough for the hen to lay an egg. This may have resulted in the first cooked chicken dish, which was described as ‘feather-lickin’ good’. It took a while before people realised that under the feathers the meat could be eaten too.

Sausages

There was a man who lived in an area beset by wild boars. It is now called Bangor, in Wales. He used to complain about his very small house with no room to store anything. He called a carpenter to install a few shelves one day. That very day, one of the boars wandered into his yard

and by accident sat on the fire. That, sadly for him, did not save his bacon. The man rather liked the taste of this meat and found he had so much left over he did not have enough storage space for it all. He put the carcass on the kitchen table and set about it with his knife.

It seemed a waste not to use the boar's intestines, so he stuffed them full of meat. Inevitably some of the scrag ends of the meat fell on the floor, so he swept them up together with the sawdust and used those too. Every few inches he tied a knot in the intestine, or skin as he called it, which would represent a meal's worth. He then hung up the string of sausages from a hook. His neighbours heard about it and he invited them around for a meal. The idea spread from there. Not everyone enjoyed his sawdust sausages. "The wurst I've eaten," remarked a German friend of his.

Root vegetables

No sane person would ever contemplate digging up a plant and eating its roots, you would have thought. But some people did. The round protuberances found on the roots of the potato plant hardly seemed like something you could eat, and no doubt when somebody did try to eat a raw potato with its skin on, it must have given them severe indigestion.

That was until the day when a potato plant in South America was struck by lightning. The green leaves withered, leaving just a baked potato. Surprisingly, a woman who was doing some weeding noticed the plant and dug it up to get rid of it. As she did so, a bit of the potato fell into her mouth. She hated it and immediately had visions of stuffing it with all sorts of other revolting things and offering it as food to the Spanish conquistadors. That will get rid of them, she wrongly thought. But they actually liked them and took them back to Europe.

Since then, people have used the potato in various ways, but instead of waiting for them to be struck by lightning, they have heated them up on a stove. If you know of anyone who persists in endeavouring to get their potatoes struck by lightning, just ignore them.

All kinds of other root vegetables are now consumed. But who would have thought that a raw parsnip would be seen as something to eat, unless it was by someone who was colour-blind and mistook it for a carrot, which can at least be eaten raw.

Bread

Whoever thought of making the first loaf of bread must have been thought of as being a complete idiot. “You see that field of wheat,” he would have said. “I bet you I can turn those plants into a thin wedge-shaped square that you can eat with some honey and a nice cuppa”. No-one would have believed him. He tried to bend a stalk of wheat into a small square. That was not easy. It was indigestible and he nearly gave up.

“Maybe it’s the thick stalk you need to get rid of,” said his mother. “That will leave you with the smaller bits.” That indeed left him with the hard chaff and the grain, and he had to use a lot more stalks to get the same amount of the smaller parts. It was still impossible to eat.

“We’ll try getting rid of the husks,” his mother said. And she put them on the ground and pounded at them. That required even more stalks to create the same amount.

“At this rate I’m going to end up with nothing,” he said. Most of the husks were removed by this pounding away at the hard bits. Just then a wind blew up and carted off the remainder, leaving just the hard grains.

“This is all I’ve got left now,” he told his mother, “and it’s still too tough to eat. I give up.”

His mother carried on regardless and kept pounding away until it had turned into flour. She collected it together and left it on top of a stone. Overnight there was a shower of rain and in the morning, they found it had turned into dough.

“What’s all this stuff?” he said and threw it on the embers of the fire.

His mother was upset at what he had done. “That’s all I needed after all that hard work,” she complained.

A few hours later they discovered little pieces of bread, or rather, pieces of toast. They dumped them in the bin. Meanwhile a friend of his, who had been watching it all, took one of the pieces and ate it. It was very tasty. The next day he opened the world’s first bakery. His name was the Venerable Brede.

Cakes

Other people were intrigued by this dough-stuff and tried adding other things to it – eggs, milk,

nuts and honey, and so on. A lot of the results looked more like bread than cakes so they realised that they would have to do something about the shape. Some people baked them inside cups; others tried to make them round. They did this by cutting off the corners when no-one was watching and then devouring the bits. This was near enough to round that they could manage.

Getting enough honey was not always easy as there were times when the bees refused to cooperate when placed in the mixture in the oven. This was alleviated when sugar cane was first extracted and sugar could be added to everything as it was very addictive.

Regarding placing candles in cakes, this began when there was a shortage of candlesticks one year. When lit, the candles gave the cakes an interesting waxy taste, which is not what people want to eat on their birthdays. Blowing the candles out succeeded in spreading a wide collection of germs. People who caught these germs attributed their illnesses to the candle-wax and led someone to invent miniature candle-holders to put on cakes. People, especially children who are hotbeds of all manner of germs, still blow out the candles on their cakes. Why this is acceptable, but sneezing into the teapot is not, is anyone's guess.

Curry

Mrs Dhansak was in her kitchen, cooking a meal with her daughter Tikka-Masala. Just as she had added some ginger to the water in which the chicken was being cooked, she had to go outside to talk to her neighbour. It was a cold day and she said: "It's chilly," as she left. Her daughter thought she was being told to add some chili powder.

At that moment Tikka's grandmother came into the room, and said. "I told you I was comin' today."

Tikka added some cumin and some more chili powder.

Her grandmother, Korma, swore by garlic and put some into the mixture, along with some more chili powder.

Mrs Dhansak came back with her neighbour, Mrs Saag who had been to a wedding and had some spare tumeric on her, which she emptied into the dish. Mrs Dhansak remembered she had not yet put any chili power in and put a spoonful in.

The neighbour's daughter, Jalfrezi, came looking for her mother and dumped some cardamom into the pot, with some chili powder for good measure.

Mr Dhansak, who was passing the door, looked in and proudly presented them with a cayenne pepper he had grown, which he threw into the mix and added some chili powder as he particularly liked it. Mr Saag noticed him there and came over to say hello and sneaked some fennel seed and a dash of chili powder into the dish.

“What shall we call this curry?” said Mrs Dhansak as they sat down to eat it. The question was not answered as it was not long before all of them had to rush off. The only name that seemed appropriate was very clear. “We must call it vinda-loo,” said Mr Dhansak later. Everyone agreed.

OLD GRANDFATHER TIME

Graham had just turned sixty. He already had grey hair and a bit of a bald spot. He wore glasses with thick rims and had a beard. He was a lorry driver, which meant that there were times when he was away a lot, but other times when he was at home in between assignments.

Being a driver, he did not get to exercise much which showed in his rotund figure, and as a result his walking tended to be rather stiff and laboured.

One afternoon when he was not working, his son asked him to look after their six-year old daughter, Emily, while he and his wife went shopping.

Emily was very fond of her grandfather, but thought he was ancient, really ancient. Graham knew this is what she thought and for a bit of fun he played along with it.

“Grandad,” she said. “Mommy and Daddy have gone to the supermarket in their new car. When you were young, did you have a car?”

“Goodness me, no,” he replied. “I had to walk most of the time. Walked nine miles to school every day. But my father had a horse. Every family had a horse in those days and if we were going anywhere together, he’d hitch a cart to the horse and we’d all pile in. It got a bit crowded at times but we were all family.”

“Did this happen everywhere, even in big cities like Liverpool?”

“Most certainly. The main street was crowded with horses and carts, sometimes five or even six a-breast. If you were stuck in the middle you would have to climb over all the other horses and carts to get to the pavement.”

“Is that where they put the shopping trolleys?”

“There weren’t any shopping trolleys and there certainly weren’t any supermarkets then. There

were just little shops – a hardware shop, an outfitters, a haberdashery and so on.”

Emily hadn't a clue what these shops were, which is why Graham had chosen them as they sounded rather exotic.

“What did you buy in a haberdashery?”

“Just the odd haberdashes when you ran out of them.”

“Where did you get your smart phone from?”

“Smart phone? We didn't have any of those. We didn't even have a telephone in those days.”

“But what happened if you wanted to get in touch with someone?”

“We visited them at home, usually.”

“You can't visit everyone you want to speak to in a few minutes. It's just not possible.”

“If there was no need to speak to someone, you didn't bother.”

“And what about looking at your photos?”

“Not many of us had those new-fangled camera things when I was young. When I did eventually buy one, I put all the photographs in an album which I sometimes showed people.”

“How did you send the photos to other people?”

“I never did, and they wouldn't have been interested anyway.”

“What about listening to your music when you were out and about?”

“That was impossible. But sometimes you stuck a mouth-organ or penny whistle in your pocket and played it yourself. When you got home, you could always put a record on the gramophone, if you had one.”

“What's a gramophone?”

“It was like a box with a horn sticking out the top, and it played the record with a needle.”

“Like the knitting needles which grandma has?”

“No, much smaller. Of course, we didn’t have a television then, and it wasn’t until I was nearly twenty that we got a crystal-set wireless.”

“What were the crystals for?”

“To make it look pretty, I guess.”

“So, what did you do in the evening without a television?”

“We would light the candles and play cards, or write letters on parchment with our quill pens – you know, feathers which were dipped in ink. But every so often we had to go outside and fill the coal scuttle in case the fire went out.”

Emily was totally confused by all of this, but guessed he was talking about keeping warm.

“Why didn’t you just turn the radiators on?”

“There weren’t any radiators and, of course, no central heating in those days. If you wanted to get warm, you would have to stand in front of the fire with a nice mug of hot tea, if you were lucky. If you were unlucky, though, you would be the one who would have to fetch the water from the well in the back garden. It was just beyond the outhouse if I remember.”

“What was the outhouse used for?”

“It was where you went when you wanted to go to the toilet. The toilet paper was a wad of newspapers, kept on a piece of string beside the seat. We were lucky. We had a three-seater so you could take a couple of other people with you when you went. It was all a joint effort.”

“I’m glad I didn’t live then.”

“It was alright, except when it was pelting down with rain or when big spiders or mice or rats would get into the outhouse.”

“I would never have gone.”

“You’d have to. No alternative.”

She looked disgusted at the thought and changed the subject rapidly.

“Who was your favourite film star?”

“Charlie Chaplin. When they started making the talkies, I didn’t like the films so much. They didn’t leave anything to the imagination.”

“And who was your favourite pop star?”

“We didn’t have pop music then. It was just sing-a-longs in the local tavern. No fancy musical instruments. Just plain song.”

“Did you know the Beatles?”

“I went to school with John Lennon’s grandfather or was it his great-grandfather?”

Her eyes widened when he said “great” so he added a few more.

“Or possibly his great...great...great...grandfather. Lovely man. Lived in a yellow submarine, if I recall.”

“Wow! And what about your favourite author?”

“That must have been my chum, Charles Dickens. We used to hang about together when he visited Liverpool. He came up here just to go to the local market. He had grape expectations.”

“What clothes did you used to wear?”

“Just the usual smocks. Sometimes you had to wear a ruff around your neck which was most uncomfortable. But what I hated to wear the most was a codpiece.”

He immediately regretted saying this.

“What’s a codpiece?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Isn’t it time your dad and mom got back? I’m exhausted. You’d better carry on doing your jigsaw now.”

Ten years later, Emily – now a wordly-wise teenager, visited her grandfather, now retired. Emily had remembered deep down everything her grandfather had told her and believed every word of it, and it had never occurred to her in the intervening years to question it – until this very day. She thought she would play him back with his own game, but in reverse.

“What have you been doing today?” he asked her.

“I had a drink with Anna in Moscow,” she replied.

“A video-link, I presume.”

“No, I teleported myself there. I wanted to really taste the vodka.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I visited other friends in Buenos Aires and Boston for a bite to eat.”

“What did you have?”

“The usual stuff – marinated hydroponically-grown seaweed, elephant-flavoured miscuits...”

“What on earth are miscuits?”

“They are shaped like old-fashioned biscuits but have all the essential minerals, proteins, and vitamins in them.”

“They sound awful.”

“They’re great. And you don’t have to go to the dentist so often as there’s nothing much to chew on these days. And besides, I’ve had my teeth sprayed with iron-enforced enamel so they should never need to be seen to.”

“When did you have that done?”

“When I had my multi-multi-life-enhancing vaccines, which protect against every single disease. I’ll probably live to be 200 years old, if not for ever.”

“Good for you. Have you anything planned for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s the day I’ve been looking forward to for a long time. I get to fly to Venus on a school trip.”

“Oh yes? Is it to study geology?”

“No, it’s for our English class. Apparently, people in Venus speak a dialect of English.”

“Goodness me. Who would have believed that!”

“The American President probably does.”

She gave her grandfather some time for that to sink in and then said: “Tell me, granddad. Are you going to freeze yourself?”

“Probably, but I’ve brought my scarf and gloves to go home with.”

“No, I meant putting your body on ice before you die so you can wake up in hundreds of years’ time.”

“What? And have to eat nothing but marinated hydroponically-grown seaweed and elephant-flavoured miscuits. No thanks.”

“But you could get a job teaching English on Venus or even Saturn.”

“Do they need lorry drivers there?”

“Probably.”

“Then they can do it themselves. There’s no way I’m going back to driving lorries. But I wouldn’t mind being put on lumps of ice, with one proviso.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s plenty of whisky to go with it. Must go now. Have a good trip tomorrow and see you in 200 years’ time. Bye.”

“Bye. And don’t get cold walking home – the ice hasn’t arrived yet.”

LATIN PHRASES FOR YOU TO USE

Prominent people, such as politicians, sometimes throw in various Latin phrases into their speech to show how learned they believe they are. You, too, can do this. Here is a list of phrases you can use which will impress everyone, well, almost everyone.

Abuses non tollit usum – do not play with yourself in the toilet

Ad hoc – this way to the hock (a sign found in wine merchants)

Ad undas – to the underwear (a sign found in clothes shops)

Alma mater – my mother's called Alma

Alter ego - I've changed

Amor fati – I love someone who is overweight

Animus in consulendo liber – there's an animal in the Liberian Consulate

Ante cibum – auntie is showing her bottom

A posteriori – bottom (more polite word)

Audi alteram partem – part of the Audi has been altered (found in German garages)

Barba non facit philosophum - the hairdresser doesn't like to talk about philosophy

Bis dat qui cito dat – lyrics of a rap tune (untranslatable)

Canis canem edit – the dog ate a tin of dog food

Carpe vinum – stop going on about my drinking

Casus belli – the doorbell

Cetera desunt – everything else is down (seen in lifts)

Circa – 2 circuses

Coitus interruptus – an interrupted game of quoits

Compos mentis – I meant to see to the compost

Contra legum – I have something against vegetables

Corpus vile – an unattractive body

Corruptus in extremis – I have disfigured fingers and toes

Dixi – short for Dixieland jazz

Ductus exemplo – an exemplary duck

Ecce homo – a gay Eccles cake

Et suppositi nil posit in esse – I ate a suppository, no need for oil

Ex animo – used to be an animal

Ex ante – used to be my auntie (now she's my uncle)

Ex cathedra -out of the cathedral

Ex officio – out of the office (please call back later)

Ex post – to get something by post

Ex undis – no longer wearing underpants

Felix culpa – Felix is to blame

Fiat luxus – a luxury Italian car

Flatus vocis – singing flat

Genius loci – Loci is a genius

Gloria patri – Gloria has become a father

Habemus papum – We've got a papa

Hic jacet – Hic! Where's my jacket?

Hoc age – the Hock is fermenting nicely

Homo bulla – a gay bull

Horribile dictu – a really nasty-looking willy

In camera – in the camera (as in I left the film in my camera)

In casu – in the case

In harmonia progressio – follow the chap playing the harmonica

In limine – in the limousine

Lege artis – a long-legged painter

Magna Carta – a big birthday card

Mare liberum – my horse has run off

Mens rea – the backside of a male

Miles gloriosus – in admiration of Miles Davis

Modus operandi – the plot of an opera

Mors omnibus – another bus has just come along

Nanos gigantum humeris insidentes – my over-weight grandmother came across a very funny incident

Natura abhorret a vacuum – nature hates vacuum cleaners

Nec dextrorsum, nec sinistrorsum – my neck is dexterous and sinister

Nihil boni sine labore – nothing good about going into labour in a cinema

Nil per os – nothing for the horse (as in - I'll have a beer but nil per os)

Non liquet – don't lick it

Non quis sed quid – I told you, you can't do the quiz without paying

Non sequitur – I've lost my secateurs

Non serviam – not self-service (waitress service only)

O tempora o mores – damn it, more temper tantrums

Omnia omnibus – all the passengers on the bus

Ora et labora – Horrors! I ate the labrador

Oratio recta – speaking out of one's ass

Passim – overtake

Pendent opera interrupta – when my pendant fell off, it interrupted the opera

Perpetuum mobile – on your phone constantly

Plus extra – advertising slogan

Pollice verso – a poetic police officer

Pontifex Maximus – the city center of Pontefract

Post factum – send the information sheets by post

Post coitum – send the quoits by post

Pro gloria et Patria – for Gloria and Patricia

Quaque hora – fear of ducks

Quid pro quo – who do I have to give a pound to?

Quid rides – donkey rides, one pound

Saltus in demonstrando – add salt as shown

Scuto amaris divini – I love my absolutely divine scooter

Sic et non – vomited, so haven't been eating

Sic transit gloria mundi – I vomited in Gloria's transit van on Monday

Sino die – what’s on today at the cinema

Sole scriptura – reading the bible by solar lighting

Stupor mundi – hung-over on Monday

Sub rosa – a submarine called Rosa

Sub silentio – a submarine which has cut its engines

Sui generis – a generous helping of chop suey

Super firmum fundamentum dei – advert for viagra

Tempora heroica – short-term act of bravery

Tempus fugit – run out of time, f*** it

Testis unus, testis nullus – one testicle is better than none

Tunica proprior est pallio – the proper tunic should be a pale colour

Uno flatu – flat number one

Utilis in ministerium – cooking utensils are in the vicarage

Vera natura – Vera’s a naturist

Via media – I heard it on the television/radio

Vice versa – I have an unhealthy addiction to poetry

Video sed non credo – what is said in the video should not be believed (fake news)

Virile agutar – the farmer is virile

Vox populi – pop singer

*Another translation of these Latin phrases can be found at
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Latin_phrases_\(full\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Latin_phrases_(full))*

But beware, it may be a spoof.

VEGETATING

“Any other business?” Jack Pips, the Chairman of Scrumpiton Parish Council asked at the AGM.

“I’d like to make a suggestion,” said Penny Parsnip, who ran the village grocery shop. “I think we ought to put up a memorial to Peter Plants after all he has done for this village. If it wasn’t for him, we would just be thought of as yet another place in Somerset where they make cider. I’m not saying that there is anything wrong with our cider, mind you.” She could see the disapproving face of Henry Peel, the landlord of the Ciderman’s Arms in front of her. “But Peter helped us to show that we have a diverse range of interests here.”

“I don’t agree with Councillor Parsnip,” said Colin Cooper, a barrel-shaped man who used to work in the pressing plant. “We don’t want no memorials to a vegetable man. This has always been a cider village. I was in apples, my father was in apples, and my grandfather was in apples.”

“All the same, we need our vegetables too, and Peter did more than anyone else here to put our village on the vegetable map of the country,” argued Simon Sprout, a teacher who taught nutrition amongst other things at the school.

“An apple a day keeps the doctor away, I was taught when I went to school,” said Dora Core, a former midwife and waitress at the pub. “And there’s lots of apples in a good pint of cider.”

“But we have to have a varied diet, they say. And if it wasn’t for the efforts of Peter, no-one here or in the rest of the country would know about vegetables like the ones he grew,” chipped in Olivia Onions, who herself had a large allotment and got her seeds and other necessities from his nursery.

“I think we should put this to a vote,” said the Chairman getting a bit restless. Remember, the issue is not about fruit versus vegetables. It is about putting up a memorial to Peter Plants.”

The vote in favour of erecting a memorial was narrowly passed and the form this would take

was left to be discussed at the next meeting.

In the evenings, Peter used to be seen propping up the bar of the pub and had downed many a pint of cider there, which served to increase his lecherous behaviour towards the girls and women in the village. He felt he deserved this chance to relax after working hard on his nursery all day. For years he had propagated the whole range of vegetables and had become a renowned expert in propagation within the village. But there came a time when he had become rather bored with the whole business. He had never wanted to be a nurseryman, but with a name like his he really had no option.

Then one day, he read an interesting article on food in the newspaper. The author, a health specialist, was advocating the 5 A Day recommendation for fruit and vegetables. Most people find it hard to manage to get the entire five, so why don't I make it easier for them, he thought, although he was really eyeing up how much money he could earn from it.

His aim was to combine several plants into one. The first attempts did not go well and he had to abandon his potato and artichoke experiment. Likewise, his broccoli and cauliflower prototype did not work. The first glimpse of success was his amalgamation of a carrot and a beetroot which he achieved by joining the seeds together with superglue. The end result may have looked like a rather diseased phallic symbol, but at least both carrot and beetroot were edible, even though they were a bit sticky.

When this had been perfected, he added a runner-bean to the duo by inserting the carrot/beetroot-combined seed into a hole in the much larger runner bean seed. This produced a somewhat smaller bean stalk but it did produce a few beans. Having the other vegetables along with them, maybe people would not want so many beans, he reckoned.

The next step was to bury the carrot/beetroot/bean seed inside an onion set, that is a partially-grown seed. The crop of onions that resulted were hindered by the stalk of the runner beans growing through them, so the useable portion turned out to be smaller than usual, but at least it was a viable proposition.

The last stage, which would add up to five different vegetables in one plant, was to add some greenery. Lettuce was too flimsy a plant, but cabbage did the trick. The answer, he found, was to grow the cabbage until it had started to produce some of its outside leaves, and at that point to plant the combined other vegetables immediately beneath the cabbage so they would merge into one.

Having finally produced a 5 A Day plant on his nursery he began to offer them for sale, and recognising their uniqueness, he advertised them in the national media. There was a terrific response and he could hardly keep up with the demand. He took on extra staff and negotiated with other landowners to buy more land. There was resistance to this from some locals who did not want their apple orchards being converted into fields growing vegetables. The very thought of it! The solution that was agreed upon, albeit with a lot of acrimony, was to plant the vegetables in the ground around the trees, even though no-one had considered how the apples would be harvested in this arrangement. The feud between fruit and vegetables, that is, the cider apples and the 5 A Day-vegetables, stemmed from this time and never completely abated.

Peter soon found himself banned from the Ciderman's Arms pub and was deprived of his evening drink and lechery. The only solution for him was to brew something to drink for himself which contained enough alcohol to satisfy him. He sought the help of some of the reputedly wanton women in the village to help with his lechery, in return for free plants. Only one woman took him up on the offer as she thought lechery must be a kind of vegetable. She had mistaken lechery for celery and needed "a stick of lechery" for an evening meal.

He immediately set to work on pulping some windfall apples he found, and after fermentation they produced a very rough cider. Not having a specific barrel for this purpose, he used one he found in his nursery in which flowers had been stored. Unfortunately, the flowers included aconite, known to the locals as monkshood, and the toxic residue which this produced tainted his brew. Other workers in his nursery found him the following day, dead on the floor, next to a pint-glass from which he had been imbibing his concoction. The woman he had hired had gone home before he had collapsed, as she realised his true intentions when he took his clothes off before drinking.

Although he was gone, the reputation of his 5 A Day plant lived on, and orders from all over the country were still pouring in. In his absence, his business was taken over by a consortium, led

by Penny Parsnip from the grocery shop - the same woman who had proposed having a memorial to him.

At the next meeting of the parish council, the chairman, Jack Pips, stated: "The first item on the agenda for tonight is the memorial to Peter Plants. What is the wording you would like on the plaque?"

"This is in honour of Peter Plants," suggested Penny Parsnip.

"I don't think 'honour' and 'Peter Plants' should be in the same sentence," commented Colin Cooper, "knowing what he was like."

"Well how about 'This is in commemoration of Peter Plants'?" Councillor Parsnip came back at him.

"Many people don't know what a long word like 'commemoration' means in this village," Simon Sprout replied. Being a teacher, he knew a thing or two about these things.

"In memory of Peter Plants," Olivia Onions remarked. "That's shorter and more to the point."

"In which case, why not just 'Peter Plants'?" Henry Peel said.

"I think we need at least to put some dates on it," Jack Pips stated, "otherwise it sounds as if it just tells you what Peter is now doing and I'm sure he is not planting anything."

"More like rotting in Hell, I hope," Colin Cooper murmured.

"I have the dates here in front of me," announced the chairman. "Born in 1962. Died in 2019. That would have made him 57."

"57!" Dora Core shouted. "He told me he was 47 when we...never mind."

"And he told me he was 39..." exploded Penny Parsnip.

"It was 28, after we...whatever," admitted Olivia Onions. "I thought he'd just led a dissolute

life.”

“That’s true enough!” said Simon Sprout.

“Well I can assure you that those are the right dates,” Jack Pips said. “Is there anything else we should add so that people who didn’t know him could be made aware of what he did, professionally, that is.”

“The five a day man comes to my mind,” Henry Peel said, reluctantly.

“Five women a day, do you mean?” Simon Sprout said caustically.

“The creator of the 5 A Day plant, perhaps,” Dora Core suggested.

“Peter Plants 5 A Day. No more to say. 1962-2019,” Penny Parsnip came up with. She was rather proud of her poetic twist to it. That gets around having to use the word ‘plants’ twice.”

“That’s a bit long, if you don’t mind me saying,” Oliva Onions commented.

She did mind!

Two hours later they were still trying to work out what to put, by which time they were too tired to even care anymore.

“I think we’ll have to go with Penny’s suggestion,” the chairman said. “We must move on. Now where do we put this here plaque?”

“You could put it on the wall of my shop, but it might put off people coming in,” Penny said.

“It could be on the wall of the Village Hall, maybe,” said Henry Peel. “I’m certainly not having it on my pub.”

No-one agreed it should go on the Village Hall, as it was used by children. And no-one had a faintest idea where it could go. The meeting had now overrun and further discussion was left to the next meeting.

Shortly after this, the words for the plaque were given to an engraver. There was not one in Scrupiton or the nearby area, so one had to be found in a nearby town. The engraver that was chosen was a retired English teacher who was a stickler for the correct use of grammar. It was just as well, as most of the scripts he had to work on had really bad grammatical errors. When he read the words for this particular plaque, he shook his head. Another one I'll have to correct, he sighed.

'Peter Plants' it starts off. The plants must therefore belong to Peter, so an apostrophe and an 's' is needed after 'Peter', he thought. They must mean 'Peter's Plants', whoever Peter is.

Now what is this about '5 A Day'? It doesn't make sense. Surely, they mean 5 times a day. I'll put '5^x A Day' - I don't like these modern symbols, but it will save a bit of space.

I'm not sure of this next bit - 'No more to say'. If that is the case then there's no need to include it. I think it is probably just a comment for my benefit. I'll ignore that, he thought. But at least they've got the dates written down right. No problem there.

I'll do the whole thing in green. People like their greens, he mused and got on with it immediately.

Two new developments occurred following the parish council meeting. Someone in the village donated a bench for the village green and it was suggested that the plaque could be fixed to this. It could be called the Peter Plants bench. However, all the women in the village made it known to the council that they had absolutely no intention of sitting on Peter, although some might have done so sometime in their lives.

The other initiative came from a sculptor from another part of the country who wanted to share his gratitude for the 5 a Day plant. He said he was a sculptor, but in fact this was his first endeavour. However, he was very keen and had lots of money to boot. His offer was accepted by the council who pondered at length about where it could be sited. The only place that no-one objected to was in the nursery itself. It was decided to put it in front of the shed where he had been found in when

he died – the very same shed which he had used many times over for other activities.

The plaque was placed on the plinth beneath the statue. On examination it was revealed that the wording was not quite as planned. A vandal, or perhaps vandals, had also defaced the memorial not long after it was erected. The 'l' in the word 'plant' was removed, and someone had scrawled the word 'Off' on it...The plaque now read:

Peter's Pants Off 5^x A Day 1962-2019

Whoever was responsible for this was never found. Everyone in the village pleaded not guilty when questioned individually about it, and no-one from outside the village had been there at the time. It was all a bit of a mystery. But it was noted that Penny, Dora and Olivia from the parish council always smiled whenever they saw it. As did all the other village women. Why, is anyone's guess.

THE KNOWN KNOWNNS

"Err... Excuse me, Cyril."

"Yes, Cynthia?"

"Can I tell you something?"

"Certainly."

"I know."

"Know what?"

"I know about it."

"About what?"

"It."

"What?"

"It, you know."

"Oh, that."

"Yes, I know about that."

"I see."

"And now I know that you know too."

"Two?"

"No, too."

"That's what I said."

"No, you know, too...also."

"So, you know that I know."

"Yes, I know that you know that I know."

"You mean that I know that you know that I know that you know."

"That's what I said."

"No, you didn't. Oh, never mind."

"I do mind because I know about it."

"But what about him?"

"What about him?"

"Does he know?"

"Yes, he knows."

"You mean to say..."

"Yes, I know that you know that I know that he knows."

"Oh no!"

"Yes."

"So, I know that you know that I know that you know that he knows."

"That's right."

"Has he told her?"

"Yes, didn't you know?"

"No,"

"Oh!"

"So, she knows too."

"Yes."

"Are you telling me...that you know that I know that you know that he knows that she knows?"

"To put it simply, yes."

"All of us must know then."

"Yes, you know that I know that you know that I know that he knows that she knows that we know."

"Why didn't anyone ever say so?"

"Because they thought you might know."

"Well, you know that you and I know that he and she and we all know it. But what about them?"

"They know it too."

"Not all of them?"

"Of course."

"I don't follow."

"Let me explain in a few words. They all know that you know that I know that you know that I know that he knows that she knows."

"No, surely you mean..."

"What?"

"That you know that I know that you know that I know that he knows that she knows that we know that they know?"

"Yes."

"Oh no!"

"Don't worry."

"Why not?"

"Because your dog doesn't know."

"That's a relief."

"However, your cat knows."

"Who told the cat?"

"All the neighbours' cats."

"And how did they know?"

"A little bird told them."

"Well, if only one bird knows, that's a blessing,"

"Not really, all the other birds know too."

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Only that the goldfish told the mice who told the rabbits who told the hedgehogs who told the cows who told the horses..."

"Stop!"

"I could go on..."

"Then why doesn't my dog know?"

"He's deaf."

"Does my wife know?"

"Of course, she knows."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm your wife."

I wrote this originally to accompany a piece of music played by my jazz quintet.

THERE'S NO STING IN THE TALE

“How are things with everyone?” asked Belinda Bee one evening as all the workers relaxed over some refreshing nectar before going to bed.

Belinda was very popular and had become the leader of the Beeworkers Trade Union (B-TU), a position which she tackled with military precision.

“We’re having trouble again at the lupins,” said Bethany. “Those damn wasps are just taking over – they’re out there in droves.”

“It was the same a few weeks ago,” chimed in Beatrice. “You couldn’t get near the tulips.”

“Leave it to me and I’ll try and think up what we can do about it,” said Belinda.

Next morning, the workers went through their usual drill.

“Empty baskets, everyone,” called out Belinda. They all showed her their back legs.

“Good. Now today we are going to the rose garden. Easy to find, just watch me.”

She did a little waggle dance* which clearly indicated to the others that it was precisely three and a half miles away at an angle of 320 degrees from the hive.

“With luck, we should be back by lunchtime. Mind you, these larvae are getting pretty demanding and require lots more to eat now, so we may have to go again this afternoon. At least it’s a lovely sunny day and we can rely on that for navigation. Let’s go.”

They left the hive and followed the directions given to them. It was a perfect day for flying and they gained their optimum cruising speed in a couple of seconds. Coming into land, before they even had a chance to put down their 'landing gear' they sensed that all was not well. Many of the roses were already occupied by wasps and the bees had to bide their time sniffing at other less-

desirable plants before they could get near the roses. They also had to work twice as hard in gathering pollen as the wasps had made off with most of it for themselves.

“Looks like a late lunch for us all,” complained Barbara.

“Or maybe none at all today,” added Brianna.

Back at the hive that evening Belinda called a special meeting to discuss it.

“As I suspected, we have a male problem,” announced Belinda. As an ardent supporter of women’s rights, she felt strongly about this, and it was true, in so far as all the wasps encroaching on “their” flowers were male. “Bella, would you like to elaborate on this for us?”

“Every new source of pollen and nectar we discover, the wasps seem to get there first. Makes you wonder if there is a spy amongst us,” Bella said.

Everyone looked at each other suspiciously.

“Has anyone seen Wanda?” someone asked.

Wanda had quietly slipped out and flown away.

“I was always a bit wary about her,” said Bertha. “Didn’t look like the rest of us, but if I’d said anything it might have been interpreted as being racist.”

“She didn’t look like one of us, I admit, but I did have to admire her figure – such a thin waist,” said Barbie.

“Well, we’ll see if the situation changes now,” said Belinda. “There’s a large rose bed in another place we could investigate. I was keeping this one secret. I’ll give you the directions in the morning. Goodnight everyone.”

The next day, they flew to the rose bed. As on the previous day, this one was already being occupied by wasps when they arrived.

“Maybe their scouts have got better equipment than us,” pondered Bambi.

Belinda was rather put out by this remark and she said: “Don’t be a bee fool. Our scouts are just as good as theirs.”

Belinda herself did most of the scouting and she took Bambi’s remark personally.

They left it at that and went over to a patch of dandelions while they were waiting to get to the roses. Again, it was a bit of a waste of time.

When they got back to the hive, Belinda addressed them all. “This is a state of war. “The only way we can defeat them is by destroying their nest. “

“That will be difficult, look you,” said Bronwyn. “It’s in a garden shed with the door closed most of the day. The man must go to his shed very early in the day.”

“Then we must visit his shed when the wasp workers are out and find the nest and lay waste to it,” stated Belinda. “We can overpower the guards, find out way inside and kill the queen. The nest will not serve any purpose after that and it will be abandoned.”

All of the workers thought this was a sensible solution and had an early night.

Very early the next morning, they set off for the shed. They had made sure that their stings were fully armed and in good working order. The man who owned the shed was a bit late in coming, so the bees had to hide themselves amongst the leaves of a tree until the wasps had departed. Then they each donned a black and yellow jacket and as a swarm they descended upon the nest. Some of the more intrepid bees found their way inside and were looking for the queen when the man came back to the shed. Afraid of being locked in, they made a hasty departure and called off the mission for the day.

During the attack, several of the houseworker wasps had been stung. However, one survivor, Wanda, informed the queen wasp what had happened. Wilhamena, the queen was very angry and drew up plans for retribution. A plan was quickly devised: a swarm consisting of male and female

wasps would the next morning invade the beehive. While the male wasps would distract the male bee drones, the female wasps would lay eggs in the hive. It was rightly assumed the female worker bees would be out amongst the flowers. Wilhamena herself would lead the attack and she would deposit eggs within the body of the queen bee. (Sorry, readers, but this sort of thing happens.)

The next day, the wasps bided their time until they knew that the worker bees would be out, and then they invaded the beehive. Part of the proceedings went as planned, but before Wilhamena could get to BEE - the queen bee, the beekeeper arrived. The other wasps tried to chase him off, but he was fully dressed in his outfit and was not deterred. In frustration, the wasps made off in an angry mood. When they flew back to the hive, the female worker bees who had unexpectedly found a good supply of nectar and honey that morning, swore revenge. But they also had to remain vigilant in defending their hive. The phrase 'Bee Prepared' became their slogan.

For a few days, there was a stand-off between the bees and wasps. The wasps still got to the best flowers first, while the bees had to make do with the scraps left behind. Then one day, there were no signs of any wasps near any flowers nearby. The bees could not understand it. What had happened?

The answer lay in the hot, sunny weather. The man who owned the shed, and his family and friends had come to the conclusion that it was now officially barbeque and picnic time and all of them ate their meals and snacks outdoors. There were lots of sugary drinks and tasty things to eat which attracted the wasps who spent hours and hours enjoying their own barbeques and picnics alongside the humans. This annoyed the man and the others, but they felt they just had to put up with it, as sitting outside in the sunshine was well worth it.

The bees were ecstatic. They almost forgave the wasps, but not quite.

The beekeeper was happy too. Out of gratitude for seeing off the wasps that day, the bees produced a bumper supply of honey. So, the year ended happily. Next year would be different, maybe a repeat of what had happened this year which newly-born bees and wasps would have to contend with. But as far as he was concerned, it would probably all end up well and he looked forward to tending his hive the next year. After all, he kept reminding himself, a fool and his honey are soon parted.

* To see a waggle dance - paste this into your browser:

<https://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/00000144-0a32-d3cb-a96c-7b3f437c0000>

HOME, SWEET HOME?

Karen was annoyed that all the bread, meat, fish, milk, fruit and vegetables and ready-meals in her local supermarket had been taken. Almost all of the shelves in the shop were empty, except for chocolate Easter eggs and ice cream. She cursed to herself for not getting there earlier, but she had to look after the children until Kevin, her partner, got home from work. Usually, he was gone all day, but when she heard the front door open at 10 o'clock and heard him call out, she knew something was amiss.

"I've been laid off," he announced. "Not just me - everyone. It's because of you-know-what.. No idea how we'll cope."

She tried to say some soothing words, but found it difficult as she herself had been made redundant only the previous day. The cinema, where she was an usherette, had had to close suddenly.

She left the children in Kevin's care and drove off to the supermarket feeling very depressed. Her only consolation was that others were in the same boat, and she felt there was a bit of a communal spirit in the air. That feeling was dashed when she saw the near-empty shelves, caused by panic buying. We've got enough stuff at home for the weekend if I'm careful, she thought, and returned home without buying anything.

On the Monday she returned to the supermarket. The situation was the same. They had very little food left at home by now and she was beginning to feel desperate. The next day was the same. By the Wednesday, she felt there was no alternative and put a couple of large Easter eggs and a carton of ice cream in her shopping basket. We can survive for a day on this, she said to herself. We'll just think of it as a bit of a treat.

The children, Emily, aged 11 and Darren, 9, were overjoyed at dinner to be fed on chocolate Easter egg with ice cream. Their parents were not so enamoured of it, but it was only for a day

after all.

The following day they decided to go out and eat in the restaurant down the road. It was closed, as were others in that area. They drove to another one some distance away and saw huge crowds waiting outside the door.

“I’m afraid we cannot accept any more bookings,” a waiter told them and we’re closing tomorrow.

It was getting late and they had no option but to return home. “Guess what,” Karen said to the kids: “We’re having Easter eggs and ice cream for dinner again.”

Kevin moaned, but the children were not too upset by this. Their schools had been closed since the beginning of that week, which left them a lot of time to spend on their smart phones. Karen was pleased that they were not up to any mischief, but was beginning to feel that they should do some exercise and that day she had sent them off to the local park. The kids begrudgingly did as they were told, even though they spent the whole time sitting on a park bench, texting their school pals.

For the last few days, Kevin had been glued to the television watching sports programmes while Karen cleaned house and visited friends. She also paid daily visits to the supermarket, but the shelves only contained the same things as before.

This came to an abrupt halt when the next day they learned that they should self-isolate themselves at home. Stringent measures had been introduced by the government and people were no longer allowed out of their homes, except for food-shopping or going to the pharmacy. This put more of an emphasis upon meal times which broke up the time spent on phones, television and housework.

The last of the breakfast cereals ran out on the Friday. The last loaf of bread had already been eaten. There were still a few tins of soup for lunch, but dinner remained the same – chocolate eggs and ice cream. By now, even the children were getting a bit fed up with it and asked for something

different.

“Today we have stew for dinner,” she told everyone. That astonished them all. They looked down at their plates and then burst out at the same time: “That’s just melted ice cream with bits of chocolate in it.” Nevertheless, they all ate up.

The next day she came up with something different. “Today we have dumplings.”

“Goody!” everyone cried, until they saw that it was melted chocolate with round blobs of ice cream floating in it.

The following day she told her family that she had prepared a special home-made soup. By now, people had got wise and recognised the soup as being nothing less than melted chocolate and ice cream mixed together.

Kevin had been instructed to work from home, which was rather difficult as he was a professional gardener and his family lived in a flat in an apartment block in a big city. He had tried to telephone people who regularly used the park he worked in, telling them how to cut the grass and take care of the bedding plants, but to no avail as they were all house-bound too. He spent his time watching videos or television programmes, in fact, anything which did not feature public parks or private gardens as his fingers would get jittery. He tried to satisfy the urge by cutting up old newspapers, but it was not the same. A pile of cut-up newspapers is not quite like a neatly manicured lawn even though they might come in useful if the toilet paper ran out.

Karen had cleaned the flat so many times there was a danger that the shelves would be worn down and the toilet would be so full of bleach that it would create a new health hazard. She got some comfort from having virtual coffee breaks with her friends using video links, but she missed smelling her friend’s perfume and seeing the good-looking barista in her favourite cafe.

Emily and Darren were starting to get restless at home. All the texts they got from their school pals sounded depressing as they too were having to stay indoors. It was all getting very boring.

At the start of the next week, Karen went on her daily jaunt to the supermarket only to find the Easter eggs had all sold out. But there were some other chocolate bars on the shelves which she had to make do with. Dinner that evening was slightly different as the chocolate bars contained a few nuts and raisins which was slightly more nutritious, especially when they were fried up with mashed ice cream. All the same her family were not overly impressed and they all expressed a desire for something different.

“I would die for some peas or carrots and a nice apple,” said Emily ruefully.

“And I would love to have a grapefruit and some cabbage,” Darren said.

“Wouldn’t it be lovely to have some slices of ham and a bit of bacon,” said Kevin.

“Well, none of those things are in the shop,” Karen told them.

“Couldn’t we get hold of some chickens somewhere and then we could have some eggs?” asked Emily.

“How could we do that?” said Kevin, “You know we can’t leave the flat.”

“Maybe we could creep out at night and go and get one,” said Darren.

“Don’t be silly,” said Karen, “...but it’s a great idea.”

As you can guess, the next night all four of them sneaked out of their flat. They got into their car and drove to a farm where Kevin happened to know the farmer. A price was agreed upon for a couple of hens and they drove back to the city along deserted streets until they arrived back at the apartment block. They climbed the stairs to their flat, grasping their newly-acquired chickens close to them. No-one saw them and they closed the front door to their flat with great relief.

At dawn the next morning the sound of a cock crowing woke everyone. It transpired that one of the so-called chickens was a cockerel. During the morning, several neighbours angrily

confronted Kevin about the noise waking them up. Kevin apologised and claimed it was the radio and he promised it would not happen again. The cockerel had other ideas and crowed at lunch time and at various time during the afternoon. Kevin told the neighbours that the radio was still faulty and he was trying to fix it himself as the repairman could not come.

He came to the conclusion that he would have to take it back to the farmer, and when it got dark, he skulked out of the flat, the cockerel inside his coat with its head covered over by his handkerchief. The cockerel was not at all happy about this and struggled to get free. The hubbub woke up a neighbour who telephoned the police, thinking it was an assault. A policeman arrived in a car within minutes and told Kevin to go back to his home. He tested the cockerel for the virus and fortunately it turned out negative, as did a test on Kevin.

Several other neighbours were now awake and were staring out of their windows at the goings-on. Kevin thought the best course of action would be to give the policeman the cockerel and hope the neighbours did not question him about the incident. But of course, the next morning they did, and Kevin had to make up a story about a wild cockerel attacking him in the street, as had often happened to him. No-one believed him and all the neighbours were appalled at what the family had done by breaking the rule on self-isolation. Kevin was not happy as he had also been given a hefty fine for leaving home.

The hen, meantime, had been put into a cupboard where it was fed on nothing other than chocolate. It is no wonder then that when it finally laid an egg it was a chocolate one. Karen fried the egg and they divided it into four portions which were much appreciated by everyone, but not worth the trouble they had gone to. The hen was very distressed about being kept in the dark without any fresh air and proper food and refused to lay any more eggs.

The pressures of self-isolating were now having a big impact upon them. Emily admitted that she really missed going to school, particularly the history lessons. Darren missed seeing his friends. Texting was not the same as actually being with them, playing football together and teasing each

other. Karen and Kevin were getting under each other's feet and they had frequent quarrels. Karen took solace in her trips to the supermarket to get away from her partner, even if she could not find anything she wanted. Kevin had got fed up with spending his time sprawled on the sofa watching television. He was an active, outdoors man and could not easily adjust to being cooped up the whole time indoors. The hen had felt the same way.

"Why don't we play a game together?" said Karen one evening. "There's nothing worth watching on the television."

Kevin thought that was an inspired idea. The children rolled their eyes to the ceiling. "Oh Daaad!!" they both remarked. The only thing they had on hand were some old playing cards. Kevin seemed to remember a card game he had played as a boy. It was called canasta. He and Karen could play together against the children. It turned out to be a long game and helped to kill several hours. Everyone became quite animated playing it. The children proved to be the better players and took great pride in their win over their parents.

"Did you enjoy that?" Karen asked them afterwards.

"It was really, really boring," was the reply. Nevertheless, the following evening both children asked if they could play that game again.

Kevin hunted around the flat and found some more games he'd stacked away a long time ago. After that, table games became a regular occurrence.

The rules of self-isolation were slightly relaxed short time later - people would be allowed to leave their homes to get some exercise outside.

"I've just read an article on a website about all the free food you can get outdoors," Karen said.
* "You mean like discarded packets of crisps with a few of them left inside?" remarked Darren.

"No. I mean things like stinging nettles, dandelion leaves, mushrooms, hazel nuts, blackberries and so on."

It was not the right season for some of these things, but the thought of supplementing their diet with the rest of them appealed. Even in city streets it was possible to find the odd patch of stinging nettles, and once they had learned the hard way not to pick them with their bare hands, they amassed quite a collection. That evening they had nettle soup for dinner. To their surprise, it was very tasty, even though some, or rather most, of the other ingredients were missing except the nettles.

As the whole family liked mushrooms, they all expressed an interest in foraging for some. There were no woods nearby, but there were some trees in the next street, but again they would have to go when it was dark. Karen was used to showing people where to go in the dark and she led the way. They were out of luck and did not find any mushrooms near the trees, but on the way home they did come across a few of them on somebody's front lawn. They very furtively set about picking them and stuffing them into a bag, just as the owner's dog began to bark. They scampered off home and had a wonderful feast of them the following day.

The taste of fresh mushrooms stirred their enthusiasm, so a few days later they got in the car and drove out to a wooded area a few miles away. Here they came across many more mushrooms, as well as a plentiful supply of stinging nettles and dandelions. Dinner that evening was quite special. What's more, the hen had also felt it was time to lay another egg to relieve its monotonous existence.

"This is what living is all about," said Kevin as he tucked into his portion of the scrambled egg and mushrooms with a side salad.

The hen did not agree with him and gave up the ghost as they were eating.

"It's no good," Kevin remarked the following day as he sipped his tea without any milk. "We need to get a cow."

"We can't do that. Remember all the problems we had with that cockerel. Getting a cow would be ten times worse. And knowing you, we'd probably end up with a bull." Karen said,

shaking her head.

Kevin was not put off so easily.

“I think this time it must be a joint effort,” he said. “We consult all the neighbours about it and share the milk between us.”

"How can we consult them? We can't have a meeting and we can't go around to their flats to talk to them about it."

"I know semaphore," piped up Emily.

"And I can do Morse code," said Darren

"Some of them I can telephone," Kevin said, ignoring the children. "The others - I leave a slip of paper in their letterboxes."

"Well, if anyone bothers to reply, remember to soak the bits of paper in soapy water before you read what it says," Emily said.

"And don't forget to sing 'Happy Birthday' two times when you do it and then throw the paper into the bin," added Darren.

“Don't joke about this,” said Karen, “Washing your hands the right way is very important. And by the way, which of your children has been throwing all the hand-towels into the waste-bin?”

There was no reply.

To their astonishment, there was an overwhelming response in favour of Kevin's proposal, but queries as to the practicalities. These were eventually ironed out after numerous bits of paper had been passed to and from. Getting hold of a cow and bringing it back would be down to Kevin's family. Feeding the cow would be everyone's responsibility, which meant that whenever anyone went outside, they would have to bring back a bucket-full of grass, wherever they had been. Everyone would have the right to milk the cow.

Having tied up the details, Kevin and his family drove out a few evenings later to the same farm as he had visited before to get the supposed chickens. This time they would kidnap a cow without telling the farmer who had let them down before.

They had planned to put the cow in the boot of their car, but the cow had other ideas.

With an almighty struggle they managed to get the front legs of the cow on to the floor of the boot with two of the pushing from the back and the others lifting up its legs. This caused the front of the car to lift up from the ground. Try as they might, though, they could not persuade the cow to put its head down and go any further inside. In truth, they had underestimated the size of a full-grown cow and its weight, and gave up, exhausted. Getting the animal's legs back on the ground again was equally as difficult and prompted it to open its bowels all over Karen's jeans.

"We'll simply have to ride it back home," Emma said.

"But we haven't got a saddle," said Darren.

"They don't make saddles for cows," said Karen. "We'll have to do without one."

As Emma was the lightest of all of them, she volunteered to ride on its back with Darren leading the cow and the Karen prodding it from behind when it stopped moving. Kevin chose to drive the car back as they could not leave it there.

They did not make much progress, until a dog appeared in the road, which prompted the cow to suddenly burst into a run, with Emma hanging on to its back for dear life. All of a sudden, the dog lost interest and wandered off.

After a couple of hours, they had made very little progress, maybe a few hundred yards at most, which was a long way for a cow. With only another ten miles to go, they took a short rest.

It was then that the dog reappeared then with a gang of other dogs. Once again, the cow showed its prowess as a potential sprinter in the Olympics and everyone had a job to keep up with it.

Hours later, they entered the outskirts of the city just as dawn was breaking. The sight of a cow being ridden bare-back by a young girl, accompanied by two other people, startled a policeman. But when they told him they were from a circus and needed to take the cow a walk, he seemed

satisfied and let them continue on.

Arriving at their block of flats, they were met Kevin and received a round of applause from their neighbours. They took the lift as the cow seemed to be reluctant to climb the stairs. When they got to the door of their flat, they found that there it was too big to go in. It would simply have to live in the hallway. That was not such a bad idea, as the cow could be taken to the door of each of the flats to be milked, which would save carrying heavy containers of milk around. Of course, the collections of grass still had to be taken to the cow to chew on, but no-one objected to that.

What was soon discovered was that a cow has a propensity to create an awful lot of cow-pats and they began to accumulate everywhere, which upset a great many people. In addition, however hard the cow attempted to make milk, there was still not enough to go around. The worse thing, though, was the constant mooing of the poor distressed cow who was kept in the dark about what was going on.

Soon, slips of paper began to appear on Kevin's doormat telling him the cow must go - a few at first and soon a whole torrent. Kevin reluctantly rang the farmer and informed him that one of his cows must have escaped. They had found it, taken it home and to keep it safe, it was being kept there. The farmer was irate and turned up almost immediately in a cattle-truck to take the emaciated cow back to the farm.

"You know, I've gone right off milk in my tea. I think I actually do prefer it black," commented Kevin when the cow had gone. The whole family agreed.

When Karen went to the supermarket the next day, she was delighted to find some packets of beef-burgers, potatoes, apples and frozen mixed vegetables, as well as toilet rolls. She bought as much as she was allowed to and told the rest of the family to go separately to the shop and buy some more. Kevin very rarely went to the supermarket and none of the staff recognised him, so he had no problem in getting more stuff. But things were different when the children tried it. Both of

them were known as Karen's offspring and the shop assistants on the tills did not allow them to take any more.

They told their parents when they arrived home. Kevin was enraged by this and went back to the shop to remonstrate with the manager. In spite of his angry complaints, he was told by the manager that this was the policy of the supermarket chain which could not be altered. Kevin went home in a furious mood.

"Come on," he said to the rest of the family. "We'll have an outing today and go to the park. We've been stuck here for the last fortnight. We need to get out occasionally for a change of scenery," he said.

They piled into the car and drove off to the park where there was quite a crowd of people.

"See," said Kevin. "We're not the only ones."

They mingled with the others, played a bit of football, chatted to friends and had a drink with them. The cafeteria should have been closed, but thinking he might do some good business, the owner had opened his premises again.

"Does you good to have a bit of fresh air," Kevin said when they got home.

"Certainly does," said Karen. "I wish the government would come to its senses and acknowledge that, instead of all the nonsense it keeps telling us."

At that moment, Kevin's phone rang. It was Harry, the owner of the cafeteria in the park. He rang to say that he had just been proved positive. The virus had been found on the coffee machine. Kevin and Karen were very sorry to hear about Harry, but were not worried for themselves or their children as they felt fine...

I won't dwell on what happened next. You can all guess.

This was a tragic time for everyone. Many people died, others suffered from the effects of the

virus on their health or their personal circumstances. But there were some rays of hope for the future. Children like Darren and Emily started to appreciate more nutritious food and began to take more pleasure in talking and being with their friends face-to-face. They also started to value their education much more. In spite of the thoughtlessness of a handful of people, there were also very many acts of kindness and generosity from friends and complete strangers. Above all, people realised that they were part of a common humanity and making sacrifices themselves would benefit everyone in the long run. Whether this would last after the virus had gone, no-one knew. But one thing everyone thought would change for ever was in their support and appreciation of the National Health Service. Never again should it be allowed to run short of resources as it had been, and any government which tried to underfund it in the future should be kicked out of office. Whether it would be, is another matter.

*. See <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/things-to-do/foraging/>

THE NEW NEW-MAN

I said to my myself,
Is there anything that I could do to please her?
Should I buy bouquets of sweetly smelling carnations
To colour her long, long day?

But then I thought I would ask her:
"What can I do
That would bring to you
Some romance and excitement?
Should I take you out to dine in candle-lit cafes
With Champagne and mellow sounds,
Where there's nobody else around?"

But the answer she gave was "No!"

"There are things to do
It would be very nice of you
If you took advice and lent a helping hand.
There's a house to clean,
Or the dust and the dirt will just remain unseen
Where all our chairs and tables stand.
And there's clothes to wash and dry,
And food to buy from the shops.
If making meals to you appeals
To me it never ever stops.
And what's more, there's work
That's impossible now to shirk

In taking care of all the problems we share.
Like my frail old mother dear,
And the kids that we often fear will never leave the nest
And give us a peaceful rest."

So I did my best as I followed her full request,
Even though it took a while for me to learn
And I made the bed, every mouth in the house was fed,
And all the rooms and all our clothes were cleaned in turn.
Mother soon passed on -
The shock was far too much for her to bear,
The children moved away from home,
They never even told us where.
But my wife at least,
Finds the work in the house has ceased
Which gives her time to spend on something more sublime.
And she's found romance at last
With a man in the keep-fit class.
Because domestic chores mean I have to stay indoors.

These are the lyrics to a song I once wrote, which to my knowledge no-one has ever listened to or performed. So before I discard it for good, here it is.