

THREE MEN AND A BRIDGE.

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PREFACE.

The original idea for this novel came to me as I watched a review by the Riparians, the Whitchurch amateur dramatic society. They performed a sketch which I did not think overly humorous, but because it involved local personalities and locations, it had the audience laughing out loud. I thought to myself I could write a better sketch than that, then all I need to do is involve a local background, and it could not fail to succeed. After a great deal of thought, and possibly because at one time I had briefly collected tolls on Whitchurch bridge, and knew some of the background, I decided upon this subject. The title and perhaps my writing style has I think been influenced by my love of Jerome K Jerome's Three men in a boat's style of humour.

The initial sketch flowed easily from my pen, (word processor actually). Even though I had originally kept the number of characters down to a minimum, for a small amateur dramatic society to perform. I found that I had enjoyed writing it so much and injected so much humour, that I wanted to carry on. So I carried on writing for a full playlet or sketch, then I found I had written five chapters, so I might as well go for a full novel.

This project then reposed on my computer for a full seven years, then suddenly in the year 2000 I had access to the Internet, and discovered Pangbourne's own web site, the rest is history. I have never approached a publisher with the manuscript, but it just seemed a waste to have taken so much time and effort to write it, that nobody reads it, hence it is on the Net for you to read if you so wish. All characters are fictitious, and not intended to represent any person living or dead, though you may guess at some of the locations.

The whole of this novel has been typed, edited, proofed, formatted by me alone and un-aided, bearing this in mind, I hope that any literary academics that may read it, will excuse any little errors.

Dave Wilson.

CHAPTER 1.

The two villages of Pengebank and Westchurch nestle in the valley of the river Thames, on opposite banks of the river. Pengebank is a large bustling village on the Berkshire bank, with a population of around three and a half thousand. It has a small high street full of shops restaurants and wine bars. Pengebank boasts two olde worlde hotels, and three public houses. It also has a workingmans club which it does not boast of, although this occupies one of the most prestigious buildings, and sites in the village. Besides its other village infrastructure, doctor's surgery schools and the like, Pengebank has one other very important asset. The Great Western Railway passes through the village, and Pengebank has a railway station, with direct commuter services to London.

Westchurch on the opposite Oxfordshire bank of the river Thames, is a sleepy quaint Olde Worlde village, with none of the bustle of modern day life. Apart from the main road that bisects the village, everything is quaint, awfully nice, and very select. Westchurch's commercial heart consists simply of two public houses. Situated conveniently for the home going London commuters, to refresh themselves on the arduous quarter mile journey, from Pengebank railway station to their homes. Westchurch boasts not a single shop or likewise establishment, to spoil its idyllic rural environment. It has of course, as its name implies a grand and imposing parish church, very much a necessity of quasi-rural living. How else would its residents be able to indulge in the grand weddings, funerals, and christening's, that are an essential part of quality life in the shires.

Westchurch needed none of modern life's noisy or smelly appendages, for they are all readily available just across the river in the sister village of Pengebank. To say that there was sibling rivalry between the two villages would be wrong. Rivalry was not the operative word, but snobbery was. Westchurch was an enclave of professional, and someone important in the city of London types. Pengebank, well Pengebank was Pengebank; property values were at least half that of those in Westchurch, need any more be said.

There was one small but significant fly, in this contented rural ointment. To avail themselves of the facilities in Grotty Pengebank, the inhabitants of snooty Westchurch needed to cross the river Thames. The only way to cross over the water from Westchurch to Pengebank, was to use the ancient lattice girdered Iron Bridge. Here was the rub; to use this bridge they had to pay money, for Westchurch Bridge was a toll bridge. In one way this served a useful purpose, in that the inhabitants of Pengebank had to pay money to travel to Westchurch. Never-the-less it greatly irked the upstanding respectable residents of Westchurch, to have to pay money, just to travel to grotty Pengebank.

Two men were leaning against the chest high girders of the Westchurch toll bridge, looking down into the river and lock cut below them. The taller of the two men had a slightly nautical look about him, which was perhaps not surprising. For Jock Harper had been the lock keeper at Westchurch lock for over thirty years, before taking early, albeit compulsory retirement. Jock was a lean and fit, for a man of fifty-five and he still retained the deeply tanned face, of a man used to working in the open air. It was his habit these days to stand on the toll bridge, and mentally supervise his old domain, the Westchurch lock, and its adjoining weir. His partner Sparrer Williams was also in his late fifties, but a different character altogether. Sparrer was the village of Pengebank reprobate, cum rat catcher, cum poacher, cum remover of all things not actually bolted down.

Sparrer spoke with a broad cockney accent, which is where he got his nickname. The nickname Sparrer was in fact derived from the term Cockney Sparrow. This could be confusing for many people, for when asked, "so you are a Londoner are you". He would invariably reply "no only ever went there once in me life, and that was to see Buckingham Palace". Sparrer's mum and dad had moved down to Oxfordshire during the Second World War, to escape the London blitz, and never moved back again. Sparrer had been raised from a boy in rural Oxfordshire, but had acquired his strong accent from his mother and father, who likewise spoke in a broad cockney accent. When Sparrer's dad had retired from his job as a farm labourer, he had been evicted from his tied cottage. This had then been sold for mega thousands to incoming, something in the City

types. Sparrer now lived in a local authority house in Pengebank. It was a most unusual partnership between the two men, but they shared one thing in common. They both had a great deal of spare time on their hands, and neither had a great deal of spare cash to spend on their spare time.

Without warning, for old habits die hard. Jock cupped both hands to his mouth, and started giving directions to a Caribbean cruiser, passing underneath the bridge below. Stentorian tones rang out across the river, "Ahoy there! the vessel Water Widgeon, slow down man! you are approaching the lock too fast, you bloody fool". This freely given advice of Jocks was obviously not wanted nor heeded. For Jock now entered into a heated shouting-swearing match with the helmsman of the Water Widgeon. Eventually turning to Sparrer, to say disparagingly "there you are, I told you he was going to fast, what's more he was so busy being rude to me, that he's just gone and crashed into the lock approach". Adding vehemently "bloody weekend sailors! I hate em". Sparrer, who had heard this performance many times before, had lost interest. He had tersely remarked "you're not on your blooming lock any more Jock, give it a rest". Then had turned around and was now keenly watching, the activity at the nearby bridge toll booth

Inside the booth was to be seen a striking, big bosomed lady of around fifty years of age. She was around five feet seven inches in height, and on the plump side, but firm with it. She was dressed in a black skirt, white uniform blouse, with black shoulder epaulets. Upon her head, perched up top of her long shoulder length, curly blonde hair was a military style black cap, trimmed with silver braid. Sparrer matter of factly, uttered just one sentence, "bloody bridge fuhrer's at it again".

The bridge fuhrer, alias Gloria Sumpter, or gorgeous Gloria, in Sparrer's somewhat jaundiced eye's, was pounding her clenched fist onto the roof of a motor car, stopped at the lowered barrier of the toll booth. A small mild looking man was peering out of the open car window, up at the black and white clad amazon standing high above him in the booth. Gloria's voice rang out "I've already told you once, that if you are claiming the reduced bridge toll, as entitled to the citizens of Westchurch, then you have to produce the prescribed identity card". The mild little man stammered quietly yet politely, "but I haven't got it with me Miss". The little mans last remark, only served arouse Gloria's voice yet higher. "Don't you Miss me mister, I'm a Missus not a prissy little Miss, no mere mans going to mess around with me and get away with it". With her arms folded across her ample bosom, she glared at the car driver for a few seconds, as though making up her mind.

The two men had stood watching this scene, with bated breath and open mouths. When Sparrer's brain suddenly engaged his tongue, causing him to mutter "go to it Gloria". Then turning to Jock said, "by god she'd make some man a powerful wife". "She already did" replied Jock, "he was the bridge manager for fifteen years remember". No no said Sparrer quickly, "I mean a good man, not that tight pillock". "I thought he was good" mused Jock under his breath, "he was married to Gloria for five years before he died, I call that pretty damn good".

Meanwhile Gloria had apparently made up her mind, and was now telling the mild little man. "Right, no citizens identity card, you will just have to go back across the bridge, that will be a twenty five pence please". As she said this she reached down and pressed a hidden button, causing yet another barrier arm to descend, at the rear of the car, neatly trapping it between the two. The little car driver was now convulsed with nervousness, and began to stammer. "But Bu Bu But madam, I've already paid you a twenty five pence". The hard thin smile that came across Gloria's face indicated she now had him, and was now going to hang him out to dry. She mimicked him, "S.S.S.Sir, if I was indeed a madam, I'd charge a damn sight more than a twenty five pence, and I certainly wouldn't service no little wimps like you, now give me my money and stop complaining". Pounding on the roof of his car once more, she explained. "The first twenty five pence you paid me was to come across the bridge, now you are going back again right, so that's another twenty five pence you owe me". Adding sarcastically, "all this coming and going wears the bridge out you know". The little man fumblingly produced twenty-five pence in coins, then handed them up to Gloria. No doubt thinking, it would be well worth twenty-five pence just to escape her vitriolic tongue. The rear barrier raised, and the car reversed off in jumps and starts, back in the direction of Pengebank from whence it had originally come from.

Jock and Sparrer laughingly made their way down to the Westchurch Wherry, twenty yards down, and on the opposite side of the road. As they passed the tollbooth, they broke into a goose-

stepping stride. Hands held up in the air in mock nazi salutes, one finger of the other hand held under their noses to mimic Adolph Hitler's moustache. Sparrer called out "go to it Gloria, keep the riff raff out of Westchurch". Gloria said nothing, but stared at them scathingly, with her legs apart, and her hands on her hips. Looking for all the world, like a female concentration camp guard.

Passing under the creaking Inn sign, of a sailing ship under full sail, they entered the public bar of the Wherry. Once inside the bar, which was festooned with nautical nick-nacks of all and every description. There was even a parrot aptly called Percy, chained to a stand and perch in the far corner of the bar. Although Percy would quite often be absent, it having been barred for riotous behaviour, or the use of bad language. They were greeted by a cheery shout "ahoy shipmates come aboard, two vacant berths at the bar, come alongside". Once they had seated themselves on the high bar stools, Sparrer then pulled a pile of loose change from his pocket. After examining it carefully, he then said dolefully "two halves of bitter please". At this the man behind the bar snorted, "hard times again Eh! Stormy weather at sea Ah!, can't afford to re-victual". Jock spoke out in frustration " for Christ's sake Captain, can't you ever forget your time in the navy". Captain was not a man to be put down easily, for he stood to attention and said in a loud monotone voice. "I am the captain of this Wherry, and what my wife says goes" he paused for a moment to think. Then saying "and when my wife says go, then I bloody well stay, just to be difficult". Still standing to attention he continued his monologue "God bless the Westchurch Wherry, and all who sail in her, for this, is a very merry Wherry". Jock looked at Sparrer lifted his head and eyes upwards, and said, "He's been at the rum again, by the looks of it". Sparrer simply nodded his head, in reply.

The Captain; Bert Wright to give him his correct name, had indeed served many years in the merchant navy. He had never risen to the rank of captain, not even of a rowing boat. Instead he had bestowed that title upon himself, when he had first taken over the Wherry. He was in fact very proud of the title, whenever he was required to fill in official forms. In the part where it said 'Occupation' he would invariably write 'Captain of the Wherry'. It was rumoured, that in the navy he had never risen above the rank of chief stoker. Although to his credit, it was said that he had been promoted to this rank, many many times. Usually as a result of being demoted from it, also many many times, following drunken sprees. It was one of the great mysteries to the customers of the Wherry, as to how the Captain, given his bacchanalian habits. Could possibly ever have accumulated enough money, to buy the pub outright from the brewers, which he had done, some years ago. All sorts of rumours had been spread around, when he first took over the pub. Pirate gold, drug smuggling, the white slave trade. Most of these, and indeed all the other ways that were suggested, for the Captain to have acquired his wealth, would have required at least a degree of sobriety. Thus for this reason only, they were all dismissed as most improbable.

The most likely way for him to have acquired his wealth, was through his long-suffering wife Pearl. Pearl was a gem of a wife, some people even claimed, that she actually loved the Captain, for all his faults. Although this crass allegation did not carry to much weight in the Wherry, even the Captain denied it!. Pearl was tall, almost six feet in height, of medium build, with strong shoulders. When made up, and with her glad rags on, she was indeed quite beautiful. Whilst the Captain, according to his detractor's, was nothing but a wizened little runt. Never-the-less all were very wary of him, and the name was never used to his face. Twenty years of stoking coal, tends to make for exceptionally strong, wizened little runts!. It was generally agreed by all, that however the Captain came by his money, and it was most likely via his wife. For it was certainly Pearl that ensured he held on to it. So that when the money did eventually reach its ultimate and long foreseen destination; the brewers pockets. It was in return for the deeds of the freehold, of the Wherry Inn Westchurch.

Sparrer taking a sip from his half-pint glass, said "Gloria's been at it again". "What's the bridge Fuhrer been up to this time" queried the Captain, for the Captain took a great interest in Gloria's activities. She tended to out shine even him, as one of the village's characters. "Some poor sod came across the bridge, and had forgotten his citizens permit" Sparrer told him. "Instead of just making him pay the full price, she sent him back over the bridge". "Here's the crack though; she actually made him pay another twenty five pence toll, to go back". On hearing this, the Captain burst out in peals of laughter, that soon had the trio all laughing together. The Captain was now convulsed with laughter, slapping his thigh, crying "what a woman, what a woman, you've got to hand it to her". Jock interrupted him saying "there's more, you haven't heard it all yet". "He was only a little fella, about your size". The Captains smile briefly vanished from his face. Seeing this, Jock hurried on quickly with the rest of the tale. "She did her usual trick, banging on the roof of his car, then she called the poor little man a wimp". Jock waited for

the captains renewed peals of laughter, to once again subside. Then said "more yet, even better, she then as good as told him, that even if she were on the game, she wouldn't sell it to him". No way is a little runt like him, going to get his leg over her, not a any price". Jock struggled to finish the story amongst peals of laughter. The captain said disbelievingly, "No she would never had said that to him would she?" Jock turned to Sparrer and said "tell him Sparrer". Sparrer confirmed it, adding, "the poor little mans confidence was totally shattered". He disappeared backwards over the bridge, with his car kangaroo-ing, and ricocheting off the road humps". After nearly a minute, the laughing finally died down, only to be renewed yet again as the Captain remarked. "The poor little sod will probably make the ten mile trip to come over the river via Snoring Bridge, rather than go through all that again".

When all the laughter finally died away, there was an anti-climax of quiet in the bar. The Captain seeing two empty half pint glasses said, "I'll tell you what lads, that story alone was worth a pint of beer" and proceeded to fill the two empty half pint mugs up.

With a fresh filled glass of beer in front of him, Sparrer stared at the ceiling and thought out aloud. "You know, this village has never been quite the same, since Gloria's husband Herbert died". The Captains wife Pearl who had just then come into the bar heard him, and said. "You can say that again, the village has been in turmoil, since the day that women took over the job of bridge manager". "That uniform she wears, according to her, its supposed to create a smart image, Billy Smarts Circus, would be more like it!" Sparrer sprang immediately to Gloria's defence, "Oh come on Pearl, its because your a woman that you don't like it". "I think its very chic, very becoming, besides I do like a lady in uniform". Pearl glared at Sparrer, and slowly and meaning-fully said. "Sparrer the only place that that uniform would look chic, would be inside Auschwitz concentration camp". Adding menacingly "Then the lady would becoming after you, which I don't think, even you would enjoy very much". Sparrer grinned back at her saying "you never can tell Pearl, I do like a strong woman you know".

The Captain knowing that the subject of Gloria's uniform, invariably aroused strong feelings in his wife, artfully changed the subject. "What I'd like to know is, where did she get all that money, to buy out the Bridge Company shares, it must have cost a fortune". "You had better ask him said Jock", indicating Sparrer with a nod of his head. "They don't call him Sparrer for nothing, a little dicky bird tells him everything, eventually". Sparrer now found himself centre of stage, he also found himself with only an inch of beer, in the bottom of his glass. One of Sparrer's principles in life was, that information costs money, if not in cash, then at least in kind. He raised his glass and supped the last remaining beer from it, then placed it noisily back on the counter. He then started rummaging through his pockets, giving little sighs as he found each one empty. This in itself all took time, for they were full of all sorts of other junk, just empty of money. Sparrer had just spent some minutes in turning over and closely examining a decrepit old rabbits foot, which he had found in one of his pockets. Then turning to Jock and saying "did I ever tell you how I came by this lucky rabbits foot Jock". Now it was Pearl, of whom impatience got the better. Pearl loved a bit of gossip, she most of all loved gossip that involved Gloria. She sprang forward to fill Sparrer's glass for him, saying tersely "go on, go on man, tell the story". Jock had now also quickly supped the last of his drink, and placed his glass cheekily along side Sparrer's. Pearl glowered at him, saying "this story had better be good" as she filled his glass up as well. "Pearl" said Jock quickly pulling his now filled glass back towards him "believe me, this story is straight out of the Arabian Nights tales". Yes said the Captain acidly, "no doubt Ali, BA, BA and the thirty eight thieves. "There should have been forty of em, but we've got two of them here, drinking our beer for free".

Sparrer began his story, but not before first saying "Captain I shall ignore that hurtful remark, about Jock here and myself being thieves, in fact I shall pretend that I never even heard it". When Sparrer had centre stage, he invariably played it for all it was worth. Turning to Jock and said, "remind me Jock old friend, what was it, that I never heard". Jock could see Pearls face, and wisely decided enough was enough, simply replied "dunno old pal, I never never heard what you never heard either". Sparrer at last got serious, and laid the groundwork to his tale. "It is rumoured, and I hasten to add only rumoured, just here-say nothing else, and you definitely never heard the story from me". "On the other hand, cut me throat if it isn't, its definitely kosher". "Straight from the horses mouth, before the Rabbi had a go at him". "It is rumoured, that when Herbert Sumpter the old bridge manager, finally turned his toe's up". "Reputedly"; here Sparrer paused giving a knowing smile, and a big slow wink of his left eye, then repeated himself. "Reputedly, succumbing to a surfeit of Lamprey pie". Sparrer then broke out into a fit of giggles, in between which he stammered out, "it was me what spread that rumour about, good ain't it".

"More likely he died of an overdose of nooky". "Can't you see the funny side of it, if the king of England can die of excess nooky". "Then that gets put down to lamprey pie, why not the Admiral of the bridge. At this point Pearl finally lost all patience saying angrily, "Sparrer if you don't stop messing around, and just tell the damn story, this beer that I have just bought you, will go over your head". Sparrer held up his hand saying "sorry, sorry Pearl, right here we go again". Now his voice took on a more sombre, conspiratorial tone as he began the story yet again.

"Well when old Herbert popped his clogs, from whatever ailment he died of, (Pearl glowered at him yet again). Pausing briefly just to say "sorry Pearl" Sparrer carried on. "Well when old Herbert died, it was on the cards that Gloria would have to leave the bridge, and the house that goes with the job". "Poor old Gloria got herself in a right state, worrying about it". "Strangely enough, although she's a bit of a bitch, she actually likes the job and living in Westchurch". "The Bridge Company, the hard hearted bastards couldn't wait to give her, her marching orders". "Then came the reading of the will, would you believe it!" "That old skinflint Herbert had got money stashed away, all over the place". "He'd got it in stocks and shares, dozens of building society accounts, even some of those crappy old pictures he collected, are worth thousands". Sparrer continued the story saying "Glori", and then quickly checking himself said "It's even rumoured, that they found hundreds of pounds in coins, hidden around the house". "Don't take to much guessing, to know where that came from does it, and if we know where that came from, we know where it all came from". "Anyway to cut a long story short, they reckoned old Herbert had been saving his cash, for a rainy day". "That rainy day, being when he had to pack up the bridge, and would have nowhere to live". "Old Herbert was simply saving up, to buy his own house, when he retired".

Sparrer sat back with a big grin on his face, and supped the last of his beer. Jock who felt that some of the glory was his. Just for knowing that Sparrer knew the full story, followed suit and drained his glass. Pearl, who had been totally engrossed in the story, now turned to the Captain, and said sarcastically. "Don't suppose there's any chance of you having any stocks and shares, or secret bank accounts is there". Then with a sweep of her hand, indicating the Captains collection of nautical memorabilia said tauntingly "don't suppose this old junk is worth anything either". Just as the Captain was rising to this jibe, the insult to his beloved lifetime's collection. Before he had actually time to speak, Sparrer tapped the counter with his empty glass saying "and there's more". The Captain snapped back at him, "what do you mean there's bloody more, haven't you caused enough trouble already". Pearl quickly brushed him aside, "what do you mean there's more". Sparrer now with a huge grin upon his face said "don't you want to know, how she actually came to buy the bridge". Pearl now resignedly reached for the two empty glasses, and whilst she filled them up Sparrer smirked. He had known all along, that you cannot give a woman just half of a juicy gossip. She has to have the lot, he had calculated from the outset that the lot, if presented correctly, was worth at least two halves of bitter. Pearl pushed the two re-filled glasses back in front of them, saying brusquely, "this time, finish the story".

Sparrer started off again saying, "well its rumoured" Pearl at once raised a finger and scowled at him. Sparrer looked indignant, and said, "well it is rumoured, I don't know bloody everything do I?" He repeated "it's rumoured, that Herbert also had a couple of substantial, life insurance policies". "So that with the money from the shares, and the bank accounts". "Then his picture collection and the policies, not forgetting the sacks of half crowns under the bed". "It's rumoured that old Herbert was worth around a cool £300,000. in cash", and old Gorgeous Gloria got the lot". The Captain gave a low whistle of surprise saying, "and she still bangs on the tops of the cars, demanding her twenty five pence". Jock reminded them, "when the Bridge Company owned the bridge, it only used to cost eight pence to cross, and now she's trebled it". Pearl's face now wore a smile of smug satisfaction; "I told you she was a greedy grasping cow, didn't I".

Sparrer was now grinning broadly, as he said slowly "and there's more". Pearl now obviously considered she was getting her monies worth, for she said "oh good, go on Sparrer". Sparrer continued "it is speculated, that given old Herbert, never earned more than ten thousand a year, for all the years he was bridge manager. Then he must have acquired all that money, other than by the sweat of his brow". "Then remembering all those half a crowns under his bed, it seems very likely, that when Gloria handed over the money, for those bridge company shares". "She was in effect buying the bridge, with be bridge companies own money". Pearl was now smiling broadly; the thought of a mere lady putting one over on a big company, appealed to her sense of humour. Pearl was thoughtful as she commented "sort of like robbing Peter to pay Paul, except that Peter and Paul are the same person, I can't see any harm in that". Pearl continued on, "that Gloria is a smarter lady than I ever gave her credit for".

"The problem is parried Sparrer, that even now she doesn't own the bridge outright". He repeated his beloved phrase, "it is rumoured" and in doing so glared at Pearl to challenge him once again. "It's rumoured, that she owes a lot of money to the banks, or whatever, and has to struggle to keep up the repayments". A look of realisation came across Jock's face as he said, "that would explain it!" "That would explain, why she won't even let a mouse across that bridge without paying, wouldn't it". Sparrer was gently nodding his head. Slowly across Pearl's face came a look of puzzlement, and she said slowly to Sparrer. "How come you know all this, you are remarkably well informed about Gloria's affairs, aren't you". Sparrer smiled, enigmatically touching his nose with one finger saying. "Sparrer's get up very early in the morning looking for worms, and another little birdie told me all!"

CHAPTER 2.

Jock and the Sparrer walked slowly over the bridge, from the Berkshire side of the river towards Westchurch. They had spent most of the afternoon, in the neighbouring village of Pengebank. After wandering around for half an hour or so, they had then played a couple of games of snooker in the workingman's club. As they passed over the centre of the bridge, Jock took up his usual station. From where he could observe the comings and goings, of the Westchurch lock and lock cut. Jock would spend endless hours at this point on the bridge, in the main; criticising the comings and going's of the hire cruisers. Sparrer would ask him, " why do you do it Jock? it seems to make you so miserable and bad tempered". Then observing, "on the other hand, you do seem to quite cheerful being miserable and bad tempered, So I suppose you must be enjoying yourself, in your own funny way".

Occasionally Jock would be happy; this was usually when some old acquaintance passed underneath the bridge. Invariably at the helm of some large private cruiser or launch, festooned with radar aerials and navigation aids. With the obsequious red flag flying at the stern. This with other multiple pennants and flags proclaiming his status as an influential boat owner, belonging to the royal, this and that yacht squadron. These people were Jocks friends, to be greeted most cordially. "Ahoy there skipper, where for bound" would be his booming greeting. This greeting being a bit superfluous, since upstream could only be but Snoring, and downstream Daplemurham!. "How is your good lady sir, and splodge the dog, is he still well" would ring out across the lock cut. Should one of these boats be coming out of the lock cut, and be travelling downstream. Jock would, taking his life in his hands, cursing and ranting at the Bridge traffic. Dash across to the other side of the bridge, to carry on the conversation as the boat emerged, on the downstream side of the bridge.

It was Jocks habit after each of these little performances, to then turn to Sparrer and proclaim "awfully nice people, you know". Sparrer nodded his head and said thoughtfully, with a large hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Yes I know Jock, but what puzzles me is, how come that awfull'y big boats have such awfull'y nice people in them". "Then all nice little boats according to you, invariably have nasty horrible awful people in them, never could puzzle that one out jock".

Sparrer turned, and walked on over the bridge saying "come on Jock I'm bored with this, lets go and see what Gloria's up to, she's always good for a laugh". The two men sauntered over the bridge, to take up their usual; watching Gloria position. This position on the bridge had been determined from much previous experience. It was far enough away from the tollbooth, to be able to see both sides. Yet most importantly, it was near enough to hear all that was being said.

Gloria, seeing the two men casually saunter up and take up station, glared fiercely at them, for she knew well enough, what they were up to. Sparrer smiled at her, and gave her a thumbs up sign, calling out loudly "Action! roll the camera's". Gloria up until now had been in a mildly benevolent mood. The sight of these two buffoons watching her, instantly changed her mood, to a deep dark one. Unfortunately for Gloria, Sparrer knew this only to well, and his next remark of "cue the leading lady" shouted through his cupped hands. Served to complete her mood transformation, to deep, dark, and dangerous.

The very next motorist that passed over the Bridge suffered from her new black mood. Offering up a ten-pound note, at the same time saying politely and apologetically "I'm very sorry I don't have any smaller change". The man received the short terse reply from Gloria, "I do!" The unfortunate brow beaten man drove away from the bridge, with seventy-five pence in copper, and ninety, ten pence silver coins, jingling in his pocket.

It was a full five minutes, before Gloria claimed her next victim of note. A small nondescript car crossed over the bridge from Pengebank, and halted at the lowered bridge barrier. Its occupant, being a man aged around fifty years of age. Instead of winding down the off side drivers window, then holding out his toll money, as was the norm. The man was leaning forward in his driver's seat, and pointing to the near side of the cars windscreen. Gloria standing aback, with

her arms folded aggressively across her chest, studiously ignored him. At last the man wound down his window, saying " I'm disabled, I don't have to pay the toll, there is my disabled sticker on the nearside of my windscreen". Gloria's dark mood overwhelmed her, as she snapped at the man. "To come over my bridge for nothing, you have to be physically disabled, just mentally disabled isn't good enough, twenty-five pence please!" The man stammered nervously, taken aback, by her ferocious manner, "but but I am physically disabled, there's my sticker on the windscreen".

Out of the corner of her eye, Gloria could see Jock and Sparrer enjoying the performance. This only served to darken her anger yet more; it was the little man that bore the brunt, as she snapped at him. "When I saw you last night at ten O'clock last night, you certainly were physically disabled; for you were just coming out of the Wherry". "When I saw you at eight O'clock, you would have passed as A1 at Lloyds, but then of course, you was in a great big hurry to get into the Wherry wasn't you". The little man just stared up at her, his eyes vacant and his jaw dropped, and he said nothing. Gloria stormed in for the kill, saying. "So! we will just imagine, that when you leave here, you will drive fifteen yards down the road, and turn right and go into the Wherry". "Therefore you are not yet, physically disabled, that will be some hours away yet! twenty five pence please". The man meekly said nothing, but obediently handed Gloria her twenty-five pence. The car drove jerkily away, travelled fifteen yards down the road, then duly turned right into the car park of the Wherry. It had not been the mans original intention, as he drove peacefully over Westchurch bridge, to call in at the Wherry. It was just that he was suddenly overcome by an overpowering urge, to down a very large Whisky.

Sparrer had been delighted with Gloria's performance, and kept on repeating "what a wonderful woman, there's no man that's a match for her, she eats them all up for breakfast". No wonder poor old Herbert only lasted five years, good old glorious Gloria". Jock had been somewhat more subdued by the performance, more in awe of the lady. Jock thought out aloud "don't know about glorious Gloria, I think her other nicknames, the Toll Troll, or the Bridge Fuhrer, or the Furious Fuhress are more in keeping". "Na! never said" Sparrer with great feeling, "compared to our Gloria, Adolph Hitler was nothing but a great big pansy".

Jock then said thoughtfully, "there was one chap got the better of Gloria though, do you remember". Sparrer snapped back, " Na! never, when did that happen, remind me". "The big lorry driver that got across the bridge, without paying the full toll, you must remember that". Sparrer snapped back, "never I don't believe it, nothing gets past Gloria, without paying". "That's the point replied Jock, he did pay, but he put one over on Gloria". "The man was driving a big lorry, and as he pulled up at the toll booth, he called out Hello darling how much for me? meaning of course the toll charge for heavy lorries". "Well you know Gloria gets a bit miffed at being called darling, so she went straight into one of her moods". "Well she leant out of the toll booth window, and snapped back at him ten pence a ton driver, and you know her, when she uses the word driver, it implies some sort of low life object". "Then the lorry driver said to her, that's a funny way to charge tolls isn't it". Jock was well into the story now, and unusually Sparrer was listening intently, saying only occasionally, "come on hurry up tell the story". "Well" said Jock "the man never flinched at all". "He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a coin, then gave it to Gloria". "Then the man said "here's twenty pence, I weigh twelve stones seven pounds, keep the change darling", and simply drove away. "Before poor old Gloria realised she had been had; the bloke was half way up the high street". On hearing the end of the story, Sparrer was visibly impressed, saying "I'd like to meet that bloke, but I don't suppose I ever will". "He'll never ever be able to cross the toll bridge again, not ever!, so there's not much chance of me ever meeting him".

Jock and Sparrer now took to swapping Gloria stories. Sparrer saying "the best one of all, was the city gent that had his exhaust knocked off, did you hear that one Jock". Jock nodded his head resignedly as if to say that yes, he had heard it many times, never-the- less Sparrer carried on. "I was standing here one day, when this bloke came across the bridge from Pengebank, in a low slung sports car". "The car stopped at the booth, and the driver got out, the driver was a little fellow dressed in a pin stripped suit". "He went round the front of his car, and up to the toll booth window". Then he said to Gloria, in a loud toffee nosed voice, that would have given a BBC news reader, an inferiority complex", which Sparrer then went on to mimic. "I say madam, your road bumps have just knocked the exhaust pipe, off of my motor car, and I wish to make a formal complaint". Sparrer paused for a second to let his mimicry of the city gent take effect, before saying "and do you know what Gloria said". Jock once again nodded his head resignedly, whilst Sparrer carried on as before. "Gloria said, "complain! you want to complain? think yourself lucky you drove across, and didn't walk across my bridge". The city gent was taken aback by the

unexpected reply, and stammered. "I'm sorry madam I don't understand, what do you mean, lucky I didn't walk across". Sparrer went on, "you know how she looks at people Jock", whilst struggling to control his giggling. "Like dog turd that's been scraped off the bottom of her shoe, well that's how she looked at the city gent". "Then she said it to him, and I couldn't believe my ears". Sparrer was now struggling to get the punchline out, over his giggling. "She said, she actually said to him, him the smart toffee nosed city gent, she said". "Well! if a little short arse like you had walked across the bridge, the road bumps would probably knocked your balls off, so think your self lucky it was only your exhaust pipe, that got knocked off."

Sparrer was still convulsed laughing at his own joke, when Jock said slowly and thoughtfully. "I rather like her one liner remarks, like the time the motor car driver said to her, what's a beautiful girl like you doing here". "Then without hesitating, she said to him, just a honest days toll sir, that will be twenty five pence please". Jock mused out loud again, "she certainly has a rapier like mind, the problem is, it's connected to a razor like tongue". "The lady is a complete enigma, so beautiful, so intelligent, so bloody difficult!" Sparrer chimed in and finished the sentence for Jock saying "and so say all of us".

Jock in his slower speech, began to recount one of Gloria's past exploits saying. "Do you remember the time that RAF type almost got the better of her". Then without waiting for Sparrer's reply, leant back against the bridge with his arms stretched out to his sides, and went straight into the telling of the story. "There was a big queue of cars, all waiting to pay their tolls and cross the bridge". "In one of the cars, was an RAF officer type, complete with hat and silver braid". "As his car moved up to the toll barrier, it lunged forward and actually hit the barrier". "Well of course Gloria was furious, she came out of the toll booth, banged on the roof of his car and shouted at him, you've broken the barrier". "Well give him his due, the RAF type never turned a hair, he just looked back up at her and said impossible madam". Jock smiled, as in his mind he relived the event. Of course he recounted "Gloria never was one to countenance disobedience, so she banged and shouted even louder you've have just broken the barrier". Jock went into one of his thoughtful modes again as he said, "I never could make my mind up, whether that RAF man was very witty, simple minded, or just plain pissed". For he said to Gloria " impossible madam, this car is a Lada, it won't do more than sixty miles an hour". Gloria became infuriated by the man's apparent flippant attitude, shouting back at him "Lada! Lada bloody nonsense". She moved round to the barrier, and pointed to a small chip in the plastic shouting at him "there look! you've broken the barrier, you did that just now when you crashed into it". A smile, coupled with a look of realisation, came over the RAF mans face. His voice boomed out "oh that barrier madam, I thought you meant the sound barrier, you know! Mach one and all that stuff; do it all the time at work you know". Then; with an inscrutable smile on his face adding, "its impossible to do in a Lada motor car you know"!

Just as Jock had finished his story, and before their mutual chuckling had died away, one of Gloria's most hateful happenings happened. There was a queue of about six cars, that had crossed over the bridge from the Berkshire side of the river, waiting at the toll bridge. Gloria was having a minor altercation with one of the drivers, who was a newcomer to Westchurch. The driver was of the opinion, that he, having paid vast sums of money in road fund licences etc, etc. Should not now have to pay yet another twenty-five pence, merely to pass over twenty-five yards of tarmacadam. Gloria was heatedly explaining to the man that she Gloria Sumpter alone owned Westchurch toll bridge, and not the bloody Ministry of Whatsit's. The man had countered this with "so what! if one took into account all the motoring taxes that he had paid in his lifetime, he was part owner of the M4 motorway". Just as this conversation was reaching a somewhat heated climax, the hateful happening occurred.

Another motorist five cars back in the queue lost all patience, and sounded a series of blasts on his motor car's horn. Both Jock and Sparrer's faces broke into grimaces of horror. Jock shook his head saying "the man's either very brave, a raving idiot, or a complete stranger to the bridge". Sparrer nodded his head agreeing " can only be, but a brave, simple minded stranger". For the second time in one hour, Gloria stormed out of the tollbooth. With both arms bent at the elbows and pugnaciously swinging, she strode purposely towards the recalcitrant motorist. Sparrer and jock stood mouths agape, as did several other regular bridge user's. For all knew that the man had committed the most heinous grievous crime, in the Westchurch toll bridge book. That, of blowing one's horn, at the proprietor of the bridge.

Gloria arrived at the open car window of the offending motorist. She took up her best concentration camp guard stance; legs spread wide arms on hips. There was an expectant silence

in the air, Jock and Sparrer's mouths had closed, but they listened intently, what would she do? Gloria spoke, in a slow deliberate meaningful loud voice "you are going astern sir are you"? The motorist far from being simple minded, took the situation in at a glance. He did what the average male did, when faced with Gloria's unabated fury; he simply let his jaw lower drop, and said nothing. Gloria continued, "or perhaps I misheard you, perhaps it was four blast's of the horn, indicating that you are not in command of the situation". "Let me see now, she carried on, according to international rules of navigation, four blasts on the horn indicates that your engine has stopped, and that you are not under control". She moved her head to one side, to listen to the vehicles engine "your engine appears to be running sir, so it couldn't possibly have been four blasts that you sounded". "Therefore it must have been three that I heard, and you are therefore going to go astern. Placing her hand on the driver's shoulder she told him, "one moment sir, I will get these vehicles behind you to reverse out of the way, so that you can safely go astern".

Gloria had now moved away from the offending motor car, and was loudly informing the cars behind "this gentleman wishes to go astern, could you all reverse back please". Chaos reigned on Westchurch Bridge. Cars in both directions had been stopped, Gloria was loudly supervising and waving her arms, and making it patently clear, that all this confusion was the fault, of one little insignificant thoughtless motorist. The little insignificant motorist stammered politely "excuse me miss, but I don't want to reverse back at all, thank you". Gloria did not let him off the hook lightly "but you must have wanted to reverse sir, for you are in the middle of the river Thames". She indicated the water down below, "and you gave three blasts on your horn which is as everyone knows, the international signal to go astern".

The man decided to make a clean breast of it, and confess, saying to Gloria "Actually I'm in a bit of a hurry, and I blew my horn for you to hurry you up just a little". Gloria if anything, is magnificent in victory! For she now started striding around the bridge amongst all the confusion and chaos, waving her arms around crying out " stop everybody stop, stop what you are doing". Then from the centre of the road, in between the two lines of stationary traffic, she announced loudly, again to vigorous waving of her arms. "Carry on everybody, everybody carry on! the person has changed its mind, and doesn't want to reverse after all. "Further more the person has revealed that he is in fact in a great hurry". "So could all people please get out of the way as quickly as possible". Gloria then glared at the man and added sneeringly, "otherwise the person will no doubt be late for its dinner".

Gloria strode victoriously away, back to the tollbooth. To her horror when she arrived, she found that she had inadvertently left the barrier open. In leaving the barrier open, that other horrible little man, the one that had started all this trouble. The man that claimed to be part owner of the M4 motorway, and yet did not want to pay the twenty-five pence, to cross the bridge had escaped. In all the commotion he had sneaked off without paying any toll at all. Gloria hated sneaky, whinging, bumptious, know-all, smelly, chauvinistic, men. In fact right at this moment, Gloria hated all men, with a great venom.

As these very thoughts seared through her mind, there passed in front of her eyes, an apparition. A being that possessed most, if not all of these negative qualities, she hated so much in men, plus a few more; Sparrer!. He called out to her cheerfully, "that was a great one Gloria, five minutes of unparalleled pandemonium, the traffic is backing up, half way up Westchurch hill". "Let us know when you are going to do it again, we could sell tickets to watch it, I'll split the takings with you fifty fifty".

Poor old Sparrer he being just a simple male, he wasn't to know that the sparkle in Gloria's eyes wasn't one of happiness, but was in fact sheer unadulterated hate, female hormones running amok!. He wasn't to know that being cheerful was one of the worst things that he could possibly have done, with Gloria in this mood. How could he have been expected to know, that Gloria's fuse had burnt right down, and that she was ready to explode, for he was but a man. Explode violently she did, and a large lump of shrapnel came Sparrer's way. "You're barred"; she snarled through drawn back lips at Sparrer. For a few moments Sparrer stood stunned, he had heard the words clearly enough, but could just not believe that Glorious Gloria, whom no man could put asunder. In many ways his heroine, for her brave, if somewhat hormonally influenced, battles against the world, was actually barring him from the bridge. At last Sparrer found his voice, it wasn't his usual voice, and it was decidedly different. It was a shaky voice, with an edge of stunned nervousness in it "you can't do that to me Gloria, I really like you, I think you are funny".

It was Jock that spotted the serious ramifications, of Sparrer being barred from the bridge first. If Sparrer were not to be allowed over the Westchurch Bridge, Jock would lose his snooker partner. There would be no one to keep him company, whilst he supervised the comings and goings at the lock cut. There would be no one to accompany him, on the tour of the five pubs and the working mans club, on the Berkshire side of the river. This was serious, if Gloria barred Sparrer from crossing the bridge; it would ruin Jocks social life for him. Jock decided to intervene, on his friend Sparrer's behalf. He cleared his throat nervously, held himself upright, then in what he thought to be a conciliatory voice started to speak. "I say Gloria old girl, don't you think", that was as far as he got. Gloria interrupted him, with a finger stabbing in his direction, and just four words "you're barred as well".

CHAPTER 3.

It was six thirty in the evening; the public bar of the Wherry was quite. The Captain was sitting on a barstool, with an almost empty pint glass in front of him. Pearl was behind the bar working, preparing for the evening session. At times she would disappear from the bar to go off to the kitchen, to check on the preparations for the evenings menu. In the far corner of the bar was a man sitting all alone, with just a whisky glass to keep him company. He was wearing a rather shabby raincoat and a cloth cap upon his head, and looked the figure of abject misery. This man was Fred Alderton, the man who some time previously had had the altercation with Gloria, as to whether he was, or was not disabled. Gloria tended to have this effect on people; that of ruining their entire day, by the use, of a mere few words.

The door to the public bar crashed open, and in strode Sparrer, followed closely behind by Jock. The quite atmosphere of the bar immediately disappeared. No words had been spoken, but it was evident to all, that Sparrer was fuming with quite rage. Sparrer's usual routine on entering the pub, would have been to spend some minutes deciding whether to purchase a pint, or a half-pint of beer, before entering into conversation. This evening he marched up to the captain, and without any preliminary greeting or conversation, Shouted at him "do you know what that bloody woman has gone and done". The captain's jaw dropped slightly, he had never seen Sparrer as angry as this before, and was stunned into momentary silence. Giving the Captain no chance to reply, Sparrer looking round the pub so that all would bear witness to what he had to say, said in a slow, incredulous high pitched, loud voice, "she has gone and barred me from the bridge". From behind, came a more subdued Jocks voice saying "me too". Sparrer continued, this time he seemed more to be speaking to himself, as if trying to convince himself that the unthinkable had really happened. "She's barred me from the bridge, Gloria has barred me from the bridge". In the background some decibels lower, and overshadowed by Sparrer's tirade, Jock was to be heard repeating "I'm barred as well".

Pearl sensing a violent change of mood in the pub, had re-appeared back behind the bar. Sparrer began to inform Pearl of the momentous events, but Pearl held up both hands saying " I heard Sparrer, along with the rest of Westchurch, want do you want to drink". Sparrer's voice was still loud, as he angrily said "right Pearl, give us two pints of Powerfull". With that single statement, give us two pints of Powerfull, Pearl knew that this was destined not to be, just an ordinary night in the Wherry. Sparrer drank the strong beer named Powerfull only very occasionally, when he wanted to get pissed!.

Sparrer turned around, and said to Fred sitting morosely in the corner "you're a victim too mate ain't yer, what do you want to drink". Sparrer continued his ranting, "bloody woman picking on a bloke like you with a bad leg!" "Come over here Fred old mate, come and get properly physically disabled with Jock and me". This suggestion appealed to Fred, for a hint of a smile came across his face. He crossed over to the bar, placed his empty glass on the counter, for a brief moment he paused, then said, "right, bugger it, a double whisky please Pearl". Now there were three! Sparrer had already almost finished his first pint of Powerfull, as Pearl served Fred his double whisky. She briefly left the bar to go out to the kitchen, Sparrer who had waited for this moment, then said to the Captain "what about you Captain, you in or out". The Captain said nothing, but thought hard for a full minute deciding at last "I'm in, but I'm not drinking Powerfull, it tends to make Pearl, too aggressive for me to handle!" Now there were four!

Pearl who was in the kitchen heard the till ring, she glanced into the bar, and saw that the captain had just finished serving, yet another round. She duly noted the full glass, in front of her husband the Captain; and mentally took over command, at the helm of the Wherry.

Pearl was a very experienced and capable landlady, she knew that four men pouring beer down their throats, was good for profits. The profit margin was lowered somewhat, if one of the imbibers was also the landlord of the pub. That was not only one of the hazards of the trade, but in her opinion, married life in general. What worried Pearl was the mood of the drinkers. The conversation in the bar was bad tempered, even vitriolic. It seemed every five seconds, the words

"that bloody woman, was shouted out aloud". Even Jock who had now consumed around three pints, was bad tempered and raising his voice.

The last time she had been in the bar to serve a drink, she had heard Fred, quiet inoffensive Fred. Fred who never usually said boo to a goose, state quite categorically. "That the very next time he went over the bridge, he was going to run the bloody woman over". He was further encouraged by Sparrer's enthusiastic cheering. Fred, who had never apparently been so popular in his life before, was enjoying centre stage. For he carried on to say, "and then I'll tear her limb from limb" demonstrating this, by making tearing motions with his hands. More cheers from Sparrer, even Jock joined in this time. Fred now had a wild look in his eyes, he was getting carried away saying, "and then, and then, I'm going to beat her to death with the soggy ends of her legs". This time making exaggerated clubbing motions, with his arms and hands. "Then;" adding with relish "lets see how she likes being bloody well physically disabled".

The Captain who had been grinning hugely throughout the whole of Fred's performance Remarked dryly. "Bit of a difference between being physically disabled, and physically dismembered Fred don't you think". "You might have gone over the top a little bit there old mate". Both Jock and Sparrer were shaking their heads; Jock said "its not you that's been barred Captain, its Sparrer and me". Sparrer was now quite carried away and baying for blood, crying loudly "dismemberment it is! off with her limbs". Which then served to incite Fred into his tearing off limbs, and clubbing with the soggy end mime, all over again.

Things were getting out of hand, Pearl knew something needed to be done, to change the mood of the party. Pearl thought that the group had moved beyond sound reasoning, so Pearl attacked. "Just like a load of men, sit around in the pub talking about what they might do tomorrow". "If you have been barred from the bridge, do something practical about it". The response was at first, that which she had hoped for.

Jock rose to the bait first "all right then Pearl, what do you suggest that we do, write to our Member of Parliament". He continued "or perhaps you think the court of human rights in Strasbourg, we could go right to the top". Sparrer was in a bitter mood, and not to be easily distracted for he chimed "Yeah, then there's Oxfam we could write to them, then the British Legion, on account of victimisation of Fred's war disability". "Then there's Help the aged, they could come in useful" turning to Jock he said "that's one's for you Jock". Jock snapped back at him, "I'm no more aged than you are". "Ah! but you will be" snorted Sparrer, by the time we've finished writing all these letters, your talking about, you will be". Sparrer spoke in a more serious voice saying slowly "what we need is direct action, positive action now".

The Captain also could see, that the mood was getting darker, and unwittingly added fuel to the flames. Saying "right positive action is called for" standing upright on the rungs of his bar stool, called out "Pearl a double whisky for Fred, two pints of Powerfull for Jock and Sparrer, one ordinary bitter for the captain of the Wherry".

As the group supped their ale, the atmosphere in the Wherry became more and more maudlin. The realisation sank in, that Sparrer would not be able to get to his favourite watering hole the Wherry. Jock would not be able to avail himself of the fleshpots! of Pengebank. What is more, he would not even be able to go across the bridge to go shopping. The Captain could see that he was going to lose one of his best customers Sparrer. Not that Sparrer spent a great of money in the pub, but he was the provider of many things. Rabbits, pheasants, even venison, could be provided if the wind was in the right direction, to carry the sound of gunshots away from the local gamekeeper's house. Now all this was to come to an end, just because the bridge Fuhress was lacking in the sense of humour department.

Sparrer was idly contemplating the bottom of his empty beer glass, holding it up and viewing the light fittings through it. When the thought came upon him, how the devil was he going to get home tonight, he was barred from using the bridge. He blurted out "Captain I'll have to stay here for the night, cause I'm marooned, shipwrecked, I can't get home". Even as he uttered the words, Pearl re-entered the bar snapping at Sparrer. "Oh no your not, I'm not having you stop here for the night". "You'll have to go, even if it means you walking across the water, you'll have to go you are not stopping here for the night".

Sparrer was in a quandary, the only way to get to Pengebank without using the bridge. Was

not as Pearl glibly said to walk across the water. Instead it was to swim, or walk the ten or so miles to Snoring Bridge and back. Neither of which options he fancied at this time of the night. He knew there was very little chance of him being able to walk across the bridge. For the parlour window to the toll bridge cottage, overlooked the footway and Gloria was sure to be looking out for him. Sparrer was without doubt going to need some sort of disguise.

Fred generously offered a loan of his shabby brown raincoat and hat. At which the Captain retorted " yes be a nice to see Sparrer looking smart for a change". Sparrer had been about to accept Fred's offer, but the Captains snide remark instantly made him change his mind. On no account did he want to be mistaken for one of those toffee nosed something in city types, that crossed over the bridge every day. Jock, who had been sitting quietly and deep in concentration for some minutes, spoke quietly and thoughtfully saying. "Sparrer needs to be disguised in such a way, that Gloria would never ever suspect that it was him". On hearing this, Pearls head instantly appeared around the side of the door. Pearls voice said with a large hint of sarcasm, "take him upstairs, give him a bath with a large splash of carbolic in it, cut his hair, then even his own mother wouldn't recognise him". Sparrer spluttering rose to protest. The Captain put out a restraining hand to him, saying "Pearl will you stop winding the customers up, and leave us in peace to our men's talk, poor old Sparrer's got to get home to-night". Pearls head disappeared back from the door opening but not before delivering a last parting jibe. By finishing her previous comment "that is, as long as his mother was up wind of him".

Right said the Captain, what did you have in mind then Jock, which disguise wouldn't Gloria suspect. Jock now had his chin held in his hand, and was obviously in a deep thoughtful mode. In the manner of a learned professor, Jock gave forth saying slowly. "Disguise means to alter one's appearance such, so as not to be recognised". "Alternatively, to camouflage one's appearance so as to blend into the background and not be seen". "Now of course the background in question, is a toll bridge". Wrinkling his nose and giving a disparaging look at Sparrer, he went on to say. "No way can we get him; to blend in with a toll bridge, so we will just have to alter his appearance, and therein lies the problem". "Just how can we alter a scruffy individual like he is, to appear to be something other than a small insignificant scruffy reprobate, its virtually impossible". The Captain warmed to the theme, "we could tie a piece of string around his neck, and pretend he is a bag of Sh-t" he said, laughing uproariously at his own joke. Fred sitting over in the corner found the thought of this funny also, and was trying to suppress a fit of the giggles. That was until Sparrer glared fiercely at him, then only with difficulty did Fred manage to stifle his giggling. Leaving hastily for the gent's loo covering his mouth with his hand, until he was out of the bar.

Jock was sitting on his barstool gazing at Sparrer, shaking his head and thinking aloud. "How can we make this man look different, I don't see how it can be done". "Whatever we do; anyone who has ever seen him before will know its him, even at fifty paces". The Captain suddenly banged his fist on the bar and shouted "Eureka! you've got it Jock". Jock flinched and looked quickly to both sides and behind him, before saying, "got what, what did I do?" "You got it in one", the Captain told him. "When you said, how can we make this man look different". Jock was still very much non-comprehending, and it showed all over his vacant face. The Captain gleefully explained, wagging his finger. "You said how can we make this man look different", Jock nodded his head. The Captain now very much into his stride, with a huge smile on his face, explained. "We will make this man into a woman!" "A small and insignificant woman granted, but never-the-less a woman". Upon hearing these words a look of great alarm appeared on Sparrer's face, and he quickly replied "Oh no your bloody not, one's mucking about with my dangly bits, that's for sure". The Captain hastily re-assured him and said "no no, we don't cut anything off, we just dress you up in women's clothes".

For seconds Sparrer sat there his face a blank, as his brain furiously considered, the Captains outrageous proposal. Then a hint of a smile crept into his face; the thought of dressing up in women's clothing was beginning to appeal to him. A slightly worried frown then appeared as he said, "do I have to wear stockings and suspender belt as well". The Captain once again re-assured him "of course not Sparrer, just ladies top clothes, and a ladies hat". "Then perhaps some nice pretty high heeled shoes, to make you appear not quite so insignificant that's all". Sparrer's face now broke into a huge grin "I like it" he said impishly "let's go for it".

Jock was sitting on his stool his face set hard, and grimly shaking his head saying, "I know what you are thinking Captain, but Pearl will never stand for it". "I mean look at him" prodding a finger in Sparrer's direction, "would you fancy him wearing your underpants yuck!" The Captain was in jovial mood as he pulled up yet another round of drinks. He reminded them "I am the Captain

of this Wherry, and this is a very merry Wherry". Then pushing a tumbler up twice under the navy rum optic saying "god bless all who sail in her" took a large gulp from the glass. Jock who knew well the significance of this action, (the Captain moving on to spirits) now realised anything was possible.

The Captain was leaning forward with his elbows on the bar counter. Jock and Sparrer were huddled up close to him, on the other side of the bar, together they conspired. It was a bit like a coven of witches, the gunpowder plot even, as the Captain looking over his shoulder said. "Right lads here's the plan, when were ready for our next round of drinks, I'll disappear". "Then you call for Pearl to serve the booze, whatever you do keep her talking". "Then while Pearls otherwise engaged serving you lot, I'll nip upstairs and raid her wardrobe". With a cheeky grin saying aside to Sparrer, "what size knickers do you take shipmate".

Further maudlin minutes passed by, and the level in the beer glasses went down. Then at last the Captain giving them all a knowing wink said "right I'm off lads, do it now" then walked out of the bar towards the pub cellar. Sparrer allowing him time to get clear then called out loudly "mug oh! mug oh! come on Pearl, the punters have got no ale in their jugs". Pearl who had been busy in the kitchen did not immediately appear. Causing Sparrer to call out yet again "Come on Pearl, if you don't hurry up I'll be stone cold bloody sober, and have to start all over again". Pearl came into the bar wiping her hands on a towel, and glared at Sparrer. Sober she said, "that would be a fine thing, it would no doubt mean you've got no money, or they are throwing clods of earth on your coffin". Sparrer turned to Jock, "fine way for a landlady to talk to her best customer don't you think Jock" he said. Jock was being diplomatic, bearing in mind that he had already been barred from one facility today. Replied softly "I don't know about best customer, I think most frequent, might be a better description Sparrer". Wisely chosen words! for they pleased both Sparrer and Pearl together.

As Pearl filled the glasses she asked sarcastically, "where's the Captain of the Wherry got to, he's supposed to be manning the bars". Sparrer was ready and waiting with the excuse, saying "little accident in the heads Pearl". "Punter in the other bar, has just complained that the number two urinal just urinated all over him, instead of the other way round". "Captains just gone to sort it all out," adding as an afterthought the explanation "foreign bloke it was, most likely went for a wee in the shower by mistake".

Pearl slammed the till shut and went to leave the bar, at which point Sparrer said casually, "is your beer alright Jock?" Jock at first caught unawares by this question, suddenly realised that this was a delaying tactic on Sparrer's part. An effort to keep Pearl in the bar, while the Captain raided her wardrobe upstairs. At the same time thinking to himself, by god Sparrer sails dangerously, and unnecessarily close to the wind at times. Pearl for some quirky reason, not known to the Captain nor any of the customers, just hated criticism of the Wherries beer. Pearl could not tell one type of beer from another, she would not know even if a beer were cloudy or vinegary. All that Pearl knew, was that the Wherry sold the best beer in Westchurch. Thus if there was something wrong, it must be with the customers and not the Wherryboat beer. So a mere casual remark, such as Sparrer had just made "is your beer alright Jock" was inviting her wrath upon the speaker's head. Jock hastened to mitigate the damage "no my beers just fine Sparrer". "I think perhaps you must have dropped a little cigarette ash in yours a moment ago". At the same time giving Sparrer a firm kick out of sight below the bar counter.

Sparrer grimaced with pain, at the same time realising what dangerous ground he had been on, in criticising the Wherry beer. Pearl seeing the sudden look of pain on Sparrer's face, was herself distracted from the spurious allegations of dodgy beer. Instead "something wrong with you Sparrer she asked suspiciously". Sparrer's brain raced to think of something wrong with him, then he remembered!. "Yes he said, rubbing his leg vigorously, I suffer from Halitosis". "One of those of those city gents told me the other day, as I stood next to him in the Goose hotel". "Quite a posh bloke he was, think he must have been a surgeon or something". "Very clever man he was too, I had only been speaking to him for a couple of minutes and he diagnosed it straight away". "Excuse me" he said, "but did I know that I suffered from Halitosis". "Apparently I've got quite a severe case, should get it seen too as soon as possible according to the gentlemen". "That's why you have seen me limping a bit lately, and it's giving me a lot of pain right now", he said vigorously rubbing his leg.

Jock suppressing a grin said to him, "Sparrer are you sure the man said you were suffering

from halitosis". "Of course I'm bloody sure" snapped Sparrer, "if I'm suffering from something I make damn sure I know what it is". "I even got the bloke to write in down for me, look here it is". After a lengthy rummage in his pockets, he produced a grubby betting slip. Written on the betting slip in block capitals were the following words. 'WARNING THIS MAN SUFFERS FROM SEVERE HALITOSIS'. Then underneath in joined together writing and barely legible script followed. 'Although if you are reading this, you are undoubtedly standing next to the man, and are already quite aware of it'.

Jock was vainly trying to suppress a fit of the giggles on reading the note, when the Captain came back into the bar. He handed the slip to the Captain saying "have a look at this, apparently Sparrer's been diagnosed as suffering from it". The Captain read the message on the slip and simply said "didn't need a brain surgeon to tell him that, I've know it for ages". Jock still giggling said "yes, but Sparrer's got it in the knee". Jock and the Captain then both burst into peals of laughter. The Captain managed in between spasms of laughing to interject. "I suppose it could be possible to get Halitosis of the feet, but hardly the knee, trust Sparrer to get it wrong".

All this for some illogical reason made Pearl happy. For some time now she had been worried, Sparrer's story and ailment had seemed quite plausible to her, but Jock had definitely been sniggering at something. The loud laughter told her that the joke whatever it was, was apparently on Sparrer. Her womanly pride and dignity were still intact. She could now safely leave the gibbering idiots alone, and departed for the kitchen and relative sanity.

It was Sparrer's turn to now be worried, why were his two best mates apparently laughing at him, when he was suffering from severe Halitosis. "Stop mucking about lads, this is serious, for all I know there may not even be a cure pleaded Sparrer". Jock made a brave effort to stifle his giggles, but Sparrer's words merely sent the Captain off into more sustained laughter. In between laughing the Captain managed to get out the words "oh there is a cure Sparrer, trouble is it's a bit drastic". The Captain had at last managed to contain his more violent laughter, and was now merely chuckling. He went on to explain "I knew a bloke in the navy, suffered from the same thing as you Sparrer". "What happened to him" asked Sparrer anxiously, "he died" replied the Captain still wearing a huge grin on his face. Sparrer now looked very worried indeed asked, "what did he die off", "he died of the cure," said the Captain cheerfully. "For Christ's sake Captain what is the cure" Sparrer pleaded. For fully ten seconds the Captain said nothing, Sparrer was beginning to think that he was doomed. Then once again in between giggles, the Captain spoke. "The only known cure for Halitosis is non exhalation". "What the devils that" queried an anxious Sparrer. Put simply said the Captain, its means that you can quite safely breathe in, but to effect the cure, on no account must you breathe out". The Captain and Jock were once again convulsed with laughter.

After a few minutes, quiet once again descended over the bar. The Captain gently explained to Sparrer that the word Halitosis, was simply the medical term for bad breath. Therefore in his particular case would not likely to be life threatening. Adding with a shake of his head that he could not guarantee the same, for anyone standing to close up to Sparrer though. Initially Sparrer was quite cross, saying tersely "that bloody city gent, he had me quite worried for a while". "You wait till I see him again, I'll give him bad breath! this time I'll fart right next to him, lets see if he's got a posh name for that as well". Then adding thoughtfully, "there's nothing wrong with my breath, that a couple of pickle onion's won't put right is there Captain". The mere thought of this pungent mixture of Halitosis and onions gave the Captain an involuntary shudder, and he quickly changed the subject. "Right" he said, "I've got some of Pearls gear let's go into the gents loo, and get Sparrer to try it on".

Sparrer posed in front of the Gent's urinal's dressed in Pearls coat. It was a delightful little belted, tight waist'ed, fawn coloured one. On his head he wore a black and white straw hat, similar to those which the old time sailors wore. The Captain was telling that in order to increase his height, the better for to disguise him. Sparrer would also need to wear the two-inch high ladies shoes, which he held in his hands. Sparrer whilst quite happy to wear the ladies coat and hat, was drawing the line at wearing ladies shoes. It was Jock that convinced him of the need to wear them, though saying. "Sparrer, I could spot you at two hundred paces even on a dark foggy night, if you were coming across Westchurch Toll Bridge side by side with the seven dwarfs". "Never poohed Sparrer, how would you do that". "Easy said Jock, you would be the one that walked under the barrier, the rest would walk round it". Sparrer reluctantly agreed, if only to make him look a little less insignificant, to try on the shoes.

Sparrer stood nervously at one end of the gent's loo. He was wearing Pearls hat and coat, with his trousers rolled up above his knees. On his feet the two-inch high heeled ladies shoes, with his grey woollen socks folded over his arm. "Right let's see how you walk," said Jock with a grin on his face. Sparrer moved forward across the floor, clunking his feet like a seven-year old girl, trying out her mother's four inch high heels for the first time. Jock said out loud "useless! what does he remind you off Captain". Chuckling aloud the Captain said "A geriatric, spastic, poofter, springs to mind actually". "Right that's it, I'm definitely not wearing them shoes then, pouted an annoyed Sparrer". Jock tried again saying, "Sparrer, if you can't walk like a lady, You've got no chance of getting away with it, Gloria's going to suss you out at once". "We could dress you up like the Queen of Sheba, but if you are going to walk like a garden gnome, you've got no chance of getting over the bridge". For the umpteenth time, Sparrer clunked his way across the floor of the gent's loo. His un-ladylike clunks, echoing loudly off of the glazed sanitary ware. For the umpteenth time Jock criticised him, Sparrer was beginning to lose all patience.

There was a loud strident banging on the door to the gentlemen's loo. Pearls voice was demanding, "Captain, what are you up to in there". "Nothing Pearl, nothing, just trying to sort out this broken urinal". Pearls voice rang out again "Captain it don't take three of you to mend a urinal, I think you are taking the urinal, not mending it now what are you up to". A look of panic appeared on the Captains face. If Pearl discovered Sparrer wearing her clothes, the Captain would be deep in the mire. He motioned to Sparrer vigorously, hissing at the same time. "Quick hide in the number two trap, don't for Christ's sake let her catch you in her clothes".

Just as Sparrer pulled the door closed behind him, Pearl burst in through the door to the Gents. One quick glance around and she demanded "right where's number three". "Number three?" queried the Captain nervously "what do you mean Pearl". "Number three" repeated Pearl striding across the room, "the little smelly one, where could he be I wonder". Pearl pushed open the door to the number one trap and gazed in. She took one pace to the right, and then pushed open the door to the number two trap. For around ten seconds Pearl simply stood there transfixed, doing and saying nothing. Then Pearl opened her mouth and Pearl simply SCREAMED! It was not really surprising that Pearl screamed, any normal person would have done so! For there behold seated on the toilet pan, bare knee's akimbo, was a demure Sparrer in all his (or rather Pearls) finery.

For long drawn out seconds, there was a loud silence. Then Pearl gave voice, screeching "you malodorous little pervert, what do you think you are doing". Quick as a rattlesnake strike, she dived next door into the number one trap, then re-appeared with the WC brush in her hand. Striking Sparrer on the shoulder with the brush, she harangued him again. "You nasty nauseous little man, what do you mean, doing disgusting things in my toilet". Pearl suddenly stopped with her WC brush in mid strike, her jaw dropped. She was having problems, relaying what her eyes had seen, through her brain, thence to her mouth. Suddenly the mental blockage cleared, she gave out another piercing scream "HE'S WEARING MY CLOTHES!".

A look of utter fear and panic came across the Captains face. "For pities sake Jock" he whispered "tell her its not what it seems, tell her why Sparrer's dressed up in her gear". Jock was about to say to the Captain, you tell her it was your idea. Instead he found himself on his own talking, to a slowly closing door. Jock braced himself, and said "Pearl" somehow it didn't come out at much above a whisper. So he did it again, "PEARL" this time it came out as a loud shout, bouncing around the toilet walls. Pearl spun around and glared at him, WC brush at the ready. Nervously Jock tried to explain, "Pearl it's not what you think honestly". Pearl moved towards him, jabbing at him with the brush "its not what I'm thinking; that's the problem, its what my eyes are seeing, that's the problem!" She turned around to face Sparrer again saying, "there you are look! I'm seeing it again, it's still there".

Sparrer was sitting on his toilet seat still taken aback by Pearls fury. When suddenly the realisation dawned upon him. He stood up, took three clunk's forward on his high heels, and said indignantly. "Ere Ere Pearl, just a minute, your not trying to say that I'm an old Poofter are you?". He clunked angrily out of the trap and halfway across the room. Then with his hands resting on the nipped in waist of his pretty fawn coloured coat. With his black and white straw sailor's hat slightly askew, he glared menacingly at Pearl. "Cos if you are, you are definitely barking up the wrong tree". "I'm no more bent, than your old man is straight, what with all his little fiddles with the drayman".

Sparrer's belligerent manor, put Pearl back slightly on the defensive. "She said we'll if your

not; you know; one of those, why are you wearing women's clothes". "MY clothes, and skulking around in the little boys room". "Cos said Sparrer" attacking yet again "I'm in disguise, I want to go home tonight". "Since you won't let me stay here, I've got to get across the bridge somehow". "So we thought I could sneak across the bridge, disguised as a woman".

Back in the bar, Pearl was somewhat relieved that her worst fears, that the Wherry Boat was a den of sordid vice had proved unfounded. Never-the-less she was still furious with the Captain for giving her clothes to Sparrer. She had been especially fond of that little black and white sailor's hat. Now it had been despoiled, and would be thrown away with the other clothes, she had retrieved back from Sparrer.

A very much chastened and subdued Captain, pulled up more pints behind the bar. Jock said quite cheerfully to Sparrer, "that's it me old friend, looks like you're marooned". "You can either face the Demon Bridge Troll, or you've got a ten mile walk via Snoring Bridge to get home". Pearl who now actually had a double brandy and lemonade in her hand, said scathingly. "Why doesn't he do what he does most Saturday nights when he leaves here, and simply crawl across the bridge on his hands and knees. "That way he won't need a disguise, because he will simply blend in with all the muck in the gutter. Sparrer strangely enough, did not take offence at this cutting remark, instead he said, "you might have something there Pearl". "If I was to crawl on my hands and knee's, just past the bit where Gloria's parlour window overlooks the bridge, she would never see me go by, would she?"

Sparrer walked over to the bay window at the front of the bar and looked out, saying "her light is still on though, she's not gone to bed yet". "Probably waiting for you to go and tuck her in," said Pearl grimly. Then adding "on the other hand she could be waiting for you, rolling pin at the ready". Sparrer thinking aloud, and with a hint of desperation in his voice said "it could work though, all I have to do is crawl past the lighted bit". "Then if I keep up close under her window in the shadow's, with a bit of luck, I'm as good as home". It was agreed by all, that this idea was far more feasible than a hundred-yard swim, or a ten-mile walk. Also that with a little luck, by the time the pub shut, Gloria would have gone to bed and turned out the offending light.

It was now half past eleven, all was dark in the Wherry Boat Inn. Jock Pearl and the Captain, were commiserating with Sparrer. The Captain saying "her light is still on, its now or never, we can't wait here all night Sparrer, you'll have to go for it". Then saying simply "wish me luck" Sparrer moved off apprehensively into the dark night. Making his way towards the threatening patch of bright light, shining from Gloria's parlour window. Some fully ten yards before he reached it, he went down on his hands and knee's and began to crawl.

Hugging close to the wall off the tollhouse, he approached the pool of bright light. At the same time coming towards him, over the bridge he could hear ominous lurching footsteps. Sparrer and the footsteps emerged into the pool of light together. Sparrer was on his hands and knee's directly below Gloria's parlour window, and could see two pairs of legs, in front of him. From somewhere above the tops of the legs, a slightly slurred, loud voice boomed. "Hello Sparrer! looks like it's been a damned good night down the Wherry then". Sparrer raised a single finger to his lips, and shook his head, in an attempt to silence the voice. The voice was not easily deterred, saying "must have been a damned good night, so much falling down water inside you, you can't even walk, you're having to crawl home". Sparrer had by now recognised both the legs and the voice, as belonging to two more drinking cronies from the workingmans club. They also were on their way home to Westchurch after a night in the club. Once again he desperately went through his finger on lips, and head shaking routine.

The voice called out behind, to yet more footsteps approaching over the bridge. "Here boys come and look at this, it's old Sparrer, he's as pissed as a fart, he can't even walk, he's having to crawl home". Sparrer was now encircled by four pairs of legs, and four voices were laughing down at him. Into the pool of light on the pavement beside Sparrer, a new ominous shadow appeared. Above his head, sounded a harsh rapping on the window glass of Gloria's parlour. Then the sound of window fastenings being released, electrified Sparrer into action. He crawled furiously between the legs, and on until he was outside the circle of light. He stood upright, then like a bat out of hell, disappeared into the dark and over the bridge.

As he careered out from sight, the owners of the legs were engaged in a cheerful one-sided conversation with a very cross Gloria. " Eureka! did you see that Gloria? it's a bloody miracle, one

minute he can't even walk, then when you appear, and he can run like a bloody whippet". The legs walked off in the direction of Westchurch, harangued loudly by the voice of Gloria. The legs spokesman was muttering bemusedly, if somewhat drunkenly. "What a woman!, what a women!, if she can do that for old Sparrer, what couldn't she do with seven loaves and five fishes". "Think about it lads, with powers like that she doesn't need a bridge". "She only has to say the word, and we could all walk back across the water.

CHAPTER 4.

One dull morning a week later at around eleven O'clock, Sparrer was waiting impatiently on the riverside patio of the Goose Hotel. The Goose Hotel was about one hundred and fifty yards upstream of Westchurch toll bridge. Situated at the side of the river on the Berkshire bank, directly overlooking the weir. Here was the conundrum, although both Sparrer and Jock were barred from crossing the bridge. Prevented from meeting, by a mere one hundred yards of asphalt, or water. Jock could in fact still cross over the river. Because in the past, Jock had been lord and master of Westchurch Lock and Weir, for many, many years. He had retained for himself a little, if somewhat unlawful privilege. He had kept the key which unlocked the gates, that allowed him to walk over the meandering path over the top of the weir and thus cross the river that way. Jock being an ex river authority employee of renown, the present lock keeper tended to turn a blind eye to this little perk. Jock could thus still avail himself of the dubious, but necessary facilities of Pengebank, although only by a somewhat tortuous route. Sparrer on the other hand, was on the face off it, denied for ever the pleasure's of his beloved Wherryboat Inn.

With a little help and connivance from Jock, Sparrer had of course tried to sneak across the river via the footway over the weir. Unfortunately the present lock keeper, a rather pompous ex military man, had taken an instant dislike to the scruffy Sparrer and had barred his way. In doing so, using words such as vagabond, disreputable, odious and the like. Sparrer's parting jibe "that the man was nothing but a jumped up bath tub attendant". Referring to his constant filling and emptying of the water in the lock, ensured that Sparrer would never pass that way again; ever!

Jock sauntered across the raised pathway over the weir, mentally reminiscing as always on his previous career as the lock keeper of Westchurch, in charge of all he surveyed. Sheer habit made him check the big river sluices, for height and obstruction as he crossed over. Arriving at the iron gate at the end of the walkway. He pulled out his last remaining prized possession of times past, the big key to the iron gate. Unlocking the gate and passing through, he was greeted balefully by Sparrer. "Welcome to sunny Pengebank on Thames stranger adding, you managed to avoid immigration control then".

Jock and Sparrer stood together on the patio of the Goose hotel, discussing what to do next. They were of opinion that neither the company, nor the prices in the Goose suited them, both being a bit uppity. The workingman's club it was then; where both the prices and the punters were more suited to their taste.

Two brightly lit rectangles of green baize, stood out in the gloom of the club snooker room. Shadowy figures moved around in the margins of the light, alternatively stepping forward into the glare to take a shot. Sparrer leaned foreword over the table, and with one foot off of the ground, then bad temperd'ly for he was loosing the game. Took an almighty shot, attempting to sink the pink ball at long range. The white cue ball missed the pink altogether and ricocheted off the cushion with such force, that it landed on the adjacent snooker table. There it rattled about three times around the table, disrupting all the balls there, before finally coming to rest.

A big man by the name of Bert West who had been playing on this table, said slowly "I suppose you'd like your ball back now Sparrer". Sparrer who had been slightly worried about the mayhem he had caused, to the game on the next table. Was quite relieved at the apparent gentlemanly conduct, of the two players there, replying "yes please Bert". With great deliberation Bert carried on "or perhaps on the other hand you might like to come over here on this table and finish this game, the one you have so skilfully bugged up".

Without giving him a chance to reply, Bert strode over to Jock and Sparrer's table. Then sent Sparrer's white cue ball, bounding backwards and forewords around the table bouncing off the cushions, clattering in to, and scattering the balls on that table. Initially Sparrer was stunned and did nothing, then holding his snooker cue aggressively; he stalked around the table to the big man Bert. He drew himself up to his full height, a good foot and a half shorter than Bert. For seconds the two men glared at each other, then Sparrer said slowly and deliberately "do you know what

you have just done". Bert with venom in his voice growled back "no; suppose you tell me".

Both Jock and Bert's partner watched with bated breath. The scene was not unlike the gunfight at the OK corral, except this was to be a snooker cue fight, at the Pengebank workingman's club. Sparrer slowly transferred his snooker cue from his right to his left hand. Then rapier like, his right hand shot forward towards Bert. At the same time a big smile formed upon his face, as he said "Thanks Bert, you have just saved me a quid that's what you have done". "I had no chance of winning that game, I was miles behind". "Now that you have just rattled the balls around the table, the game is void, and I've saved me money". As he gave this explanation, Sparrer was vigorously shaking a somewhat bemused Bert's hand. Jock was visibly impressed with this performance, more impressed than Bert or his partner could know. For Jock knew well enough, that there had been no money bet on the snooker game between Sparrer and himself. Sparrer with his natural guile, had just got himself and Jock out of a potential very nasty situation.

Five minutes later in the bar, Sparrer and Bert were the best of friends once again. Indeed much to Jock's surprise, Sparrer had just bought Bert a half-pint of bitter. Yet another five minutes later though, all was revealed as Sparrer said casually "what time are you going home tonight Bert". Bert lived in Westchurch, Sparrer knew damn well what time Bert went home, for it usually coincided with Sparrer's evening stroll to the Wherry. "Usual time about seven O'clock replied Bert", any chance of a lift with you tonight queried Sparrer, perhaps a little too offhandedly. "You must be joking!" snorted Bert, "the Toll Trolls after your guts". It would be more than my life's worth, to be caught giving you a lift over the bridge". "It would be high treason, I'd be hung drawn and quartered, and my head impaled on one of her fancy lamp posts".

"Oh! so you are afraid of Gloria then are you, great big man like you Bert, I wouldn't of thought that". Not waiting for a reply Sparrer carried on, "I could hide in the back of the car, she need never see me". Then thoughtfully, "still I suppose being hung drawn and quartered could be quite painful couldn't it". "But look on the bright side Bert, at least your head would have a nice view of the river Thames wouldn't it". It was a combination of Sparrer's humour, and the allegation that he was afraid of Gloria, that made Bert change his mind. Saying "all right I'll do it, I will give you a lift, but not in the back of the car, you will have to hide in the boot.

At five to seven sharp Sparrer was waiting in the car park of the working mans club. Into the car park drove a little green Volkswagen Beetle, with Bert at the wheel. Now Bert although a big man, had always driven this make and model of car, as long as anyone could remember. The car really was most unsuited to his large bulk, and many village jokes were made about it. For a while, Bert even believed that Volkswagen, which he pronounced WOLKSWAGEN. Was the German word for roller skate, as some wag had informed him. The wag glibly explaining that in the German language the 'V' was the same sound as the 'W'. I.E., WOLKS. Then that WOLKS was the Teutonic word for WALKS, thus WALKS WAGON, therefore Q.E.D. A ROLLER-SKATE. Now this was the bit that finally convinced Bert of the wags sincerity! "what's Q.E.D." mean he asked. "Quad e'rat demonstranum" replied the wit, "Latin abbreviation for that which has been proved". Bert was visibly impressed, for in his mind a man that could speak pure Latin, could only but tell the truth. The wag then warming to his theme went on to expound. That for people of Bert's size, it was originally intended that they should strap one Volkswagen to each foot, and proceed down the road in that manner. Bert sagely nodded his head, this man was an obvious scholar, and he must therefore be believed. Bert merely requesting that the wag "speak some more Latin to him again" cos he liked the sound of foreign languages.

Bert struggled out of the little green motor car, then opened up the front boot. Saying to Sparrer "hop in, lucky you are only a little un, you should just about fit". Adding "I've taken the spare wheel and all my drain cleaning kit out, just in case there wasn't enough room. The car moved slowly of out the car park, and turned left heading for the bridge. Inside the car boot it was as black as your hat, not a thing could Sparrer see. He felt the car lurch twice, as it went over the first of the traffic calming road humps. Then seconds later, another double lurch at the second of the road humps. The car came to a halt, and Sparrer listened intently for Gloria's voice. Then the car moved forward a further short distance, they were obviously in a queue of traffic. One more move, then he could hear Bert's voice tinged with bravado "evening Gloria, citizen of Westchurch with nothing to declare". Sparrer was on a high, but never-the-less thought to himself, for gods sake Bert don't push it to far, telling her you've got nothing to declare, is just asking for trouble. Sparrer was almost ecstatic, giggling, and thinking to himself. If only Gloria knew, if only she could see, if only she really had X-ray eyes, instead of just allegedly so. There not three feet, and ten microns of metal car boot lid away, was himself Sparrer Williams, being wilfully disobedient

and getting away with it. The car slowly moved away, and then he heard it! Gloria's voice coming back with the inevitable acidic riposte. "The only day that you had nothing to declare citizen of Westchurch, was on the day, before you learned to talk".

The little green Volkswagen pulled up onto the forecourt of the Wherry. Bert jumped out, made his way forward and opened up the boot lid. Saying cheerfully as he did so "well we did it Sparrer, we put one over on the Toll Troll, before her very own eyes, or rather underneath them". Sparrer beamed back at him, cheekily gauging his moment to be right "Yea well done Bert you certainly pulled the wool over her eyes" adding casually, "same time same place tomorrow night then Bert OK!". Bert having without thought agreed to Sparrer's request, drove away from the Wherry with a vague feeling inside him. That it was not Sparrer William's that had just been given a ride, but instead it was himself that had been taken for one. For now he had just agreed, to repeat the performance tomorrow night.

Sparrer made a jubilant entry into the bar of the Wherry, the Captain greeted him loudly, and Pearl hearing the commotion from the kitchen came into the bar to join in. Seated on a barstool and with a pint of Powerfull before him, which the Captain had presented him free as a welcome back gift. Sparrer recounted the tale of his crossing the bridge. Embellishing it somewhat, so that it sounded as exciting as a crossing of the Berlin wall at check point Charlie, in the cold war days. Sparrer was once again in a jovial mood; "everything is back to normal" he told Jock and the Captain. "Bert's going to bring me over the bridge each night, in the boot of his car, then I'll just sneak back afterwards underneath Gloria's window, same as last time".

This brief resumption of normal life, normal that is for Sparrer of course, lasted just over a week. Sparrer got bold and in-cautious, cocky even!. He made the mistake of letting Gloria see him on the Westchurch side of the river, not once but twice. Gloria was an intelligent woman; Gloria soon put two and two together and came up with the answer four, which was what she had suspected all along. B-E-R-T! was a four letter word, and he had been behaving suspiciously for over a week now, what with his nothing to declare and citizen of Westchurch nonsense. It must be him she thought to herself, both he and Sparrer were members of the Pengebank ne'er-do nothing men's club, as she termed it, therefore it had to be him.

At five minutes past seven the very next night, Bert drove happily over Westchurch toll bridge, with Sparrer as usual coiled up snugly in the boot. Bert was cheerful because he had now got used too, and in fact enjoyed sneaking Sparrer over the bridge every night. It had given him some measure of fame at the working mans club, where he had been dubbed the purple pimperl. At first Bert had been annoyed, he thought they had merely been taking the mickey out of his rather blotchy florid complexion. He had also unfortunately misheard the word pimperl for pimple. Once the dashing exploits of the Scarlet Pimperl had been explained to him. Then the simile with his good self, he was inordinately proud of the name. He would beam with pride when the other members chanted "she seeks him here, she seeks him there, she seeks the purple pimple every where". Whilst behind his back they added a last line. "The purple pimple as everyone knows, is plain to see on the end of Bert's nose"

As soon as Bert drove over the crest of the bridge, Gloria spotted the little green Volkswagen. She watched him drive slowly over the road humps, and come to a halt at the toll barrier. She glared down at him adopting her infamous legs astride, arms crossed, Fuhress stance. Initially this served to intimidate Bert as intended, but he quickly recovered giving his by now standard salutation. "Citizen of Westchurch, nothing to declare" as he proffered his toll moneys. Gloria at first ignored him, she neither took his money, nor raised the barrier. The next thing Bert knew, Gloria was outside of the toll booth standing by his driver's door and peering into the back of the car. He heard her give a snort Hmmp! then his driver's door opened. A firm hand took him by the shoulder at the same time saying, "right lets have a look in the boot then shall we, open it up".

Sparrer heard these words clearly; his heart skipped a beat and then continued skipping ever faster. He was caught like a rat in a trap; Gloria would pummel him to death when she found him. He wanted to shout out drive on Bert, drive through the barrier, don't let her find me for god's sake, but terror took his tongue. Bert's mind was also racing, he considered running away, but rejected the idea, he would have to leave his beloved Volkswagen behind. He played for time, he switched off the ignition, applied his hand brake ever so slowly, and he fumbled with his seat belt fastener. Then Gloria was pulling him bodily out of the car; the fateful moment was nigh.

Sparrer felt the car lurch as Bert's heavy frame got out. He cringed and curled up smaller, for when the boot lid opened he would have his back facing Gloria. He heard Bert's voice almost pleading saying "but there's nothing in there Gloria just old engine parts". Then Gloria's voice, strident no nonsense, demanding, the voice of absolute authority saying "open it". Sparrer braced himself for the blows to come, put his hands over his ears to protect himself from the shrieks of her rage. He was contemplating whether or not just a small prayer, even at this late stage in his life would serve any purpose.

Then he felt the car lurch again, he could see it in his mind, she was beating poor old Bert up against the side of the car. Then the cars engine started up, Oh No! she was going to drive it into the river and drown him. The car got up speed; it was doing almost forty miles an hour. Sparrer's brain raced almost as fast, that was it! she was going to crash it into a wall, and crush him to death.

After what seemed an eternity but was in fact only minutes, the car braked to a halt. The car lurched, then Sparrer could hear someone fumbling at the boot catch, He'd been kidnapped she was going to do away with him somewhere quiet and out of sight. The boot lid opened, there stood a large dark form silhouetted by the glare of a street light behind it. Before Sparrer could turn around in the cramped space of the car boot an excited voice spoke saying "Christ almighty, we had a bloody close shave back there Sparrer".

Half an hour later in the bar of the Wherry, Sparrer was already two thirds of the way down his second pint of Powerfull to steady his nerves, before he would tell the story. "I thought I was a goner, she had me dead to rights, banged up in the boot of Bert's Volkswagen". "Then what happened! go on Bert you tell them," he said to a still nervous looking Bert standing alongside him. Bert took a gulp out of his glass and started "Well I thought we had had it, she was absolutely livid, she pulled me out of the car and demanded that I open the boot". "I honestly think that if she had not had hold of me, I would have run away". "Then she started pulling me towards the back of the car, I thought she was going to throw me in the river". "Then I had the shock of my life, for she pointed at the rear engine compartment and shouted open it". "For a while I thought she had completely gone off her rocker. Then I realised, being a mere woman, Bert checked himself and said I'll re-phrase that, a mere woman she definitely i'snt". "Gloria didn't know just like a lot of other people, that the Volkswagen is a rear engin'ed car". "I thought that as soon as I opened the door she would realise it was the engine compartment, so I told her it was full of spare engine parts". "Luckily also when I was playing for time, I had turned the engine off". I just could not believe my luck, I opened the door, she peered in, paused for long minute in surprise. Then giving a snort of disgust she marched away from me". "I don't need to tell you! I was out of there lickity spit, like a rabbit with its bum on fire". "I was doing forty miles an hour by the time I reached the Wherry, and I carried on till I was clean out of sight". "I was taking absolutely no chances with the mood she was in". Sparrer then took over telling "that put the fear of god up me, I thought it was Gloria driving and that she was going to do me in, by crashing into a lamppost or something". Adding remorsefully "I don't think we will try that little trick anymore, the mere thought of being delivered up to Gloria, trussed up in a tin trunk petrifies me". "We are just going to think of some other way of crossing aren't we Bert". Spluttering into his beer Bert quickly replied "count me out Sparrer I've done my good deed for the decade, and that's enough for me".

Meanwhile on the bridge Gloria was taking the tolls from the late evening traffic. At this time of the day the traffic was mainly private cars and local residents, all well used to Gloria's vagaries of mood. Gloria was strangely quiet as she took the toll moneys, and issued change. Some bolder residents of Westchurch chanced an "evening Gloria" to receive a non-committal grunt in reply. Gloria was preoccupied; her mind was on other matters. She had been one hundred percent sure that Sparrer had been in Bert's little green Volkswagen, and yet he hadn't!. Even now she was convinced that he had, but he couldn't have been. The more she thought about it the more convinced she became. When she had asked to look in the boot, Bert appeared transfixed petrified even, and yet there was nothing there why? Then the thought struck her, that's how they had done it, she had not looked underneath the car.

Having at last totally convinced herself, that yet once again the horrible little Sparrer had put one over on her she settled down into a pleasant dark mood. Thenceforth every car that came over the bridge and proffered a note, received the entire change in coin of the realm. All citizen's permits were checked against the cars registration number. A stranger enquiring as to whether he was headed in the right direction for Forestcote had his toll money collected, only then being given

the answer no, and told to go back in the direction he had come.

Cyclist's which Gloria particularly hated, because they did not have to pay bridge tolls suffered the barriers being dropped down in front of them when only yards away from it. Although in all fairness to Gloria nobody actually, or least only very occasionally, came to any harm from this little trick. This was because Gloria had acquired a great skill, in gauging the stopping distances not only of the various types of cycles, but the individuals that rode upon them as well. The vicar for example, rode a very old fashioned upright bicycle with inefficient brakes. Should he be travelling from Pengebank to Westchurch he would thus be travelling down the slope of the bridge. He should then be given at least ten yards stopping distance before lowering the barrier in front of him. Whilst when he was travelling in the other direction, against the bridge incline, five yards stopping distance only, would suffice to cause the maximum irritation, without incurring risk of damage to the barrier itself.

For a brief while all was quiet on Westchurch toll bridge. This was the quiet spell between the rush of home going workers, then those travelling out for an evening's entertainment. Slowly over the brow of the bridge from the direction of Pengebank came a familiar shape. Gloria recognised it instantly in the distance, for it was a Volkswagen Beetle motor car. At first it served only to make her hackles rise alarmingly, she prepared herself to harass the driver, for she now hated all Volkswagen's and occupants thereof. This is what Sparrer had unknowingly done to her!. Now in her mind, like Pavlov's dog, all Volkswagen's were associated with evil!. World war two, the bombing of London and Coventry, Blitzkrieg! total war!. Teutonic occupants with toothbrush moustaches, and quiffs of hair over their foreheads. Gloria was ready and waiting to show the driver of this little Kraut motor car, there would be no peace in her time.

As the little Volkswagen slowly bumped over the last of the road humps, the seed's of doubt yet again entered Gloria's mind. Surely if Sparrer was suspended beneath Bert's Volkswagen as he crossed over the bridge, he would have been knocked off by the road humps, as the car lurched over them. Her mind was in turmoil yet again, she had been so sure that Sparrer had crossed over underneath Bert's car. Yet seeing this Volkswagen lurch over the road humps, would seem to make it almost impossible.

The little car braked to a halt at the barrier, and its offside driver's window wound down. The driver looked up into the brightly-lit toll booth but there was no one there for him to pay his toll to. The driver became aware of movement at the side of the car. Then looking to the rear out of his window, to his amazement saw someone kneeling down on the ground at the side of his car. What's going on, what are you doing, he shouted back. Gloria's voice came back somewhat agitatedly "I'm looking to see if there is room for a man underneath your car". The driver of the Volkswagen being of good hearing, heard the statement clearly enough. The trouble was, it did not make sense to his brain. Why should a complete, or in this particular case an apparently not so complete mentally that is, stranger, wish to see if a man would fit under his car. So his brain, remembering the lurch as it came across the road hump omitted the words 'room for'. His brain then sent the simple message 'I am looking for the man under your car' forward, for the drivers immediate action.

The driver panicked, he had felt the lurch of the road humps, and was now convinced he had run somebody over, and that someone was still pinned underneath his car. He leaped out of the car, knelt down on the road alongside Gloria, and peered underneath the car but could see nothing in the dark. Gloria was still engrossed with her own thoughts, and muttering aloud "Its possible, its possible, Sparrer could have got under there". The driver dashed around to the front of the car, opened the boot and returned with a torch. Directing the torch's beam all around the underneath of the car, he still could see nothing untoward. So the driver still on his knees on the ground, turned and said angrily to Gloria, still also on her knee's on the ground. "What do you mean putting the fear of god up me, by telling me there is a man trapped underneath my car for, are you crazy or something".

Given that Gloria had just re-decided, that it was possible for Sparrer to have crossed the bridge underneath a Volkswagen. Her animosity to both them and their drivers was re-affirmed. Here in her mind, was a typical member of the Teutonic master race, asking her if she was crazy. Gloria staggered to her feet, for a moment speechless. The driver stood up alongside her, a full head shorter than she. Gloria stretched to her full height and looked down at the man. The man although not a resident of Westchurch, used the bridge regularly and knew well enough of Gloria's

reputation, retreated backwards. In his haste to retire, he almost fell backwards into the open boot of his car. Seizing the advantage Gloria advanced on him, and made ready for the grand haranguing. What came next, thoroughly confused the by now totally intimidated driver of the Volkswagen.

Gloria's face was but inches from his, but she was peering over his shoulder. She snapped at him "you haven't got an engine in your car why?" "SS-sorry Gloria" stammered the man "I don't understand". Gloria turned the now thoroughly bemused man, physically around, and pointed to the open car boot and repeated "look there's no engine in your car, how did you get here". The man still stammering nervously explained that the engine was in the back of the car. Gloria was now instantly jubilant, happy even! this explained all! that's how they had done it!. The devious devils had moved the engine to the back, and Sparrer had hidden in the front, where the engine should have been. It was no wonder she couldn't find him. Her euphoria evaporated somewhat, as the man opened the rear engine compartment. Explaining as he did so, that all Volkswagen Beetles have their engines at the rear, adding everybody knows that!

The Volkswagen drove furiously away in a haze of blue smoke. The driver wishing to put a great distance between himself and Westchurch Bridge, before yet another change of Gloria's mood. At the time, neither the driver nor Gloria realised the enormity of what had just happened. Gloria had actually forgotten to collect his toll money! This was not totally surprising, for Gloria was now seething with anger. Those two, those two rogues, reprobates, nere-do-nothings, had taken advantage of her as a poor vulnerable woman. They had assumed that because she was a woman alone, with no man to care for her. That she would not know, that not all motor cars have their engines at the front, and had thus cruelly deceived her. This was where Gloria's inherent weakness lay. Although most people saw Gloria as the dragon, Gloria perceived herself a damsel in perpetual distress from dragons, male dragons that is. She all alone, with no knight in shining armour to protect her from the male dominated world. So that poor Gloria had to protect herself, and by god she would!

Having mentally spurred herself into an even greater temper. She now did something she had never ever done before, in all the time she had been proprietor of Westchurch toll bridge. She pressed the buttons to activate, both barriers to the up position. She left the toll booth carefully locking the door behind her, then crossed over the road and went into her cottage. Behind her there was confusion, cars were waiting at the raised barriers. The lights were still on in the toll booth, drivers had left their cars and were jumping up and down in an effort to see into the booth. For fully some minutes non were prepared to pass through without paying, lest they incur Gloria's wrath. Then disbelievingly they watched Gloria emerge from the cottage. Only to ignore the waiting motorists and stride off, with a large furled umbrella clutched in her hand, in the direction of the Wherry Boat Inn. Then and only then, would the motor cars deign to pass under the raised barriers, without paying tolls.

CHAPTER 5.

In the Wherry the excitement in the telling of both Sparrer's, and indeed Bert's narrow escape had worn off somewhat. Bert had just stated loudly and very firmly, that no way was he going to risk bringing Sparrer over the bridge again. Adding that there was no doubt that Gloria knew he was hiding in the car, and it was sheer good luck that she did not find him. Telling Sparrer "I am amazed that you would even want to chance it again yourself, if she found you she would probably throw you straight in the river".

Sparrer was now quite gloomy, for it looked very much like this would be his last night in the Wherry for some time to come. Jock tried his best to cheer things up by saying "what we need to do is to form an escape committee, so that Sparrer can come over for his drinks". This amused the Captain, for he chuckled "escape committee, where exactly is he going to escape from then Jock". "Pengebank of course, it's obvious! quite a lot of people would like to escape from grotty Pengebank you know".

Sparrer stood up from his barstool and glared at Jock "just a minute Jock there's nothing wrong with Pengebank, it's just you snotty nosed Westchurch mob that say that". Jock stood down from his barstool and glared at Sparrer. "Well it seems that you can't get out of the place quick enough Sparrer". Sparrer took a step towards Jock and snarled "yea and you'd be buggered if you couldn't get over there to collect your pension and groceries, wouldn't you".

The Captain although a somewhat newcomer to Westchurch, where people were not considered to be local, or permanent residents even, until the sods thundered down on their coffins. Could see the old arguments, or village rivalry's starting all over again. They usually finished in fisticuffs, or threats by one the opposing factions, to blow up the bloody toll bridge. Jock took a step nearer Sparrer and shouted "not a decent pub in the whole damned village". Sparrer now almost face to face with Jock twisted the knife "yea and why do you think they put that bloody great bath tub your so fond off, the lock, on the Westchurch bank then eh! keep the riff raff out of Pengebank, that's why!"

The Captain acted swiftly; this was where the fight usually began, when Sparrer started insulting Jock's beloved lock and weir. If not checked, Sparrer would very soon use his favourite derisive term for a lock keeper, "nothing but a jumped up bath tub attendant", and they would be at it tooth and nail. The Captain stepped up onto a beer crate, leant bodily across the bar, pushed his hands between the two and moved them bodily apart, at the same time saying "well I think it is a jolly good idea".

Sparrer having calmed down a little, but still staring aggressively at Jock said, "what's a good idea?". "The escape committee" quickly replied the Captain. "The more people that put their heads together to figure out a way for you to drink in the Wherry, the more chance of success we have". For a while Sparrer was deep in thought. Then the realisation that this was in fact an attempt to keep him in the Wherry, swayed him. He finally said "alright I agree, but it must be called the escape TO Westchurch, not the escape FROM Pengebank committee".

Just as peace calm and orderliness, had once again settled over the Wherry Boat it was shattered, by the main door to the bar crashing open. All heads turned in the direction of the door. Initially all that could be seen, was the door being held in the open position, by a large furled up umbrella. Then the umbrella moved forward into the room, to disclose Gloria holding on to the handle. Sparrer uttered a strangled cry of "bloody hells bells its her". Then he was off his barstool like a ferret down a drainpipe, and heading for the gent's toilets. Gloria walked forward into the bar, and took up her feet astride, arms on hips stance. The Captain nervously greeted her "evening Gloria". It was like the gunfight at the OK corral, a big stand-off, for fully a minute she said nothing, she just glared. The whole bar full of growed up men, were shuffling their feet like naughty school boys, their eyes averting her gaze

Then with a slow deliberate, firm voice Gloria spoke. "Tell him; the little scruffy one; that if I ever catch him on my bridge again", here she paused for words. "I'll, I'll have him gelded" then quickly correcting herself "no I'll do it myself, I'll bite them off". She said it with such fervour and venom, that every entire male in the room winced at the thought. "Very good Gloria" spoke up the Captain, he being on the far side of the bar thus feeling relatively safe from immediate emasculation. Gloria then turned and spoke only to Bert, who was casting nervous furtive glances over his shoulder checking his escape route. "If I ever catch you, or your back to front motor car, on my bridge again I'll do the same to you, is that clear". With that she spun around and stamped out of the bar leaving the door to crash closed behind her.

All was hushed in the Wherry, till at last Jock gave a low whistle and said "exit stage left, the demon toll troll, at her demon'IST".

Pearl then came into the bar saying cheerfully "did I just hear a woman's voice". Jock broke the silence again "must of been Pearl, there aren't any male harridans, so it must have been". When told of Gloria's threats, Pearl seemed to find the subject of emasculation inordinately funny. Indeed she was still laughing when the far door opened slightly, and Sparrer peeked through. He came back into the bar with a very relieved look on his facing saying "she's gone then, what did she want". At this Pearl started laughing all over again "If I told you Sparrer you wouldn't believe it". Then in between chuckles she said to him "If I was you Sparrer, first thing tomorrow morning I would nip down the ironmongers, and buy myself ten pounds of steel wool, and a pair of knitting needles". Puzzled Sparrer turned to the Captain saying "what the devils your missus on about". The Captain who could normally read between Pearls lines, was puzzled also, merely shaking his head in reply. Sparrer turned to Pearl "what would I want steel wool and knitting needles for". Pearl went off into spasms of laughter yet again. At last she controlled herself just enough to say. "When you find out what Gloria's got in mind for you Sparrer, the first thing you will want to do, is knit yourself a pair of iron underpants". At this last remark Pearl still laughing, made her way back through to the kitchen. Sparrer, who could still see nothing funny at all in her remarks, posed the question incredulously. "What the bloody hell would I want iron underpants for?". Then being further puzzled because all in the bar, with exception of perhaps Bert, who was giving the idea serious consideration himself, were laughing out aloud again.

All had been quite for a minute or so, when Jock asked the question "how are you going to get back over the bridge tonight Sparrer, Gloria is bound to be watching for you". "That's never been a problem" snorted Sparrer "I've got that sussed". "All I have to do is sneak up in the shadows till I get to her cottage, then run like hell past it". "Even if she knows its me, by the time she gets out, I'm halfway over the bridge and going like a rocket". "My problem is that now she knows about the car trick, is how do I get over the bridge to the Wherry in the first place". Jock started to speak somewhat guardedly considering the subject he was about to broach. "That's what I had in mind when I suggested an escape committee". "You see I have, an idea to get you over the bridge without being discovered". Now that it suited him Sparrer conveniently ignored the mention of escape committee saying eagerly. "Come on then Jock Lets hear it, lets hear it man".

Jock now had the undivided attention of all in the bar, he explained. "Well, have you noticed that when the seven O'clock train from London arrives at Pengebank station." "Then all the something in the City types get out, to make they're way over the bridge to Westchurch". "Have you noticed how they are dressed exactly alike, bowler hat, pin stripped trousers, umbrella, briefcase". Jock now well into his stride added "have you noticed how they all march over the bridge like guardsmen, at exactly two yard intervals". Sparrer had obviously indeed noticed for he quickly added "yes like a load of bloody Penguins on parade". "Exactly" said Jock eagerly "and if you was in the middle of Antarctica, a thousand miles of white nothingness". "Empty of everything but millions of penguins, what would be the best disguise eh?" "The best disguise would be to blend in with; to look like, that which there was most off". "Great idea" guffawed the Captain "shouldn't take to much effort, to disguise old Sparrer ere, as a piece of penguin droppings should it".

The Captain was chuckling out aloud at his own joke, Sparrer was protesting vigorously, Jock was trying hard to be taken seriously. The Captain then in attempting to apologise, added fuel to the flames by saying "sorry Sparrer, I honestly haven't got a clue what penguin droppings look like, its just that your name sprang to mind automatically". Jock was bravely trying to regain the initiative saying "what I had in mind was that the person should blend in with the penguins, and thus not be seen". "Just the same as a suitably disguised Sparrer should blend in with the penguins here in Westchurch, and not be noticed". The Captain was on form, there was now no

stopping him "what lie down on the bridge footway as they all march over, and pretend that he is a piece of Penguin Sh-t." Yet again convulsed with laughter that was a far as he got, which was just as well, for Sparrer was becoming extremely annoyed.

Once again the Captain was apologising, holding up both hands and saying. "OK OK it's a good idea Jock, but where is Sparrer going to get hold of a penguin outfit". Then quickly correcting himself saying "sorry, sorry I mean city gents outfit". At last apparently being taken seriously, Jock hastened to tell. "I've already called in at the Oxfam shop in Pengebank, they get dozens of them donated". "The lady there told me, that the city types are only too pleased to donate their cast-offs". "This type of person of course, wouldn't be seen dead buying other peoples rags". "So since the city types are the only one's that actually wear penguin suits, and they won't buy them, there is no point in putting them out for sale". "Wonder where they all go to" mused the Captain. "I've travelled the world a few times, never seen anybody actually wearing a bowler hat". Then saying thoughtfully, "though it is possible I might have seen a few natives cooking their dinner in one, at sometime or other".

"Seriously though" insisted Jock "all we would need to do, is to get a city gents outfit". "Bowler hat, pinstripe trousers, umbrella briefcase etc, that will fit Sparrer, then dress him up in it". "The rest is easy, we simply insert Sparrer into the homeward bound stream of penguins". "Nobody, not even Gloria, would think of looking amongst that immaculate mob, for an old reprobate like Sparrer".

The consensus of opinion was that the plot was daring yet stunningly simple, and was almost certain to succeed. It was considered to be the most likely plan to enable Sparrer to continue socialising at the Wherry. Jock basked in the afterglow, of praise. There was but one dissenting voice "if you think that I am going to prance around, like a poof doctors clerk, all dressed up in a penguin suit, you've got another think coming" said Sparrer. "But Sparrer I know it would work" pleaded Jock. "If you marched past with the rest of them city gents, with your umbrella tucked under your arm." "Your bowler hat sloped over your eyes, she would never think it was you". "I don't care if you cut two holes in the front of it, for me to look out of, I'm still not doing it" snapped Sparrer. Jock tried to reason with him "why? why won't you do it". Sparrer glared back at Jock "Cos you would still know it was me; he would still know it was me;" (indicating the Captain). "They (indicating everyone else in the pub) would know it was me, marching down the road like a clockwork soldier with that stuck up mob". "Then when I get to the Wherry, it wouldn't be worth the carrot would it". "I'd have to sit here all night long in a penguin outfit, nobody would talk to me". "I might as well go and sit on a perch, over in the corner with Percy the parrot there". As he spoke he glanced over his shoulder, then suddenly exclaimed, "where is the parrot?".

The Captain spoke sadly "its barred, Pearls barred it again". "What for this time" asked Sparrer. "The usual, using foul language in the bar" said a resigned Captain, then going on to explain. "It was lunch time we had a group of ladies in for meals, they was all laughing and joking". "Well as we all well know, old Percy likes a laugh and a joke, only this time the joke was on him". "Cos I think the ladies must have been a bunch of vicars wives or something, because they didn't go too much on his expletive's". "So that's it, he's barred again, no foul language in the bar say's Pearl". Jock who had been listening with interest, suddenly said "well I think its all wrong, he shouldn't have been barred". Sparrer agreed with him "how was Percy to know they was vicars wives, they wasn't wearing no dog collars or anything was they?" he asked. The Captain then told him that he had not said that they were actually the wives of vicars, just that they might have been. "Serves their own rights," said Sparrer tersely ignoring the Captains last remark. "If the holy ladies go swanning around undercover, in plain clothes, then it's their own bloody fault if people don't treat them with reverence". Sparrer was warming to his theme "take our local vicar, he don't wear his number one god uniform when he comes in for a pint does he". "Percy can swear in front of him alright, and he's the number one holy man around here".

Jock was now more than a little exasperated at Sparrer's tirade, saying crossly. "That's not what I meant Sparrer, what I really meant was that Percy has been charged with the wrong offence". "Charged with the wrong offence!" snorted the Captain incredulously "what the devil are you talking about Jock". Jock now wearing a devious smile upon his face elaborated. Percy has been charged with using foul language in the bar, it is my opinion that this was the wrong charge to bring against a parrot. Therefore Percy has been charged with the wrong offence, thus cannot be guilty. Justice should be done and he be re-installed, in his rightful place in the bar". The Captain smiled, merely saying "he never got charged with anything, he just got thrown out for

using foul language". "Exactly! Exactly! my point" said Jock excitedly wagging his finger. Percy is a Psitticus I.E. a member of the parrot family, a dickie bird! a fowl!. Therefore being as he is fowl, he would have to use foul language wouldn't he". His face now beaming he continued, "I submit that Percy has been charged with the wrong offence, and therefore should be set free".

Sparrer meanwhile was looking puzzled saying "what the bloody hell is a sitticuss when it's at home". "Sounds like your calling Percy rude names now Jock". Jock who loved nothing more, that to be given the opportunity to air his vast and comprehensive knowledge obliged. "A Psitticus Sparrer, and by the way it is spelt with a 'P' is the Latin, or posh name for a parrot". Sparrer never one to be put down easily, quickly replied "lot of bollocks, and by the way bollocks is spelt with a 'B' Jock". Refusing to be drawn into yet another argument with Sparrer, Jock appealed to the Captain. "On behalf of Percy the Parrot, I think we ought to appeal to your good wife Pearl, to reconsider her decision to banish poor Percy from the bar". The Captain turning his head to one side simply gave a shout "Pearl, deputation to see you". Then as Pearl entered the bar, wearing a big grin on his face he said to jock "appeal away old son".

Jock stammered nervously, he being somewhat in awe of Pearl. "W've o'of the P.P.L the Psitticus protection league, wish to demand, no no request, or rather ask you to reconsider, your decision to banish Percy from the bar". At this point his nervousness overcame him and his speech dried up. Sparrer joined in, "is that it, is that all you are going to say". "All your huffing and puffing and posh words, all we get is; we ask you to reconsider your decision". Then turning to Pearl Sparrer gave forth saying "look here Pearl, it's our opinion that poor old Percy has been hard done by". "The vicar! He comes in here regular doesn't he, he don't object to old Percy letting one fly now and again". "So if the vicar don't object, why should a bunch of religious old biddies get Percy thrown out, answer me that". For a while Pearl was taken aback bemused even by Sparrer's outburst. Then at last she spoke saying "alright then Sparrer answer me just one question will you". "Certainly fire away" said Sparrer sensing victory. With a look of puzzlement upon her face, Pearl asked her question. "What on earth is the Psitticus protection league?"

The end result was that Percy was allowed back into the bar, but Sparrer obviously never forgot this night. In later years, in the summer months when the pleasure boats and tourists were back on the river. Sparrer could be heard trying to inveigle the odd half-pint of beer out of them in the bar, supplying them with local information. "What kind of parrot is it madam? well its Latin name is Persitticuss, but we all call it Percy for short". "It is commonly known as a fowl mouthed Parrot, what's that sir, you thought it was an African Grey Parrot". "Yes you are quite right, it is an African Grey, it is just that Percy happens to be a very foul mouthed, African Grey Parrot. Which if you stick around long enough, will no doubt be demonstrated".

CHAPTER 6.

Sparrer was ensconced in the river bar of the Goose Hotel. He had been there for almost an hour, and was waiting for Jock to come across the weir to join him. Sparrer had been bored and had arrived early, merely to kill time. He was nursing an almost empty, half-pint glass of beer, which had been his initial and only purchase. Amongst the other clientele, businessmen, yuppies yah's and the like, Sparrer stood out like a throbbing digit. The smart arsed manager of the Goose had been harassing him, enquiring "was sir enjoying his drinks" clearly emphasising the plural.

Idly Sparrer gazed at the sign saying 'no dogs allowed in the bar'. Then seeing a big black Labrador curled up fast asleep on the floor underneath the sign. He began to put hidden alternative meanings to it, 'no riff raff allowed in this pub', 'no unwashed need enter'.

It reminded him of his one and only trip to London. When he was amazed to see, that pubs put up signs advertising that which they did not sell, 'No Guinness sold here' read the sign. "If you don't sell it, why do you advertise it" he had naively enquired. Only to be told imperiously by the publican, that they wished to advertise the fact, that they did NOT sell Guinness. It was many years before he discovered that 'No Guinness sold here' was a euphemism for 'No Irish allowed in this pub'. Sparrer had now thoroughly convinced himself, seeing as there was a big black dog curled up on the floor, underneath a sign clearly stating 'no dogs allowed'. That the sign held hidden sinister meanings, which he was not as yet, aware of, but almost certainly were meant for the likes of him.

Sparrer's vacant gaze wandered up to the ceiling. The Goose being a riverside pub, its furnishings featured a riparian theme. There suspended from the ceiling was an old traditional style Thames skiff. Sparrer's eyes brightened if only he owned that, he could easily row across the river to Westchurch and the Wherry. In his mind Sparrer could picture it! a beautiful summers evening. His shirt sleeves rolled, the skiff gliding smoothly and quietly through the rippling water. One finger up to Gloria as he went past the bridge, then pints of amber Powerfull sliding down his throat. Good company, good conversation, the good life. The dream faded, his mood darkened again, for in order to get the beautiful craft into the pub and then suspend it from the ceiling. It had been cut into two completely separate halves. The boat could no more serve the purpose, for which it was lovingly crafted, than a lead ingot.

Sparrer moved over to the windows which overlooked the river. He looked out, it was approaching the time he had agreed to meet Jock in the Goose. He gazed sadly across the fifty yards of water that separated him from Westchurch, and his social life. Then his eyes settled, on the boat lying alongside the Goose's riverside moorings. I wonder he thought to himself, would they give me a lift over to the other bank of the river. No sooner had he asked himself the question, than he gave himself the answer no never! The boat was a glass reinforced plastic, floating gin palace. Radio, radar and Sat/Nav aerials and other appendages, sticking out all over the place. It could apparently navigate the planet with ease, and yet here it was marooned on the murky river Thames. Sporting more flags and bunting, than Buckingham Palace, so much chrome, that if it ever put to sea it would be deemed a hazard to navigation, dazzling all other vessels with reflected light. Sparrer instinctively knew, that people who owned boats like this. Would never allow the likes of him to even touch the decks, unless firmly affixed to wet end of a mop handle.

It was quite easy for Sparrer to pick out the boats owners, from the other customers in the Goose. Snotty yachties, or cruiser boozers, were quite a common sight in Pengebank in the summer months. Deck shoe's, Guernsey sweater's, multi-coloured wellington boots, kiss me quick captains hats, being just some of the standard uniform of the type. On the other hand the occupants! for the word crew could just not be used in that context here, of the hire cruisers. Now they seem to walk down the village high street wearing (A) next to nothing or (B) complete, multi coloured Ronald McDonald outfits, oblivious to all around them. This type being quite easy to spot upon the river also, for they invariably cruise along in bumper cars!. The local term for the broad, blunt ended Caribbean hire cruisers. Which festooned with big rubber fenders, are invariably to be seen, careering down the river, crashing into things.

Having nothing to lose, Sparrer decided to chance his arm anyway, and walked up to the man wearing the nautical cap. Now with this kind of person you didn't just ask for a lift on his gin palace, a little subtlety was required. "Morning skipper that your fine vessel tied up alongside" he enquired breezily. On this occasion though Sparrer had misjudged his man totally. For the man turned around, looked down at Sparrer, and simply turned away again. The man had deigned not to talk to, nor even acknowledge him. Cut to the quick, Sparrer struck back, saying out loud for all in the Goose to hear. "I just thought you'd like to know, that your boat is the biggest, crappiest, most obnoxious gin palace we've had up here all season". Adding for good measure "I haven't seen anything like it on the river, since the Snoring sewage works broke down a couple of years back". Now at last the important man deigned to acknowledge Sparrer, and turned angrily around. To late though, for Sparrer had gone.

Sparrer stood outside on the river patio, and peered across the river. It had become too stuffy in the bars of the Goose for him, and it was not the air that offended him. At last Jock's familiar figure appeared at the far end of the weir walkway. Sparrer watched impatiently as he walked across towards him, stopping at, and checking, every single sluice on the way. At long last Jock arrived at the Iron Gate at the end of the weir. As he hunted for his prized gate key, Sparrer baited him. "Everything to your satisfaction then Jock, river running at the regulation speed, all ducks floating the right way up". As Jock came through the gate Sparrer continued, saluting Jock and saying. "All correct on the Berkshire bank of the Thames sir". Then adding conspiratorially, "although on the way here I did see a bloke pinching a bucket of water out of the river". "Do you think I ought to report him to the authorities, or are we prepared to overlook it this time".

Jock chose to ignore Sparrer's teasing, just saying "right where are we going to, into the Goose?". Sparrer declined "no I'm fed up, I've just been in there for an hour, and that was fifty nine minutes to long". "Half of them are stuck up, and the other half want's to put you down, lets go somewhere else". Turning left out of the Goose's car park, they made their way into the village of Pengebank. "I need to go to the Post office first" said Jock "then to the library, after that we can have a game of snooker at the club if you like". "Your always going to the library" grumbled Sparrer "why don't you buy yourself a television set like everybody else does". "Not you! you have to do things the hard way don't you, carting great big bundles of books backwards and forewords". You'll wind up all humpty backed, and don't say I didn't tell you so when it happens".

Pengebank post office was a small sub office, with a modern interior and two serving windows. Around the outside walls were racks of stationary and greeting cards for sale. Jock joined the queue, when his turn came moved up to the window and presented his pension book. The lady behind the counter brusquely said "identification please". Taken aback by this surprise demand he exclaimed "I'm Jock, the lock keeper, everybody knows me". "I'm sorry but I still need identification said the lady". He tried another tack saying "you can identify me yourself, I was here the same time, same day last week, and I was Jock the lock keeper then, and I still am now". The lady stared blandly back at him. Jock was getting annoyed, turning to Sparrer he said, "right this man will identify me, tell them who I am Sparrer". Sparrer gazed vacantly ahead before saying in a deadpan voice "never saw you before in me life mate". Jock was now furious, faced on one side with the intransigent post office lady. On the other with a maliciously amnesiac Sparrer, he looked like being denied his pension. He shouted loudly and threateningly at Sparrer "will you tell this lady who I am, before I do you a mischief". Sparrer with an evil smirk on his face, said to the post office lady. "Some sort of psychopath I shouldn't wonder missus, judging by his manner". This only served to strengthen the post ladies resolve she stating firmly "no identification, no money" stalemate! If this affair had been allowed to progress much longer, Jock would have indeed become psychotic!. It was a complete stranger to Jock, who came to the rescue, in identifying Jock to the post office lady. From the back of the now long winding post office queue, came an impatient, loud, exasperated, male voice. "For pities sake woman, everybody in the whole damned village knows who these two reprobates are, pay the man his money".

As they left the post office Jock was still loudly berating Sparrer. "What did you want to do that for, you showed me up in front of all those people". "There are times indeed, when I wish you had never seen me in all your life before, and this is one of them". They walked together down the high street in the direction of the library, when suddenly Jock stopped. He turned, wagged his finger at Sparrer saying ominously, "now if you show me up in the library, where I am a very respected patron, then I really will do you a mischief understand". Sparrer looked at him solemnly, grinned, and simply nodded his head.

The library was a small branch library, the same size and depth as a double fronted shop.

The interior was a pleasant single undivided room, brightly lit with racks of books all around. At the rear was an alcove with a table and chairs, this served as the reference section of the library. Inside the library there were a few people browsing the shelves, all was calm, all was quiet, all was peaceful.

Jock and Sparrer entered through the big double glass doors. They paused at the desk just inside, where Jock delved into his plastic shopping bag and brought out his returned library books. Sparrer watched as he piled up on the counter six big bulky books. He then greeted the lady librarian with what Sparrer thought to be, a somewhat over affected "good morning Joyce". Sparrer's agile brain clicked, so that was why Jock was always going back and forth from the library with hundredweight's of books, he fancied the librarian. What a bloody fool Jock is, Sparrer thought to himself, seems to think the bigger the book, the more brownie points he gets librarian-wise. He's going to do his back, in long before he gets anywhere with her.

Jock ushered Sparrer away, and led him back to the reference section. He pulled a chair from under the table then ordered Sparrer "right sit down there and read something". "Read what" said Sparrer irritably. "Good god man" said an astonished Jock, "thousands and thousands of books and you ask, read what? "I don't like books" snapped Sparrer". "Read a newspaper then" countered Jock. "There ain't no newspapers" countered Sparrer. "Yes there are, you have to ask for them at the desk" snapped Jock". A look of pleasant surprise came over Sparrer's face "why didn't you say they have newspapers here in the first place".

Sparrer went off to get a newspaper; Jock at last quietly browsed the shelves. He was flicking through the pages of a book titled 'River control and management'. Written by a celebrated engineer, when he became aware of a loud familiar voice in the background. "What! no Sporting Life" then a silence "call yourself a library!" Although Jock could only hear one half of the conversation, that was enough to catch the drift of it. Sparrer's voice carried on loud and clear. "I am here to study" silence then "how can I study if you haven't got the Sporting Life". Jock hurried over to rescue the librarian, just in time to hear "I don't want to read the Telegraph, that ain't got the gee gee's in it".

Jock physically pulled Sparrer back to the reference section. There he gave him a firm and final warning "sit down there, do nothing, say nothing, think nothing, don't even blink out aloud" "I'm not having you show me up in here, like you did in the post office understand". Jock's outburst had surprised him, and a somewhat subdued Sparrer meekly nodded his head.

For fully five minutes Sparrer behaved himself, sitting at the table staring vacantly at the ceiling, and drumming his fingers. Jock was hovering nearby, and watching him intently. His fingers stopped drumming, and his eyebrows raised then Sparrer delved deep into his trouser pockets, and produced his tobacco tin. He placed the tin on the table before him, and carefully removed the lid. Jock quickly moved into Sparrer's line of sight, and made urgent signs that smoking was forbidden in the library. Sparrer shook his head then he in return made signs, making rolling motions with the thumbs and index fingers of both hands, then pointing to the tobacco tin. Signing that he did not intend to smoke, but merely to roll up some cigarettes for later use.

At last Jock was able to relax somewhat, and began an urgent hunt of the library shelves. Hoping to be able to select his book choice, before Sparrer could get up to more mischief. Sparrer meanwhile was sitting quite contentedly with his tobacco tin in front of him, rolling his first cigarette. Now to Sparrer hand-rolling cigarettes was a therapeutic art form. Each cigarette needed to be carefully crafted out of paper and loose tobacco. The desired result was a little tube of tobacco filled paper, not too thick nor too thin, the tobacco not too tight nor too loose. There should be no creases or folds in the paper, it should be pleasing to the eye, and feel right. He twirled the tube of tobacco and paper, tenderly, expertly between his fingers and thumbs. Holding the now formed cigarette up to his lips in both hands he carefully licked the paper to moisten the gum. Twirling once again, between his fingers and thumbs sealed the cigarette. He held the newly formed cigarette up and examined it, then ran his fingers along its length to smooth out the creases. Then when he was satisfied, he nipped off the extruding excess tobacco between his thumb and first finger, and returned that to his tobacco tin. Now came the final test, if the tobacco had been laid loosely and correctly. If the rolling between fingers and thumbs done gently but firmly, then the cigarette should draw easily. He tenderly raised the newly formed cigarette to his lips taking great care not to wet the end, for to test the draw.

His solace was shattered! Loudly in his left ear, so loud that it startled him completely, came the words; NO! the shrieked out loud words, "you can't smoke that it here, smoking's not allowed in the library". Unbeknown to Sparrer, for the past two minutes the librarian had been watching him intently. She had watched and waited for the moment when Sparrer placed the cigarette to his lips before pouncing. So much by surprise had he been taken Sparrer, that for moments he was stunned into silence. "I'm not smoking" he blurted out, "oh yes you are" insisted the librarian. Sparrer was recovering from the initial shock now "oh no I'm not, before I can smoke it, I've got to set fire to it haven't I?" he challenged. "Therefore I haven't set fire to it, so I'm not smoking it." The librarian was now thoroughly miffed, she now realised that she had acted prematurely, but was not to be put down easily. "Setting fire to things, is against the library rules as well", she informed him imperiously before storming away back to her desk.

Sparrer now knowing that he was being watched closely and intently, played to the gallery. Setting fire to things was against the rules was it! right here we go. Out of his pocket he took a box of matches, and placed them on the table in front of him. Aware all the time of the librarians gaze, he removed a match from the box. He studied the match intently and placed that on the table in front of him. He removed a second match from the box, and subjected that to an intense examination and placed it on the table. His face now had a look of supreme mischief upon it. He removed two cigarette papers from the packet, carefully crumpled them up and placed them also on the table. He slowly picked up the two matches and looked purposely at the librarian, her eyes widened in alarm. Then picking up the two matches one in each hand, grasping them firmly by the brown sulphur head. He began to rub the untreated plain timber ends of the matches together. Slowly at first, then building up to a crazy manic speed. He would stop occasionally, to gently blow on the ends of the two matches, before repeating the performance all over again. It was quite a long time before the librarian realised, that Sparrer was practising that which is known in the armed forces as dumb insolence. Only then and with reluctance did she turn away to carry on with her work. Sparrer had scored a moral victory, but would never-the-less not let the matter rest. For when the librarian looked across at him next. He was holding a pencil between the two palms of his hands with one end of the pencil resting down against the matchbox. He was busily and vigorously engaged in rotating the pencil backwards and forwards between his palms. Pausing occasionally to blow gently down onto the matchbox.

This was Sparrer at his finest; dumb insolence was only a crime in the armed forces, not in civil law. What crime had he committed? what was he to be charged with? Disturbing the peace? hardly, two matches being rubbed together don't make a lot of noise. Attempting to start a fire in the library? "they must be joking your Worship, what with a broken pencil and an empty match box". "I've no more chance of starting a fire with those, than I have of writing a sequel to 'War and Peace with them'".

Because most of this little encounter had been carried out in mime, Jock had been unaware of it taking place. It was only when he returned to find Sparrer still inexplicably to him, busy rubbing the pencil between his palms that he got the full, if somewhat one sided view, of the incident. Jock was annoyed, once again he had taken his eyes off of Sparrer for only minutes, and yet again he had been up to mischief. "You want to think yourself lucky Sparrer," said Jock crossly "do you know that in certain circumstances, the penalty for smoking could be death". "I'm not at all surprised to hear it" chirped Sparrer "the anti smoking lobby is getting pretty vicious these days". "No I'm serious" insisted Jock, "its the law of the land". "Never" said Sparrer capital punishment was done away with years ago". Jock was now getting into his stride, wagging his finger he said. "not for all offences, high treason, and arson in her majesties dock yard are still punishable by death". Sparrer was not quite sure if Jock was being serious or not, although he did have this habit of wagging his finger when he was serious. So he played it safe saying "no fear there mate, I'm one of her majesties loyalest subjects" before adding, "what's arson got to do with smoking anyway?"

This was the prompt Jock was waiting for and relished, he then saying ominously to Sparrer. "If you were to go into her majesties dock yard, and by chance, happen to find a packet of cigarettes lying on the ground, what would you do?" Sparrer thought for but a brief second and answered "well pick them up and put them in my pocket of course". "Then what would you do" challenged Jock. This time Sparrer sensing a trap paused before giving his answer, finally saying. "Well if no one had seen me pick them up, I'd smoke them. Jock shouted jubilantly "death!, the long drop, hung by the neck until you are dead". "What the devil are you talking about?" said an amazed Sparrer". Jock eagerly explained. You find a packet of cigarettes and keep them, that's stealing!" "You light and smoke one of those stolen cigarettes, thus destroy it by fire, that's

arson!" The next sentence Jock delivered with slow sadistic glee " Ah! Sparrer but you are in one of her majesties dock yards, where the sentence for arson is DEATH!" Sparrer was initially puzzled, hypothetically a bit worried indeed. Finally in his usual glib manner he solved the problem saying. "Don't worry about it Jock, if I ever get to go to one of her majesties dockyards, I'll make damn sure I only smoke my own ciggies".

Jock having once again resumed his hurried search of the libraries shelves. Sparrer was now leaning backwards on the rearmost two legs of his chair. Only his two feet firmly hooked underneath the table, prevented him from falling backwards. This was rather a dangerous thing for him to do, but he had discovered quite by accident, that this annoyed the lady librarian, so he persevered!. It was almost his undoing though, for as he leaned back with his hands clasped behind his head, he happened to glance to his left. There, at the far end of the library busily studying a book was the brain surgeon!. He almost fell backwards off the chair with the initial shock. Then with his two arms whirling like windmills to recover his balance, he struggled to regain the chairs upright position. The two front legs of the chair crashed noisily back to the ground. The newly emergent smile on the librarian's face faded away. As looking up, she saw that Sparrer had landed safely on his feet and not his backside, as she had long been hoping for.

Sparrer struggled to his feet, and called out quietly yet managing to sound loudly in the libraries subdued atmosphere "Jock Jock, where are you". Jock answered straight away, fearing a far greater commotion if he did not. "Over here Sparrer in the Biography section". "Where the devils that then" called back Sparrer, in return. For brief moments the two played hide and seek, as they sought each other out amongst the free standing shelves of books. At last finding each other, Sparrer took Jock by the arm and led him to the end of the aisle. There he pointed at a tall distinguished gentleman at the far end of the library studying a book, saying excitedly "look its him, its the brain surgeon".

Jock was puzzled saying, "brain surgeon, who the heck is that then, I don't know any brain surgeons". Sparrer replied irritated'ly "you know, you know, the one from the Goose hotel, the one that told me I had halitosis". Then Sparrer talking more to himself than Jock carried on ominously. "Only now that I know what halitosis means; I'm going to get my own back". Then saying as an aside to Jock before he walked away, "watch this, or more to the point, smell this".

Sparrer like a lot of other men of his age, suffered from flatulence. Sparrer of course did not know it by its posh name, all he knew was that he had it, and in was in fact rather good at it!. He did not look upon it as a malaise, rather as an asset. It could make one the centre of attraction, distraction, repulsion even. It could be used to good effect in playing tunes, pyrotechnics, or simply acquiring lebensraum. (How much sorrow and grief in the world might have been averted. If only Hitler, who allegedly suffered from flatulence, had known about this!). It was Sparrer's intention to use it now, in its repulsion mode.

Sparrer quietly sidled up to, and stood alongside the distinguished gentleman. Reached out and took a book from the shelf in front of him, opened it and pretended to read. The gentleman was engrossed in his book, Sparrer waited, the whole essence! of his retribution depended on careful timing. "Morning squire said Sparrer breezily". The gentleman looked round, his eyebrows raised ever so slightly. "Remember me" chirped Sparrer "I'm the bloke you met in the Goose, you remember, I'm the one you told had got Halitosis". At this carefully chosen point, Sparrer silently passed wind!. Sparrer carried on talking "brilliant diagnosis, don't know how you did it so quickly, and from three feet away as well, without even touching me". Sparrer again paused and waited. Then when he saws the mans nose begin to wrinkle and twitch, he came in with the coup-de-grace. His voice took on a servile tone, pleadingly he said. "You being such an educated and eminent doctor, I wonder if you could help me". He paused again, the mans nose was now twitching violently, and he was beginning to back away. "You see said Sparrer sorrowfully and following close behind the man, I've progressed". "I've got galloping Allitosis now, it's spreading all over my body, and its even leaking out of the back end of me, right now".

The distinguished gentleman hurriedly left the library. So did two little old ladies lugging heavy bags of shopping with them, but not before they had informed the librarian. That it was disgusting, and that the public health people ought to be called in to deal with it. Sparrer stood in the middle of the odour, where he at least was relatively safe from harm, with a smirk on his face. The librarian, who by now had put two and two together, and come up with the answer Sparrer, hesitated to approach him. It was Jock, who in trying to regain some favour with the

librarian. It was Jock that had to enter the noxious vapours zone, and escort Sparrer from the library.

As they left the building, there was the clatter of windows being hurriedly opened behind them. Jock was once again berating Sparrer " I don't believe it, I just do not believe it! At one fell silent stroke, you have just emptied the whole library". "My standing in the community has plummeted, Joyce the librarian will never speak to me again". Sparrer although somewhat subdued, was defending himself "its not my fault, its the brain surgeons fault, he shouldn't have accused me of having Allitosis in the first place, should he".

CHAPTER 7.

Sparrer walked down Pengebank high street ahead of Jock, to escape his continual complaining and whinging. Jock had it fixed into his brain that not only had he; Sparrer got him barred from using Westchurch bridge. Now there was a very good chance, he could be barred from the public library as well. Jock was not in one of his most jovial moods, as he followed on morosely, a distance behind Sparrer. Sparrer on the other hand was on a high. Jock looked up; there some fifteen yards ahead of him, Sparrer was engaged in conversation with a motorist, through the open nearside window his car. As he drew near he heard snatches of the conversation. The motorist had been seeking directions for Westchurch Hill the shortest route to which, would be over Westchurch Bridge. Sparrer was attempting to send the man over via Snoring Bridge the long way around. Telling him with exaggerated theatrical gestures "there be Trolls, terrible Trolls, on Westchurch Bridge". Adding dismally, "not all who pass over that way, come back again".

Then as Jock drew level Sparrer said to the driver "ask my mate here, the terrible troll nearly got us, didn't she Jock, tell the nice driver all about it". Jock who was not in a mood for any more of Sparrer's japes, walked by without replying or even acknowledging him. This did not deter Sparrer, "there you are see that" he said to the driver "struck dumb! my poor old mate has, never been the same man since he crossed over Westchurch Bridge and the Troll got him". A somewhat bemused and alarmed driver, played safe and drove off in the direction of Snoring bridge!. Sparrer catching up with Jock said gleefully, "that's the fifth one this week I've sent over Snoring instead of Westchurch, I must be costing Gloria a fortune in lost Bridge tolls".

Jock had intended to go into the village grocery store, for some odds and ends of food. He thought better of it, deciding the safest place for him to go would be the Pengebank working mans club. There Sparrer's little foibles, were well known and tolerated. Some members even encouraging his antics, to brighten-up an otherwise dull day. It was well known by all in the club, that Sparrer had been barred from the bridge. Pengebank was a relatively small village; such things came under the heading of village affairs and would be common knowledge.

The clubs debating society, which comprised a very loosely associated group of members. Who normally gathered at the far end of the bar under the clock, and were known to all those who did not participate in it, as the troublemakers. This society had advised Sparrer as to his rights. Viz., Gloria had no right to bar him from using the bridge, under the somewhat contradicting explanation, that the bridge was a private, public highway. All sorts of hair brained schemes had been proposed conniving to get Sparrer across the bridge, so far without a hope of success. Emergency vehicles are allowed across the bridge unhindered. Apparently all Sparrer had to do, was to join the Pengebank volunteer fire brigade, then every time there was a fire in Westchurch he could cross over un-hindered and for nothing. Yet another debater had observed that dead people don't have to pay, funerals apparently crossed over without paying. This brought a smile to Sparrer's face as he thought to himself, "Yes that would be a once in a lifetimes perquisite, he would be more than happy to forego". All in all, the consensus of opinion in the debating society, was that Gloria could not ban Sparrer from crossing Westchurch Bridge. Never-the-less the fact of the matter remained she, had barred him!. The deliberations and opinions of the Pengebank workingman's club debating society, carried no weight whatsoever with Gloria.

The chairman of the debating society, (I.E. the biggest troublemaker) had his bluff called. This gentleman had been the most vociferous in insisting that Sparrer had his rights, and should demand that he exercise them. When it was put to him that as the representative of the society he should approach Gloria. Then demand that in accordance with its member's decision, Sparrer should once again be allowed to cross over the bridge. The gentleman suddenly remembered that he had a pressing prior engagement, gulped his beer down and left the club. Now it happened that this gentleman lived in the village of Westchurch. Then as he crossed over the bridge and offered his money up to Gloria in the toll booth saying. "That bunch of rogues in the workingman's club, are up in arms about you barring Sparrer again Gloria, but of course, non of them has the nerve to do anything about it". "I told them, its your bridge, you can do as you like with it, anyway that Sparrer had it coming to him, that's what I told them". Gloria took the mans toll money, although

the manner in which he proffered it indicated that he had hoped she would not. Gloria knew this man well, a Judas! and a fifth rate Judas at that, for his price was only five copper coins the cost of the bridge toll.

Sparrer lounged up against the soft padded bar counter. He was bored, the three snooker tables were pre-booked for the next hour and a half. He had just been approached by a surreptitious looking man who had enquired most genially and cordially, would he Sparrer. like a game of darts. Now Sparrer recognised the man straight away as the all time best ever darts champion, from the Dog and Duck public house at Snoring. This type of man does not genially and cordially play darts, with complete strangers without good reason. Sparrer tersely informed him, "no thanks mate I'm skint" whereupon the man turned upon his heel and went away. The club steward Norman who had been watching the man closely said to Sparrer. "You know him then do you?" Sparrer merely nodded his head in reply. The steward carried on to say, "he took a fiver off of poor old George Gatt earlier on". Sparrer's eyes opened in surprise, "what George the caterpillar" he asked.

Now this was amazing, for Sparrer had never ever seen George play darts in the club ever!. He was a man most unsuited to the game of darts. He had originally been dubbed the Caterpillar, because most unusually for members of Pengebank Workingman's club, he was a vegetarian, hence the name Caterpillar. The man that bestowed the name upon him observing at the time "that you don't come across many carnivorous Caterpillars do you". Having been dubbed with this nickname, some observant wag then noticed that he actually ate like a Caterpillar. When eating he would hold a stick of celery, slice of lettuce, tomato, or whatever in one hand. His hand and mouth would slowly move together. Then at the last moment with a final quick move of his head, he would take a gulp or bite, just like a Caterpillar.

George was an amiable somewhat slow gullible man, but never-the-less quite popular with the club members. He would come into the club around twelve O'clock in the morning carrying his plastic lunch box. This would invariably illicit enquiries "what have we got for dinner today then George" (for he was never called Caterpillar to his face). Then would be heard exaggerated cries of "oh lucky lucky you! lettuce and cucumber sandwiches", or whatever. George was the butt of some good-humoured practical jokes. It was not unknown for the odd garden slug to be slipped into his lettuce and cucumber sandwiches. Then when he discovered it, to be admonished for attempting to eat meat.

On one occasion, they raided his tucker box as soon as he entered the club. Then finding inside it an orange, put this in the club deep freeze for an hour and a half, before placing it back into his tucker box. It was a site to behold, to see him raise the orange to his mouth in his slow caterpillar way. Then the puzzled look came across his face as he tried to bite into the frozen solid orange, in an attempt to peel it. Up until that point all had managed to keep straight faces. When a yet still puzzled George started banging the frozen orange onto a table, endeavouring to confirm its petrified state, the laughter started. "Is that what being a vegetarian is George, eating concrete oranges, don't much fancy that" said a wag. "Now you know why oranges don't grow in Antarctica" chirped another. "Cos the Eskimos wouldn't be able to get their teeth into them, just like you couldn't".

Now putting slugs into George's sandwiches, and freezing his afters solid was one thing. This was done by his friends in sport, with no malicious intent. No harm would come to him other than perhaps a surge of protein to his system, apparently slugs are quite nourishing!. Or at the very worst a chipped tooth, no lasting damage was intended. Conning gullible George out of five pounds of his hard come by money, by a mere visiting club member, was beyond the pale in comparison. Something needed to be done about it.

Jock, Sparrer, and half a dozen other club members were gathered in a corner of the bar in earnest conversation. One large man was heard say menacingly "I'll soon get his five pounds back for him". This did not seem to suit the mood of the gathered group, violence being strictly against the club rules, although in a mild form it was tolerated on most Saturday nights. The large man was now quiet again and listening intently. It was Sparrer that now seemed to be doing most of the talking and whatever he was saying seemed to please all of those present. Soon it was apparent that whatever was under discussion was resolved, for the group broke up. Three of the largest men, hurriedly leaving the club with grim looks upon their faces.

The surreptitious cordial, genial gentleman, the hustler, the con-man, was taken aback somewhat. One moment the Pengebank club members were treating him like the pariah (that he was), the next moment they were treating him like a long lost brother. Although no one actually went quite so far, as to offer to buy him a drink, the atmosphere was most definitely friendly. This puzzled him somewhat, for even in his local pub the Dog and Duck at Snoring; he was not the most popular of customers. He was apparently convinced that his prowess at darts, stemmed from the fact that his great great, many times removed grandfather had been a Bowman at Agincourt. Thus of course he was a man of superior breeding, and tended to look down upon lesser mortals. He was soon to find out though, that as in real life superior breeding does not necessarily endow superior intelligence. For his main adversary was now Sparrer Williams, who whilst making no claims to superior breeding, was not lacking the intelligence department.

Sparrer's part in the action to retrieve back from the confidence trickster, George the Caterpillars five pounds. Was simply to humour him, and keep him talking thus keeping him occupied, whilst the main plan was effected. This of course came quite naturally to Sparrer, who's own great great many times removed grandfather. Would have no doubt, probably managed to convince the recruiting Sergeant, that he had a bad back. Thus being excused duties, and not having to attend at nasty gory glorious, Agincourt. Sparrer pattered and flattered him, what a fine arrer's player he was, his great great many times removed grandfather would have indeed been proud of him. "By god" exclaimed Sparrer, "you would have been a useful at Agincourt yourself, great dart player like you". "Finishing the game on a bulls eye Eh! more like a frog's eye, Arrer straight through a Frenchman's helmet visor, just like your great granddad.

If anything Sparrer went a little over the top, for the man became slightly uneasy. Never before had such bonhomie been bestowed upon him, it made him nervous. Once or twice the man had attempted to make apologies, and say that he really ought to go. This in turn made Sparrer nervous, because the ultimate ploy to detain him was to offer to buy the man a drink, which Sparrer very much, did not want to do. At last Jock who had been stationed behind the man, from which position he could see out of the club windows, gave Sparrer a grin and a thumbs up sign. On seeing this Sparrer promptly and abruptly said to the man, "Ah well, nice to have met you goodbye". The man quickly and nervously left the club, unsure of why everyone was smiling at him as he went. At the very exit door to the club, three strapping fellows coming in, stood aside to let him through. Bidding him a seemingly excessively cheerful, safe journey home as he left.

Sparrer, Jock and the others stood around with huge grins on their faces, saying nothing. As the man had left the club, Jock with an exaggerated flourish had looked at his wristwatch, all waited patiently in expectation. Just five minutes later the door to the club opened, and back into the club stalked a sheepish looking man. "Is there a telephone in the club?" he said quietly to the steward, who was standing behind the bar with a big smirk on his face. Before Norman the steward had time to reply Sparrer chirped cheerfully "got a problem mate?". The man now somewhat subdued replied quietly "yes I have, my car has broken down, and won't go". Sparrer once again adopting his best bonhomie enquired "really old sport, what seems to be the matter with it then". A sad face man explained "I don't know, the engine starts alright, but when I engage gear and let the clutch out, nothing happens". Sparrer drew in his breath with a hiss saying, "sounds pretty mega to me". Then adding cheerfully. "I'm not much of a mechanic, but it definitely sounds like your wheels ain't going round to me".

Sparrer turned to the tall man lounging back against the bar saying "you're a mechanic Sid, why don't you have a look at this gentleman's car for him". A glimmer of a smile crossed the mans face, which quickly disappeared as Sid replied glumly. "You know me Sparrer, I never like to mix pleasure with business". Sparrer once again went over the top, saying dramatically and with theatrical gestures. "Oh come come Sid, helping a poor distressed gentleman like this, would be a pleasure would it not?". It seemed almost as if Sparrer had somehow missed his vocation in life, he should have perhaps have been a Thespian. Although to have called him by this name, would almost certainly resulted in a punch on the nose for the person that did so. Sparrer was very wary of long words that he did not understand. Ever since the time when for two whole weeks he was boasting to all in the village that would listen, that he was a reprobate, and a very fine one at that. The problem then arose because upon hearing him say it, people kept agreeing with him. So that when he eventually found out what the word really meant. He could not remember who had actually called him that name, in the first instance. Now, when people called names that he did not fully understand, he tended to take immediate action.

Sid's apparent unwillingness to mix pleasure with business, was of course all part of the

grand plan. Which was to demonstrate, that no effort, or indeed expense would be spared, to mend the mans motor car. Sid was not in fact a motor mechanic at all; he had been merely selected because it was the consensus of opinion, that he was the man, that looked most like a mechanic. Sid was in reality a boilerman at a nearby public school. It was judged that the stains on his oily overalls and boots. Looked just like the ones to be found on motor car seats and carpets, following a service at the local garage, and on that basis alone he had been chosen.

Finally Sid drained his pint glass then acting the part, saying brusquely "make way for a tradesman" made his way out of the club bar. Behind him followed the man whose car it was, closely behind him, almost frog-marching him in fact, was Sparrer. Then behind Sparrer trooped the entire occupants of the Pengebank Workingman's Club, around a dozen in total. Once outside of the club, they all gathered in a half circle around the offending motor car. Which was a rather shabby Mini pick up van, which had seen far better days. The thought that he was now a tradesman, had taken seed in Sid's mind. He now started issuing stentorian commands to the man "right get in the drivers seat". Then having opened up the car bonnet "right now start her up". "Engine sounds OK, select first gear, right now let out the clutch". Those standing in front of the car quickly moved to one side, but nothing happened the car stayed stationary. Sid stood there deep in thought, with his hand on his chin. Then made the driver go through the whole procedure again, with the same result, nothing happened.

The man switched off the car engine, and got out of the car with a by now very worried look on his face, and said to Sid "what do you think". Sid scratched his head, then rubbed his jaw, shook his head, and then said slowly and mournfully. "No doubt about it, you've definitely got friction drive problems". The man sounded puzzled "friction drive problems, I've never heard of that one before". All might have gone smoothly, had not a spectator, in reference to Sid's genuine occupation queried "would it help if he pulled his damper out a bit Sid". Whereupon Sid took offence, at this slight upon his newly found status as a motor mechanic, and went to walk away. The man thinking he had upset Sid with querying his diagnosis, then virtually pleaded with Sid, to stay and help him.

It was Jock that whispered conspiratorially in the mans ear "the problem is, Sid's a real tradesman, he doesn't like to give his skills for nothing on principal". Then adding "try offering him a fiver, he's bound to accept, then he will save face and donate the money to a worthy cause". The man hesitated briefly, and then did as Jock suggested saying to Sid. "If you could get the car going, I think I could manage to pay you a fiver for your trouble". A huge smile broke over Sid's face as he said; "now that's more like it". Then quickly went on to add, "the trouble is I will need the help of two or three others to engage the friction drive, they will want a pint of beer each for their trouble". "I think you had better make it a tenner to be on the safe side". The man was hesitating yet once again. Sparrer was now glaring savagely at Sid for being too greedy; the plan had been only to ask for a fiver. At last the man made his mind up, saying cautiously. "Ok I will pay you ten pounds, but only if you get the car going, but nothing if you fail".

The man was then coerced into producing a ten-pound note. Which was duly taken from him and given to Jock to hold, as a completely impartial stakeholder. Sid took charge again telling the man "right get back into the car and do as I tell you". The man sat in the driving seat, with his view of the front of the car obstructed by the upraised bonnet. Sid's voice called out "right turn the ignition on, but don't start the engine till I tell you". The man did as he was told then felt the car give a slight lurch, as if the front of the car was quickly raised and lowered. Then Sid immediately appeared alongside him at the driver's door, his face beaming with delight, telling the man "right start the engine". The man was puzzled, but did as instructed. "Right," said Sid "see if the friction drive is engaged now" the man let out the clutch and the car moved forward. The man whilst more than pleased that his car had been mended, some how sensed that all was not what it seemed. If the friction drive had gone, and it needed three men to mend it, how had it been done so quickly?. He had the vague feeling that he had been done, as well as the motor car.

The man disconsolately watched as Jock cheerfully passed his ten-pound note over saying, "here you are Sid full payment for services rendered". Then as Sid took the note from him, he added "pleasure to see a real tradesman at work, in this modern day and age". The man was now thoroughly convinced that he had been had, but how he did not yet know. Feeling somewhat cowed by all the smiling Pengebank club members surrounding him, he nervously stammered out. "What exactly is the friction drive Sid, and what went wrong with it". Sid was not about to divulge a tradesman's tricks and secrets; he was already making his way back into the club, with his two assistants.

It fell to Sparrer to explain the complexity's of how a friction drive did and did not work, which he did gleefully. "You see old mate" he said, "your friction drive is your two front wheels". Now if your two front wheels don't make contact with the ground, it stands to reason they won't work don't it". "That's why it took three people to mend it". The man was still utterly puzzled, so Sparrer explained more. "You see that's how many men it took, to lift the front of your car off of the two house bricks it was propped up on". "So that your friction drives could re-engage with the floor, simple ain't it". Just before Sparrer walked away from the man, he revealed the motive for the trick saying to him ominously. "If you ever come back here and fleece our club members at darts again". "Next time, we'll remove all four of your bloody friction drives, and throw them in the river, got it".

As Sparrer strode breezily back into the club bar, to his surprise he found not a happy gleeful crowd pleased at the outcome of their little jape. Instead a minor altercation was taking place between Jock and Sid. Apparently when Sid had added the second five pounds to his mechanics fee, for drinks for his assistants he had meant it. Now he had just brought a round of drinks for himself and his helpers with the money. Jock was taking him to task for this, pointing out that the whole thing had been Sparrer's idea in the first place. Then when Sid saw that the majority of club members were beginning to side with Jock, he offered a compromise saying. "Sparrer I'm going over the bridge to Westchurch in half an hour, if you like I will take you over in my car boot". As Sparrer eagerly accepted, Sid qualified the offer "just this once though and no more, I'm not going to get myself excommunicated from Pengebank, just on account of you falling out with Gloria".

CHAPTER 8.

Sid's car pulled into the car park of the Wherry out of sight of the toll bridge and Gloria's all seeing eyes. Sid got out of the car made his way to the rear and opened the boot, then helped Sparrer out. Saying as he did so "there you are Sparrer, just this once though never again" adding "I'm sure Gloria was suspicious, she must be able to smell you at ten paces". A very indignant Sparrer chided him, "smell me? most likely it was the sheer odour of fear emanating from you mate, that she smelt". Adding sarcastically, "come to think of it, she always was good at smelling out rats, so I think we did well to put one over on her". Sparrer stretched himself after his spell in the confined space of the car boot, saying wistfully "right what I need now is a pint of the Captains best Powerfull".

Sparrer crashed open the door and strode into the bar of the Wherry. Then with an exaggerated flourish took off his cap saying theatrically "she seeks him here she seeks him there she seeks old Sparrer Williams everywhere". Pearl who was serving behind the bar grinned at him saying. "Its obvious that I'm not the she you are talking about, so it must be Gloria". Adding "does that mean that you have escaped from Pengebank over the bridge", adding thoughtfully "how did you do that I wonder?". Sparrer who was now in an exceedingly joyful mood, having regained his old haunts. Tapped his nose with his right forefinger, replying simply "need to know Pearl, need to know". Brusquely Pearl replied "right we have just established that somehow or other you managed to sneak over the toll bridge, what I do need to know now is what do you want to drink."

Sparrer full of bonhomie replied grandly "a pint of your best Powerfull please landlady". Adding as an afterthought "while you are at it, pour a pint for my best mate Jock. Who at this very moment in time is walking across the raging waters of the weir to join me here". As Pearl pulled the pints of beer, Sparrer mused "this calls for a celebration, I think I will dine out to night, what rolls have you got left Pearl". Pearl shaking her head, at the thought of dinning out being a mere bread roll said "all we have left is cheese and onion Sparrer". "What you mean I've no choice at all just cheese and onion" countered Sparrer irritably. "Of course you've got a choice, Pearl snapped back at him, you've four choices". "How can I possibly have four choices if you've only got cheese and onion rolls left?" said a bemused Sparrer. Pearl patiently explained "your first two choices are take it or leave it". Then with a smile on her face added, "your third choice is that I take the onion out, and you then have just a plain cheese roll". Sparrer not to be outdone queried "does a plain cheese roll cost less than a cheese and onion roll". Pearl was now tiring of Sparrer's trivial banter, and snapped back at him NO! After a moments thought Sparrer ordered his meal "right Pearl, one cheese and onion roll please" adding cheekily "the cheese roll to eat here, and the onion wrapped to go".

For a brief moment, an exasperated Pearl just stood and stared at him. Then turning to the back of the bar, she slid aside the glass door to the food cabinet. Then taking out the one remaining bread roll reposing on its small plate being wrapped overall in cling film, placed it on the bar in front of Sparrer. She then repeated back to him "one cheese and onion roll, with the onion wrapped to go, right". Sparrer who was really enjoying this, it wasn't often that you could put one over on Pearl! replied breezily "that's right Pearl". Sparrer watched as Pearl carefully removed the cling film from the roll and plate, and then smoothed the cling film flat on the surface of the bar. Then lifting up the top of the roll she deftly removed the onion, and placed it in the centre of the cling film. She then proceeded to carefully and neatly, wrap the cling film around the onion.

Sparrer stood and watched all this with bated breath and a sickly grin on his face, he could not believe he was getting away with it this easily. It must be something to do with the sale of goods act, or some other new fangled food regulation he thought to himself. It was most out of character for Pearl to be this servile, something wasn't quite right. Pearl finished wrapping the onion in the cling film, then picking it up between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand at the same time saying to Sparrer "one portion of onion wrapped to go! correct?". Sparrer simply nodded his head in reply. Pearl turned half right at the bar, held out her right hand with the neat

little onion package in it, and disdainfully opened up her finger and thumb. The little parcel fell from her outstretched hand, to land with a thump in the empty refuse bin below. Turning back to Sparrer Pearl said acidly "right its gone, are you happy now". Well of course Sparrer wasn't happy at all, but even he had more sense than to say so.

Picking up his pint of beer, Sparrer hastily retreated from the bar. Then sitting down at the nearest table, opposite a man dressed in a smart business suit who was eating a meal. At the same time as he was eating, the man was reading a copy of the Financial Times thus obscuring most of the man from Sparrer's view. The man disdainfully, and in Sparrer's opinion discourteously chose to ignore the chirpy greeting, "evening squire". Thus Sparrer likewise decided to ignore the pompous man, and decided to try and regain favour with Pearl. Calling out across the bar saying to her "I was only joking Pearl, I didn't really want to take the onion home with me, you know", but Pearl had had enough of Sparrer's antics for a while and chose to ignore him.

Sparrer was bored! with no one to talk to till Jock arrived, he decided he might as well eat his dinner. Having taken this decision, he was just about to reach for his cheese roll. When, to his utter astonishment a hand appeared from behind the Financial Times, picked up his roll, and conveyed it back behind the newspaper. Then when the bread roll re-appeared, a large bite had been taken out of it.

At first Sparrer could not believe his eyes, such glutinous behaviour from such an apparent toff!. Initially Sparrer was speechless with disbelief! then with utter amazement he watched as the mans hand emerged from behind the newspaper and began groping around the table for Sparrer's dinner yet again. This was unbelievable, Sparrer had already seen that the man was eating a gargantuan sized mixed grill. Yet he was apparently trying to pinch Sparrer's Spartan dinner, as well. Sparrer's hand got there first, and he pulled the bread roll quickly back towards himself. The toff's hand groped on, till it at last realised something had happened to the roll. The newspaper came down from in front of the mans face, the toff's eyes saw what had happened to the bread roll and he glared at Sparrer. Sparrer glared back, then the unbelievable happened!. The man reached across took Sparrer's bread roll, and took yet another bite out of it.

Now Sparrer Williams is not a man to be mucked about with, nobody pinches his bread roll with impunity. Especially not a bloke who looked like he could afford to buy his own bakery, if he so wanted to. Sparrer pushed his chair back and stood upright. He leaned forward, placing both hands midway on the table between the two of them. Then with great and slow deliberation reached forward, and removed a lamb chop from the mans plate. Holding the chop by the bone, he took a large bite out of it, in doing so removing most of the meat from off of the chop. Then with a big self-satisfied smirk on his face, he replaced the remains of the chop back on the mans plate.

Sparrer once again sat down and slowly chewed, at first slightly distracted by the fact that the chop was delicious. Then with his hands folded across his chest glared at the man, as if to say, what are you going to do about that then. He had definitely called the mans bluff for without further ado, the man gathered up his newspaper, picked up his hat and umbrella. Pausing only to hiss the word "peasant" at Sparrer, quickly left the Wherry. Pearl seeing him leave hurriedly, and leaving half the meal still un-eaten on his plate said warily to Sparrer. "What's up with him then, said he was hungry when he ordered the meal, you didn't put him off it, did you Sparrer?" Sparrer knowing full well, that he had been the innocent party in the incident. For once in his life, never-the-less decided to let discretion be the better part of valour, for Pearl was very touchy on the subject of her cooking. He told a little white lie saying, "nothing to do with me Pearl" adding "the bloke did say his food tasted a bit gamey just before he left though". "Gamey"! queried Pearl "what does he mean by Gamey! what exactly did he say to you Sparrer". Sparrer still very much on the defensive replied told her, saying truthfully "well Pearl the last words the man said to me before he left was, Pheasant!. Must have meant it tastes like Pheasant, you know a bit gamey".

Pearl, a slight having been called upon her cooking, was now round the public side of the bar. She was holding up the plate with the abandoned meal upon it, and sniffing at it like a pig after truffles. Saying to Sparrer "it seems perfectly alright to me, what do you think" at the same time offering the plate to him. Sparrer sensing an opportunity replied "I think I would need to taste it first Pearl, before I could give an opinion". After an interval of around ten minutes or so, Sparrer was able to determine without doubt, that the liver bacon, and sausages were definitely not gamey. The lamb chops and steak needed further consideration and tasting, which he duly obliged, before declaring these also, not to have been gamey.

All that remained on the plate now, were the chips. It is most unusual for chips to be gamey in flavour, but Sparrer persevered. So much so, that Pearl was getting agitated, saying "if one chip is alright, they must all be". "Ah not necessarily so" said Sparrer between chips, "it was just possible, that if there were just one manky chip on that plate, it could possibly have tainted the whole meal". At long last Sparrer was able to truthfully declare, with great satisfaction, more to himself than Pearl. That there had not been the slightest hint of gamey'ness about that meal. Then espying the abandoned bread roll, with only one bite taken from it. He thought to suggest that perhaps he might test that, but thought better of it. That bread roll had been the cause of the man leaving the Wherry, thus Sparrer had benefited in a superb mixed grill. Best let sleeping dogs lie, at least until Pearl had gone out of the bar. Sparrer was now seated at the bar once again slightly downcast, waiting for Jock to arrive. He had yet again fallen out of favour with Pearl with the simple but innocent enquiry "did the gent by any chance order a sweet with his meal, that needed tasting for gamy'ness".

The door to the Wherry burst open, and Jock in an obvious irate mood stormed in. "Would you believe it, would you Adam and eve believe it he spluttered angrily". "Some young smarmy jumped-up smart arsed upstart of a assistant relief lock keeper, has just tried to stop me crossing over my weir". Jock now almost speechless with anger, said to Sparrer "what do you think of that then EH!". Sparrer never batted an eyelid, merely saying casually "thought you was a long time getting here" then as an afterthought adding, "could he swim". As always Jock was easily side-tracked "could who swim?" he queried surprised at the question. "That jumped up, smarmy, whatever he was that tried to stop you crossing the weir" Sparrer replied. "How the hell should I know whether he could swim or not" shouted jock getting angrier. Sparrer now lowered his voice saying matter of fact'ly "oh so you didn't throw him in the river then". "Of course I didn't throw him in the river, He's a lock keeper, an official of the water authority, you can't throw them in the river". Sparrer was beginning to enjoy himself "Oh I see, one law for you lot the officials, and one law for us the plebs then is it". Jock was now completely baffled "what the hell are you talking about Sparrer". So Sparrer reminded him "in the old days when you used to be the lock keeper, and I used to try and sneak across over the weir, you used to threaten to throw me in the river if you caught me".

Jock visibly calmed down, and the hint of a wry smile appeared on his face. Talk of the good old days when he was the lock keeper, always had this effect on him. The smile on Jocks face broadened, as he said "Ah I would never have really have thrown you in Sparrer, there are laws against that as well you know". "Very pleased I am to hear that, after all this time" Sparrer said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. Carrying on to query "exactly what law is it then, that prevents the throwing of Plebs like me into the water might I ask". Jocks face creased in a huge grin, for a while he hesitated, finally saying. "In your particular case Sparrer, it would have to be without doubt, the laws prohibiting pollution of the river Thames itself". As these words left his mouth, Jock backed warily away from Sparrer. He need not have bothered, for the tension was broken by a peal of laughter from behind the bar. Pearl who had apparently been busily engaged behind the bar had been listening to the conversation throughout. The thought of the river being contaminated by Sparrer, instead of the other way round, she found hilarious.

Pearl left the bar still stifling her laughter, Sparrer somewhat miffed at being once again the butt of the joke did not react. Sparrer in fact enjoyed being at centre stage, even when a joke went against him, as long as the joke got a good laugh he didn't really mind. Sparrer was a Thespian at heart, a somewhat scruffy one, albeit in other surroundings he might have been called bohemian. In the villages of Westchurch and Pengebank though Sparrer's home turf, the terms resting, bohemian Thespian, were invariably construed to mean lazy, scruffy, vagabond.

Jock was now standing at the bar becoming somewhat agitated, saying "dammit Pearls gone off before I could get a pint of beer". At which Sparrer told him "I have already bought you one, look it's standing there waiting for you". Jock effected a drama of his own "what you've already bought me a pint, without being asked, paid money even, what have you come into some luck, won the pools or something". Sparrer ignored the sarcasm, telling Jock "yes it just so happens that he had indeed just had a bit of luck". He then went on to tell Jock the story of his purloined cheese roll. Then how his little altercation with the city gent, ended up in him getting a free meal. Sparrer was describing the delights of the mixed grill in detail, when Jock interrupted. "I suppose it's to much to hope that you bought me a cheese roll, as well as pint is it". Sparrer shook his head saying, "sorry old mate but I bought the last one for myself".

Sparrer resumed his description of his feast, explaining how he had to be careful and not let

Pearl wise up to the fact. That even if the food had been gamey and as high as a kite, he was so hungry he would have still eaten it. When Jock interrupted once more "well whose cheese roll is this here then". Sparrer annoyed at being interrupted yet again snapped "I don't know, you found it first you eat it". Jock replied puzzled slightly "but you said you bought the last one, so it must be yours". "Can't be, my one is still on the table over there, with a big bite missing out of it". This served to remind Sparrer, that he had paid good money for that roll, and he was going to damn well eat it. Quickly checking that Pearl was not to be seen, he retrieved his roll from the table. Holding the roll in both hands he raised it to his mouth and took a huge bite out of the roll, and began to chew happily away.

After a few seconds a frown came over his face, between chews he complained "Pearls been a bit mean with the cheese in this one, I can't taste it at all". A few more seconds of chewing and he swallowed, then decided to investigate. Prising apart of the two halves of the roll, then letting out a cry. "I want me money back, I've been diddled, there's no cheese at all in this roll, it's just a plain buttered one". Jock out of curiosity raised the top of the abandoned roll on the bar, then saying "well there's bags of cheese in this one".

A look of horror and realisation came over Sparrer's face! seconds later Jock's face broke into a huge grin!. First Sparrer started nodding his head, and then Jock joined him nodding his head also. Sparrer held up the roll in his hand, saying half in horror half in mirth "this was his roll all the time, that's my roll you're holding". Jock's face was beaming, and his head nodding vigorously in agreement. Sparrer was now chuckling aloud "the poor sod, I pinched his roll, nicked his chop, he wasn't taking any more chances. I might have started on him next, no wonder he left in a hurry". Jock was laughing and speaking at the same time "frightened the poor bloke out of the pub, then had the cheek to eat his dinner once he had gone". This last remark had Sparrer on the defensive once again "Oh no, that wasn't my fault I was only tasting it for Pearl, just being helpful". "From what you told me" Jock challenged him "you just about help-fulled yourself to it all".

At this point the Captain walked in behind the bar, and seeing the smiles on their faces asked "something funny going on, have I missed something funny". The Captain was immediately suspicious, when both Jock and Sparrer answered in unison, as one, "Oh no Captain, nothing funny going on, you haven't missed a thing". The Captain studied their faces, they were both trying hard to suppress laughing. The Captain puzzled as he was, took a different tack saying "what ever it is lads don't worry about it, I don't get too many laughs in here, now you two don't come in regular any more".

The Captain re-filled their glasses, and then his own. Looking surreptitiously over his shoulder lest Pearl be skulking behind him said "on the house lads welcome back". Sparrer started the banter saying to Jock "what about this then Jock, he actually misses us, welcome mat on the doorstep, free beer, we'll have to stay away more often". The Captain though was serious saying "no lads its boring since you've been gone, even Pearl says so, so it must be true". The Captain carried on "I even heard Pearl talking about it to Gloria the other day, you know just sounding her out". "What did she say said Sparrer anxiously". "No chance" replied the Captain, she's still set dead against you".

Sparrer a bit crestfallen at this bad news changed the subject saying, "come on Captain make us laugh, something funny must have happened since we were last in surely". The Captain gloomily shook his head "No lads it's been dead boring, I even looked into the Pengebank club a couple of times to see if I could find you". Jock told him "we have just come from there now", adding "Sparrer here, pulled another of his little stunts whilst we were there". So they spent the next five minutes regaling the Captain with the story of the Caterpillar, and the subsequent removing of the shyster's friction drives.

After the telling of this tale the Captain cheered up somewhat, then his face broke into a grin as he said. "Wait a minute, we did have a funny incident in here about a fortnight ago". It was a Tuesday evening, pretty quite just a few regulars in, when this City commuting type gent came in". "He had obviously had a few drinks on the train, or done the rounds in Pengebank, because he was pretty squiffy when he came in". "He stood at the bar about where you two are stood now, and ordered a double whiskey and soda, little bit unsteady on his feet he was too". "I served him his drink and went down the other end of the bar, to talk to the regular customers".

"It was a pretty dull night that Tuesday, and nobody was in a mood for much conversation". "Then Percy the parrot started his antics!". "Started imitating the telephone, trying to get some attention, like he always does when he is bored". "Its no bloody fool that parrot" said Jock "It only does it now when there are strangers in the pub, because they are the only one's that react to it". "I know" replied the Captain "but its a bloody nuisance at times, the thing keeps Brreepp, Brreepp away until I get fed up and tell it to shut up". "Then of course it goes into its Brreepp Brreepp Shut Up routine". The bloody thing is magic ain't it" said Sparrer "we know what happens next everybody laughs at the parrots antics, then the thing goes Brreepp, Brreepp, Shut Up, Shut Up, followed by its manic laughter routine".

That's right said the Captain, adding, "on this particular Tuesday though we never got that far". "The bar was full of regulars and they ignored Percy completely". "Yes, they would do" said Jock "if you talk back to it, it just gets worse". The Captain carried on "after a couple of minutes of its Brreepp Brreepp, the city gent who'd had a few, wanted to know why somebody didn't answer the telephone". "I told him it was the parrot, but he wasn't having none of that". "It's definitely a telephone" he kept on back at me". "He was convinced the call might be for him". "What made him think that though I haven't got a clue, for I don't think even he knew where he was let alone his friends or associates". "I tried to tell him in slow concise words". "THE TELEPHONE IS A PARROT, this was probably a mistake though, for now he was cocking his ear towards the Brreepp Brreepp and looking for a parrot".

"That was his undoing, because Percy spotted him and Brreeped even louder". "Anyway the gent finally makes his way across the room, and finds Percy on his perch, and Percy gives him a couple of Brreep's for good measure" "Then the bloke looks at me and says" "the telephone's a parrot, who would have believed it!" "I must say I was very pleased, I had been trying to tell him that for the last five minutes, now he's finally worked it out for himself".

The Captain now a big smile on his face went on to say "well what came next we were just not ready for". "Old Percy just sat there not even blinking, waiting for the usual SHUT UP! So's he could carry on with the next part of his repertoire". "All I can say is, the bloke must have been drunker than I thought he was, if I had known I wouldn't have served him in the first place". "The next thing we knew, the bloke had got hold of the parrot round the middle lifted him up to his head, and was saying HELLO up Percy's bum". "He really thought, that Percy was a novelty telephone".

"I suppose" mused the Captain "he might of got away with that even, but when he said HELLO yet again and still got no reply, he got a bit annoyed". "He then started banging Percy against his other hand, attempting to clear a supposed blockage in the telephone". "Old Percy got a bit annoyed at this un-dignified treatment". "A drunk shouting up his bum, then being violently bashed from hand to hand". "So that when the man shouted HELLO up him the next time, Percy bit the mans ear with a vicious bite".

"That's when the fun really started" said the Captain "gleefully". Pearl who had meantime come back into the bar was also smiling and nodding her head in agreement. "The man threw Percy up in the air, shouting like a maniac" "it bit me, it bit me, the telephone just bit me!". "Then old Percy started flying in circles on his tethering chain, squawking away like a demon". "The man stood there unbelieving. mouth opened agog, watching it do so". The Captain who was now having trouble just telling the story through laughing, went on. "Of course by now, we was all laughing our socks off". "So this prompted old Percy back on his usual repertoire". "He began squawking out loud, its the bloody parrot, its the bloody parrot, then followed this with its manic laughing routine".

The inebriated City gent was mortified, he was a man of the world, and he had seen many things in his bacchanalian travels. He'd seen pink elephants, He'd seen furry things climb out of the wall plaster even, but none of them had ever bitten him before. This present hallucination of his was horrific; he was watching a telephone fly around the room in circles, calling out that it was a parrot. What is more his current delirium was so severe, that the thing actually looked, and even sounded like a parrot.

When at long last when the laughter in the pub finally died down, the parrot settled back down on its perch. There it promptly proceeded to fluff up it's ruffled feathers and went Brreepp Brreepp once again. The Captain looked around for the city gent, to tell him "it could be for you

mate!" but he had long since gone.

After the Captain had finished telling his story of Percy and the inebriated gents antics. Then having to re-assure Jock and Sparrer, that it was absolutely true in ever detail. Sparrer decided to confide with the Captain, his story of the city toff and his cheese roll. As the Captain listened, his facial expressions fluctuated from humour to horror and back again throughout the tale. Then when Sparrer finally got to the bit, where he discovered his own cheese roll still on the bar untouched. The Captain was mortified, saying with horror "for gods sake Sparrer don't ever let Pearl find out, or you will wind up barred from the Wherry, as well as the Bridge".

How can it possibly be! that above all the general clamour, hubbub, and conversations in a busy bar. That a person working in an adjacent room will apparently filter out all extraneous noise's. Then only hear the spoken words "DON'T LET PEARL FIND OUT". Well it certainly is possible, for immediately after they were spoken, Pearl appeared and repeated ominously, slowly and with great deliberation. "DON'T LET PEARL FIND OUT WHAT?". The Captain who had not seen Pearl enter the bar. Upon hearing the words repeated back at him from behind. was galvanised into inaction, mortified yet again! He stammered out nervously "nothing Pearl, nothing Pearl". The Captain was in the mire! Sparrer and Jock looked on as Pearl repeated sternly "what is it, that I am not supposed to find out". The Captain now with a resigned look of defeat on his face said gloomily "go on, it will be best if you tell her Sparrer".

Sparrer rose slowly from his bar stool, took a step backwards away from the bar, stood up to his full diminutive height, and said sadly. "Pearl I have to tell the truth, that although you are probably the best cook in the whole of Oxfordshire. I have to say there was absolutely nothing wrong with that meal I tasted for you. It surpasses belief, that a man could walk out and leave a meal like that. Indeed it was of the highest standard, the chops especially were done exactly to my liking". Then with a far away look in his eyes, began in great detail to describe the rest of the meal. Before long being interrupted by a now agitated Pearl shouting "well what was, wrong with it then". With a wicked grin on his face, Sparrer replied "nothing at all Pearl, it was a feast for a gourmet". Then indicating subtlety with his hand added "its just that for some reason, I don't seem to be able to eat this cheese roll here, is it possibly not up to you usual standard"?. Would there be any chance of me getting my money back on it!.

At this Pearl snorted in disgust spun around and stormed out of the bar saying nothing, even she had been rendered speechless. The Captain with a huge grin on his face, was muttering brilliant! brilliant! and was delving down into his pocket. Producing a handful of coins, he proceeded to count out and hand to Sparrer the price of his cheese roll, saying at the same time "magnificent! how do you do it Sparrer". "With no prior warning at all, you spun her a beautiful tale, you are a genius, without a shadow of a doubt you are a natural born liar". Sparrer positively beamed! at the spoken words, such was the man, that being called a natural born liar, was taken as a compliment!

CHAPTER 9.

It was six thirty in the evening; the public bar of the Wherry was quite. The Captain was sitting on a barstool, with an almost empty pint glass in front of him. Pearl was behind the bar working, preparing for the evening session. At times she would disappear from the bar to go off to the kitchen, to check on the preparations for the evenings menu. In the far corner of the bar was a man sitting all alone, with just a whisky glass to keep him company. He was wearing a rather shabby raincoat, and a cloth cap upon his head, and looked the figure of abject misery. This man was Fred Alderton, the man who some time previously had had the altercation with Gloria, as to whether he was, or was not physically disabled. Gloria tended to have this effect on people; that of ruining their entire fortnight, by the use, of a mere few words.

The door to the public bar crashed open, and in strode Sparrer, followed closely behind by Jock. The quite atmosphere of the bar immediately disappeared, no words had been spoken, but it was evident to all that Sparrer was fuming with quite rage. Sparrer's usual routine on entering the pub. Would have been to spend some minutes on deciding whether to purchase a pint, or a half-pint of beer, before entering into conversation. This evening he marched up to the captain, and without any preliminary greeting or conversation. Shouted at him "do you know what that bloody woman has gone and done". The Captain's jaw dropped slightly, he had never seen Sparrer as angry as this before, and was stunned into momentary silence. Giving the Captain no chance to reply, Sparrer looked round the pub so that all would bear witness to what he had to say. Said in a slow, incredulous high pitched, loud voice. "She has gone and put bloody NOT WANTED posters up all over the bridge! They've all got my picture on them; I am apparently an undesirable!. They say if any body assist's me in crossing over Westchurch Bridge, that person will be barred from crossing the bridge as well. It's taken me an hour and a half to get here; nobody will chance giving me a lift anymore. Even the dustmen, wouldn't give me a lift in the back of the dustcart!. I finally got a lift off of one of the Caribbean hire cruisers. Had to tell him my little dog had swam across, and was in danger of drowning on the other side, before even he would give me a lift. I tell you he stammered, that woman has gone to far this time!

Pearl sensing a violent change of mood in the pub, had re-appeared back behind the bar. Sparrer began to inform Pearl of the momentous events, but Pearl held up both hands saying. "I heard Sparrer, along with the rest of Westchurch, want do you want to drink". Sparrer's voice was still loud, as he angrily said "right Pearl, give us two pints of Powerfull". With that single statement, give us two pints of Powerfull, Pearl knew that this was destined not to be, just an ordinary night in the Wherry. Sparrer drank pints of Powerfull only very occasionally, when he wanted to get pissed!

Sparrer turned around, and said to Fred sitting morosely in the corner, "you're a victim too mate ain't yer, what do you want to drink". Sparrer continued his ranting, "bloody woman picking on a bloke with a bad leg!" Then turning to Fred saying "Come over here old mate, come and get properly physically disabled with Jock and me". This suggestion appealed to Fred, for a hint of a smile came across his face. He crossed over to the bar, placed his empty glass on the counter, for a brief moment he paused, then saying, "right, bugger it, a double whisky please Pearl". Now there were three!. Sparrer had already almost finished his first pint of Powerfull, as Pearl served Fred his double whisky. She briefly left the bar to go out to the kitchen, Sparrer who had waited for this moment, then said to the Captain "what about you Captain, you in or out". The Captain said nothing, but thought hard for a full minute finally deciding at last "I'm in, but I'm not drinking Powerfull, it tends to make Pearl too aggressive for me to handle !". Now there were four!

Pearl who was in the kitchen heard the till ring, she glanced into the bar, and saw that the captain had just finished serving, yet another round. She duly noted the full glass, in front of her husband the Captain. Then she mentally took over command, at the helm of the Wherry.

Pearl was a very experienced and capable landlady, she knew that four men pouring beer down their throats, was good for profits. The profit margin was lowered somewhat, if one of the imbibers was also the landlord of the pub. That was not only one of the hazards of the trade, but

in her opinion, married life in general. What worried Pearl was the mood of the drinkers!. The conversation in the bar was bad tempered, even vitriolic. It seemed every five seconds, the words "that bloody woman, was shouted out aloud". Even Jock who had now consumed around three pints, was bad tempered and raising his voice.

The last time she had been in the bar to serve a drink, she had heard Fred, quiet inoffensive Fred. Fred who never usually said boo to a goose, state quite categorically. "That the very next time he went over the bridge, he was going to run the bloody woman over". He was further encouraged, by Sparrer's enthusiastic cheering. Fred, who had never apparently been so popular in his life before, was enjoying centre stage. For he carried on to say, "and then I'll tear her limb from limb" demonstrating this, by making tearing motions with his hands. More cheers from Sparrer!, even Jock joined in this time. Fred now had a wild look in his eyes, he was getting carried away saying. " Then, and then, I'm going to beat her to death, with the soggy ends of her legs". This time making exaggerated clubbing motions, with his arms and hands. "Then;" adding with relish "lets see how she likes being bloody well physically disabled".

The Captain who had been grinning hugely, throughout the whole of Fred's performance. Remarked dryly "bit of a difference between being physically disabled, and physically dismembered Fred don't you think". "Adding dryly, you might have gone over the top a little bit there old mate". Both Jock and Sparrer were shaking their heads, Jock said "its not you that's been barred Captain, its Sparrer and me". Sparrer was now getting quite carried away, and baying for blood, crying loudly "dismemberment it is!, off with her limbs". Which then served to incite Fred into his tearing off limbs, and clubbing with the soggy end mime, all over again.

Things were getting out of hand, Pearl knew something needed to be done, to change the mood of the party. Pearl thought that the group had moved beyond sound reasoning, so Pearl attacked. "Just like a load of men, sit around in the pub talking about what they might do tomorrow". "If you have been barred from the bridge, do something practical about it!" the response was at first, that which she had hoped for.

Jock rose to the bait first "all right then Pearl, what do you suggest that we do, write to our Member of Parliament". He continued "or perhaps you think the court of human rights in Strasbourg, we could go right to the top". Sparrer was in a bitter mood, and not to be easily distracted for he chimed. "Yeh, then there's Oxfam we could write to them, then the British Legion, on account of victimisation of Fred's war disability". "Then there's Help the aged, they could come in useful" then turning to Jock he said "that's one's for you Jock". Jock snapped back at him, "I'm no more aged than you are". "Ah! but you will be" snorted Sparrer, by the time we've finished writing all these letters, you will be!". Sparrer spoke in a more serious voice, saying slowly "what we need is direct action, positive action now".

The Captain also could see, that the mood was getting darker, and then unwittingly added fuel to the flames. Saying "right positive action is called for" standing upright on the rungs of his bar stool, he called out. "Pearl a double whisky for Fred, two pints of Powerfull for Jock and Sparrer, one ordinary bitter for the captain of the Wherry".

As Pearl busied herself pouring the drinks, Sparrer exclaimed loudly "that's it positive thinking, direct action, I've got it". "Jock old mate, if we cant go over the bridge, we will make damn sure that no other bugger can!". Jock wore a slightly bemused look on his face as he said, "how the devil will we do that?. We can hardly saw it down with an hacksaw, can we, those girders are foot thick. Sparrer had not actually considered demolishing the bridge, but the idea now very much appealed to him, and he warmed to the theme. Jock he said "your an old river man, couldn't we crash one of those bloody great river authority barges into it, that should do the trick". Jock liked to be recognised as an old river hand, an expert at his trade, so was giving the idea serious consideration. Then shaking his head he said sadly "it would never work, this time of the year, there isn't enough flow on the river, to knock over a bean pole, let alone a bridge". Pearl who had been listening to the conversation, as she poured the drinks observed shrewdly. "Haven't you men forgotten one rather important thing, one of the essential necessities of life". It was the Captain with a perplexed look on his face that asked the obvious question. "What the hell has Westchurch bridge, got to do with the essential necessities of life". "Beer" said Pearl "the brewers dray comes over it twice a week remember". For a second or two stunned silence came over the group. "Trust a woman to put the kibosh, on a good wheeze grumbled Jock, morosely". Sparrer's face lit up yet again; he was not to be easily deterred. Saying "Ah that's only the

Coward's brewery dray, beer that's made with M4 motorway run-off water, Yuk !" "Murry's ales comes from Oxford, and that's on this side of the river, there will still be plenty of Old Powerfull ale to sup !"

Fred suddenly came out of hibernation, and entered the conversation, saying "pass us me whisky please Jock". He was greeted by the Captains caustic "evening Fred thought you had passed on, with a severe case of Gloria-itus". Fred now with a pained hurt look on his face, said quietly "it's just that I thought you might want the benefit of my military experience". "What experience was that then queried the Captain". Fred took a sip at his whisky, and started again. "During the war I had some experience with explosive's". Jock snorted interrupted, and scoffed at him "you was in the artillery, the ten mile sniper's!". "You couldn't even hear the explosions, from where you were." Jock was about to lead into his own, glorious national service day's experiences. But Sparrer held up his hand "saying let's listen to what Fred has to say it might be something useful". Fred passed a grateful smile at Sparrer, and continued "well when them big shells sometimes misfired, somebody had to get rid of them, and I done the course". "I could well imagine it!" again interrupted Jock, "you were probably considered disposable. So they sent you on a bomb disposal course, sounds like the army to me". It was now Sparrer's turn to interrupt, he said loudly and crossly "Jock will you let him finish, this might be useful information".

All eye's and ear's were now expectantly upon Fred, which tended to unnerve him somewhat. He stammered and said "all I was going to say was, that if you wanted to get rid of something as big as the Bridge you would need to blow it up, that's all". Fred's voice tailed meekly away into a great anticlimax; there was a large intake of breaths at Fred's staggering statement of the obvious. This was only broken by loud raucous outrageous laughter; something had very much amused Pearl. Pearl in between gust's laughter cried out "men; useless good for nothing item's". She carried on "first you are going to saw the bridge down, only you haven't got a big enough hacksaw". "Then you are going to knock the bridge down, but the battering boat won't go fast enough". "Now" she spluttered trying to gain control of herself "Now you are going to blow the bridge UP, but of course you haven't got any bombs". Still giggling to herself at the foibles of mere men, she told the captain "I'm just going out to the cellar, to put a new barrel of Powerfull on". As she left she called back "if you are going to think about getting a submarine, to torpedo and then sink the bridge, wait till I come back, I don't want to miss it".

Sparrer spoke up somewhat irately "your missu's goes a bit over the top sometimes Captain, bit of discipline don't go amiss you know, thought you run a tight ship?". The Captain stood down from his bar stool, then standing rigidly to attention, went into his much loved monologue. "I am the captain of this Wherry, and what my wife says goes". Still standing to attention, he carried on altogether lads, then launched into "God bless the Westchurch Wherry and all who sail in her, for this is a very merry Wherry". Jock smiled to himself, these little recitations of the Captain's, usually indicated the early stages of him getting pissed.

There was now a lull in the conversation; Pearl's acid remarks had subdued the enthusiasm for disposing of the bridge. It was Fred that broke the silence by saying "you know what, I might just have something, that will do the job". "Do what job," asked the Captain?, but Fred was already on his way out of the bar, saying "its in the boot of my car I'll go and get it". A nasty thought flashed through Sparrer's mind, and he spoke out aloud "who's round is it next?, Fred's not trying to sneak away, without buying a round is he".

After a few minutes Fred returned to the bar, carrying a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. He placed the parcel on the bar, and said, " there it is, that might just do the job". What the devil is it asked the Captain. Fred with a shake of his head said, "I don't know, it's got some foreign sounding name, It's written on the parcel somewhere". He went on to explain " I was up the car boot sale last Sunday, and a bloke was selling this stuff". "It was dirt cheap, apparently its redundant stock, some big organisation closed down, so the man said". Sparrer was now even more puzzled and asked "well what are you supposed to do with it then Fred". Jock who had been examining the parcel on the bar called out "here it is, XETMES is that the name Fred". "If it's written in green biro, that will be it Fred replied". "What's this other word written in green biro A.R.I queried Jock". Fred told him "that's the name of the company that went broke, I wrote that down in case I wanted to get my money back". Sparrer was getting agitated "alright Fred, it's got funny foreign sounding name, but what are we supposed to do with it". Fred explained "well the man that sold it to me, said it was a new type of plastic, with many uses". For example, it could be used as a filler, for wood, cracks in walls, and loads of other things".

The Captain who for the past minute, had been struggling to open the parcel, finally threw the brown paper wrapping aside. Then held in his hands, an oblong shaped block of brownish plastic looking material. He pressed his thumbnail into the block saying "it feels pretty soft to me, I know what, lets try it out". He stood up on his barstool, and reached down behind the bar, from where he produced a large wooden mallet. He held it up saying "there you are lads, one wooden barrel mallet, only to be used on people's skulls in emergencies". The Captain now picked up a knife from the bar, and proceeded to cut one of the corners off of the block of plastic. He placed the head of the mallet onto his lap. Then with the blade of the knife, started to work the plastic material into a large crack in the head of the mallet. When he had finished he said, "now if this stuff really works Fred, it will have paid for itself with this one job". "For this is my most favourite mallet, me and my mallet have been through some exciting times together in the past" he said. Demonstrating this by swinging the mallet around his head threateningly, like a battle-axe.

The Captain placed the mallet back onto the bar then asked "how long does this filler take to set hard Fred". Shaking his head Fred replied "haven't got a clue Captain, there wasn't any instructions with it". Jock snorted in disgust "typical of the man, he buys the latest revolutionary plastic filler, and doesn't even bother asking for instructions in its use". Pearl had now re-appeared in the bar commenting caustically, "I see the demolition committee's still in progress then". She picked up the barrel mallet from the bar, and went to leave. The Captain tried to stop her saying "Pearl I have just mended that mallet". Pearl made to hand the mallet back to the captain, saying mockingly "so you don't want any more beer then". "Perhaps you would like to come into the cellar, and bang the tap into the barrel with your head". Sparrer thought this funny saying "that's the Captain, strong in the arm, and thick in the head". He had intended to counter this with, "only to bang in beer taps, what's required is thick in the arm and strong in the head". Pearl never gave him a chance to finish his witty remark, telling him "you can shut up, you're just about the right size to use as a battering ram on the beer tap".

Pearl had once again left the bar in subdued silence; once again it was Fred who started up the conversation saying. "The reason I never got any instructions with the plastic, was that I didn't buy it to use as a filler". Jock sneered, "here we have a person who has just purchased the latest revolutionary plasticine filler, available to man. Then he tells us he intends to use it instead, NOT to fill things with". Fred carried on "no Jock, the man kept trying to sell it to me to fill things with, but I didn't need anything filled". So I asked him what else could I use it for, and he said if all else fails, I could always blow up tree stumps with it". Fred then said cheerfully as all was revealed, "that's what I bought it for, to blow some old tree stumps at the back of my house".

Jock was again being derisive, "you mean to say that the man sold it to you, and you bought it, in all seriousness for blowing up tree stumps". Yes replied Fred, "he was a very nice man and assured me it would do the job". "I think you've been had" said Jock "you cant just walk into Woolworth's and ask for three pounds of high explosive please". "There's all sorts of paperwork to be filled in, before you can buy that stuff". The Captain was now taking a keen interest saying "but it wasn't Woolworth's Jock, it was a car boot sale, you can buy virtually anything at those". Sparrer meanwhile, was giving the plastic a practical test, by banging the block down on the bar top. Commenting "it makes quite a loud bang, if you whack it down hard enough".

The Captain had now turned his attention to the wrapping paper, saying Fred "are you sure this was the way the man spelt it, XETMES". "No" said Fred "he didn't spell it, he wrote it down for me, that's his writing on the paper". The Captain continued "and I suppose he wrote down the name of the organisation that closed down as well, the A.R.I.". "That's right" said Fred cheerful that someone believed him at last!. A look of sudden realisation came over the Captains face, as he said slowly, silly Irish buggers spelt it the wrong way round". Slowly and thoughtfully he murmured "Fred, I think the man that sold you this, was a dyslexic". As he uttered the words, a look of horror appeared on his face, he stood up, and at the top of his voice shouted "PEARL DON'T DO ANYTHING". He then rushed out of the bar, in the direction of the cellar, knocking over the barstool as he did so.

After the initial shock of the Captains noisy and unruly departure, had died down. Fred was on the defensive yet again, saying quietly. "He wasn't a dyslexic you know, the man who sold me the filler; he was an Irishman". Jock who was still puzzled at the Captains speedy exit, sought to placate him saying, "well he could have easily been an Irish dyslexic, couldn't he". It was now Sparrer's turn to look puzzled, and he said "no that's not on, with a name like that, he would have to have been an Hungarian or Polish even". Jock stared at Sparrer in amazement saying, "what on earth are you on about Sparrer". Sparrer explained, "Irish names in general tend to begin with Mac

something, or O something, like McGee or O'Neil". "It's Hungarian, or Polish names that have Xs and Ys in them, so therefore if he was an Irishman, he couldn't possibly have been named Dyslexic. This illogical solution to the problem seemed to appease Fred, because he agreed "Yes that sounds alright Sparrer, he could have been an Irish Polish man, called Dyslexic, but he didn't have a trace of a foreign accent, he spoke pure Irish".

The Captain returned back into the bar clutching the barrel mallet, and wearing a very relieved look on his face. He placed the mallet very carefully onto the bar and said, " we just had a bloody narrow escape there lads". Picking up the paper that the plastic filler had been wrapped in, he pointed to the green biro writing. Then said, " look A.R.I, that's the firm that closed down, what does that spell the other way round I.R.A.". "What's so special about that" queried Jock, "B.B.C. the other way round is C.B.B. tells us nothing". "Correct" said the captain "but now look at the other word XETMES, and spell that the wrong way round". Sparrer look puzzled "saying don't be daft Captain I can't even spell it the right way round". Jock had a pencil, and was busy reversing the letters on the brown wrapping paper itself. He gave out a startled cry "bloody hell, it spells SEMTEX". The captain with a big smile on his face nodded his head "so now we know why Fred's Irish friend told him he could blow up tree stumps with it". "What we have got here lads, is about four pounds of Semtex plastic high explosive, made in Czechoslovakia and as used by the Irish Republican army". A look of realisation came over Sparrer's face as he said " Ah! so he wasn't Polish after all, was he that Irishman, he was a Czechoslovak". The Captain was clearly puzzled at Sparrer's last remark, but Jock told him "pay no attention to Sparrer, he's in a little world of his own, and its full of foreigners".

It was now Jocks turn to comprehend; he nodded his head sagely, smiled, and pointed a finger at the Captain saying. "So that's why you yelled out, and disappeared into the cellar just now, the mallet!" The Captain nodded his head saying "yup, I filled the head of the mallet with Semtex". "Pearl was just about to bang the tap in the barrel, and would have blown the barrel to kingdom come, I got there just in time". Sparrer was now chuckling out aloud and saying " pity I would have loved to have seen her face, as she hit the barrel and it exploded". "Powerful stuff, that Old Powerfull Pearl, goes down like a bomb, don't yer know".

Pearl came back into the bar to announce "right the powerfull's back on again". The Captain moved round the back of the bar telling her "alright Pearl, I'll carry on and serve the drinks, you finish off in the cellar". Pearl gave him a sneering look "Ah the revolutionary committee has got more revolting things to talk about Eh! not fit for ladies ears". "Or are you naughty boys, still; planning to blow up the Westchurch Bridge". Pearl left the bar once again, with her derisive laughter, ringing in the men's ears.

Sparrer was cross, Pearls jibes were still sounding in his ears, as she made her way to the cellar. It reminded him of Gloria's voice, as she uttered those fateful words "your barred!" He having supped around five pints of Powerfull, didn't help matters. This tended to put him, in either deep depression, or on an exhilarating high. It was Pearls parting words that did it, his mood changed suddenly from low to high, and he blurted out loudly "by god we could do it". He got quite excited and said "Jock, Captain, we could do it, we've got the Semtex, we could blow the bloody Bridge up!".

"Steady on" said the Captain, "blowing up bridges is against the law, in fact the magistrates take a very dim view, of blowing up things". Sparrer turned to Jock, and said "what do you think Jock, you game?" Five pints of old Powerfull, has a different effect on Jock, it sort of gives him a devil may care attitude. Jock thought long and hard before finally replying, in a very thoughtful manner". "Do you know what, its a long time, since anything exciting happened in this village". The last time, was when that bloke nicked all the ornamental lamppost's, off of the bridge, that gave us something to talk about for weeks". "Just think, if we could actually blow the bridge up, not only will it be one up Gloria's kibosh, but Westchurch could be famous". Turning to the Captain he said "just think of it Captain, hundreds of charabanc's, thousands of tourist's, all coming to see the blown up bridge". "All popping in for a drink, and something to eat in the Wherry". The Captain was not easily convinced for he said "maybe, but half of them wont be able to get across the river, with no bridge".

If Jock wasn't convincing the Captain, he certainly was convincing himself, for he continued. "Oh ye of little faith, just think about it". "We would become so famous, that Gloria would be able to sell the old bridge to the Americans, to stick alongside London Bridge in

Arizona". "Then with the money from that, she could buy a brand new bridge". "Think about it, we could blow up the bridge, and at the end of the day, everybody would still be happy". He gleefully although somewhat alcoholically said, "count me in Sparrer, I'm with you, we'll blow the bloody thing up tomorrow night sharp". The Captain finally relented with "all right I'll be there to give you support, but I'm taking no part in actually blowing it up". Fred gave a nervous cough, quickly drank the remains of his beer, and stood up saying. "Unfortunately lads tomorrow night is my darts night, and it's my turn to drive the team there, so I won't be able to make it". "Then again, being as I'm not actually barred from the bridge, blowing it up, might be going just a little bit over the top".

"Right" said Sparrer rubbing his hands gleefully as Fred left the bar "that's sorted the men from the boys, let's make some plans". Jock came in with the first idea "we'll need to do it late at night, when there's no traffic going over the bridge". Sparrer nodded his head eagerly in agreement adding "it would be useful if we get the lights on the bridge turned off, so no one can see us". "I had already thought of that," said Jock, "and I have it in hand". "You have it in hand" repeated Sparrer, "you know bugger all about electricity Jock, how can you have it in hand". Jock smiled a slow smile, and put one finger to the side of his nose, saying. "I may know bugger all about electricity, but I know a man who does". The Captain, who was more cautious about the whole venture, was a bit concerned about more people having knowledge of the escapade. Jock assured him "this man is perfectly safe, in fact I have something on him, that could get him into a lot of trouble, so don't worry on that score".

After a further half-hours deep discussion and another round of Old Powerfull, which even the Captain was drinking now, the plans were finalised. "If this comes off Sparrer", said Jock, "in future we will have to call you Guy Fawkes". "If it don't come off" said the Captain gloomily, "they will be throwing you on the bonfire on November the fifth, along with Guy Fawkes". With the plans for Westchurch's most exiting night ever, since the Second World War finalised, they began to relax. Suddenly Sparrer cried out "oh god! we have forgotten something". A look of panic came over his face, as he explained "the bloody geese, Freda and her Canadian boyfriend they sleep under the Bridge at night!". He mournfully went on "we can't do it, we can't blow the bridge up, if we killed those geese the people of Westchurch would never forgive us". Sparrer went on "I can see the headlines now, thugs and hooligans murder two tame geese, then on the back page, Westchurch toll bridge falls into river". Its off lads mourned Sparrer, I couldn't face it, nobody in the village would ever talk to us again. Adding mournfully anyway I like those geese too, I wouldn't want to kill them". A big smile came over Jocks face as he said "you big silly sod Sparrer, those geese aren't anywhere near the bridge at night, they sleep on the island by the lock cut". Sparrer looked at him disbelievingly, and said "are you sure Jock". "Of course I'm sure" replied Jock. Sparrer shook his head, "what I mean is, are you really, really sure". "Good god man, I worked on the lock for thirty years didn't I, how much sure'r can you get" Yet once again Sparrer was all smiles as he proclaimed "right lads its back on, its tomorrow night".

CHAPTER 10.

As Jock Sparrer and the Captain, made their way to the centre of Westchurch Bridge, all was in darkness. The Captain said to Jock "look's like your man the electrician has done his job alright then, the lights are all out". "Oh! he's not an electrician" replied jock, "he's more a sort of jack of all trades". "Well all right then, jack of all trades "replied the Captain", but he's certainly done his job and put the lights out". Jock chuckled to himself saying, "I think you will find, that he has done a little bit more, than just put the lights out Captain". As they arrived at the centre of the bridge, and could now see over the brow, Sparrer gave an urgent warning hiss! saying " quiet, somebody's on the bridge". In the gloom could be seen a dark coloured pick up truck, and alongside it, a man working at the bridge rail.

Sparrer and the Captain made to retreat from the bridge, but Jock held his hand in the air and said "its all right lads, I know him, he's the jack of all trades". As they approached in the gloom, they could see that the man was working, at the base of one of the ornamental lamp standards. Then as they drew nearer, the man saw them approaching and turned around to face them. He greeted them cheerfully "I see the bomb squad's here then". Jock greeted the man jovially, "hello Smiffy, everything going alright". The man called Smiffy, replied equally jovially, "Yes, going like a bomb, ha! ha! joke eH!". Then quietly, this is the last one coming off now, I'll be away in two minutes". With that, he lifted the cast iron ornamental lamp standard off of the bridge rail, and placed it in the back of his pick-up truck, to join seven or eight other's already there. "These going to the same bloke as bought them last time" queried jock. "Yes said the Smiffy, if all goes well they will be delivered there inside twenty minutes". The man then got into the truck, and with a cheery goodbye drove off into the night, the load clattering as it went over the road humps on the bridge. Sparrer now said thoughtfully "isn't that your brother in law Jock, the one from Crayford". Jock nodded his head in agreement, at the same time saying; "I told you my man would be safe, didn't I". Then adding, "that's the second time he will have nicked the bridge lamps, so he can hardly go to the law about our little bit of mischief, can he!"

They all made their way back to the centre of the bridge, where the explosive was to be placed, against one of the bridge supports. Once there, the two main participants of the crime started to dress in their disguises. Jock had chosen simply dark clothes, and a deerstalker hat. He also wore a pair of dark glasses, which were to prove impracticable, mainly because he couldn't see out of them in the dark, and so were discarded. The Captain, whose main role was to be lookout, and thus be merely inconspicuous, was dressed in his normal clothes. He had though, taken the precaution of wearing a pair of high speed trainer's, just in case a quick get-away was called for.

If Jock could be considered perhaps to be under-disguised, then sparrer definitely went way over the top. He was already wearing a one-piece black boiler suit, which buttoned right up to the neck. Then over his right shoulder, and under his left arm, he wore a coil of thick heavy rope. From out of the pockets of the boiler suit, he produced a pair of black finger-less gloves, which he then proceeded to pull onto his hands. Then delving into the old brown army haversack, which he carried slung over his shoulder, he produced an old khaki balaclava woollen hat. This he proceeded to pull over his head, at first getting it the wrong way round, so that the face opening was at the back. This amused the Captain, for he said "Well I for one, wouldn't recognise you wearing that hat Sparrer, what is more I don't think your mother would either". After a struggle Sparrer turned the balaclava around, whilst it was still on his head.

He then delved back into his haversack, and produced with a flourish, a world war two, black painted soldier's steel helmet. He announced proudly "this used to belong to my dad, he was in the commando's in the last war". He pointed to the white painted letters on the front of the helmet, and said "see! ARP". "My dad was in the Assault Raiding Party, did the sort of thing we are going to do now, blowing up bridges and things". Jock knew full well, that a black steel helmet with ARP on it, which was short for Air Raid Precautions. Would only have been worn by an air raid warden, a semi- civilian post in one of the big cities. He decided this was not a good time for a lesson, on the niceties of military etiquette. If he offended Sparrer's pride, as to the origins of the tin hat on

his head, Sparrer might yet call the whole thing off.

"Well" said Jock dryly "you certainly look; the part Sparrer, you would frighten the hell out of me on a dark night". "You look a bit like one of them SAS bloke's, you see on the television news, you know storming embassies and that sort of thing". This last of remark of Jocks inordinately pleased Sparrer, for he had in fact modelled his outfit, on those very same SAS soldiers. Sparrer had now been distracted, for he now started admiring himself, adjusting his tin hat to a more rakish angle, saying "you really think so Jock". It was the Captain that brought him back to reality, saying "for Christ's sake Sparrer let's get on with it, we can't hang around here all night".

The Captains anxious voice snapped Jock back into reality, for he said "right have you got the Semtex Sparrer". "Of course I have said Sparrer producing it from within the army haversack, what do you think this is? a slab of fruit cake". Jock took it from him and examined it closely, for he knew that Sparrer had a bit of a sweet tooth. Indeed Sparrer had been known in the past, to consume a whole slab of fruitcake to himself. The thought had crossed Jocks now panicking mind. That it was just possible, that Sparrer might have eaten a whole block of Semtex, and was now going to attempt to blow up the bridge, with a two pound slab of his mothers fruit cake.

A much relieved Jock, found that he was indeed holding in his hands a block of Semtex. Attached to the block, was a length of fuse, around a foot in length. "We have checked the fuse haven't we" confirmed Jock, "it should burn for around ten minutes". "Yes I've checked it" said Sparrer irritably, "a two foot length burned from the start of Coronation Street until the adverts came on, so I cut it in half, it should be alright". Hearing this technical conversation, on how to determine the burning time of a length of fuse. Made the Captain very happy, happy that he had the forethought, to be wearing his high-speed trainer's, he might just need them.

Jock removed Sparrer's haversack, from over his left shoulder and placed it on the ground. As he did so, Sparrer told him "you look after that while I'm down there, that was my dad's favourite ferreting bag". Jock nodded his head, then removed the coils of rope from round Sparrer's other shoulder. Asking at the same time, "are we sure this will be strong enough". "Course I'm sure" snapped back Sparrer, "It's me what's going down on it isn't it, think I'd nick something that wasn't safe". "This is best quality mooring line, off Brian the boat's barge, that thing must weight fifty tons at least, course it's safe".

Jock tied one end of the line around Sparrer's middle, saying, "right let's have a last check on everything". "Matches, have you got your matches" Sparrer patted one of the pockets on his boiler suit, and replied "yes all correct". "Good" murmured Jock, "Sellotape to stick the Semtex on with"? Sparrer patted another pocket, again saying "all correct". Jock's voice now had a nervous edge to it, as said "right lets run through the plan one more time". "I will lower you down on the rope, then when you have taped the Semtex to a girder let me know". "Then lastly, when you have lit the fuse, you call up to me again, I will pull you up, and we will all run like mad, OK".

With the rope secured around his chest and under his armpits, Sparrer climbed up onto the four-foot high guard-rails of the bridge. Here he stood upright and saluted, then mockingly saying, "Captain, those who are about to die, salute you". The Captain was not amused, replying "you'll die alright, if you don't stop mucking around". "Its not a penny banger we are playing with, its two pounds of bloody high explosive, get on with it man". Sparrer lowered himself down over the bridge rail, until he was resting with his two elbows on the rail. Jock and the Captain took up the slack in the rope; Jock said "ready to launch Sparrer". "No not yet" replied sparrer trying grimly to hold on with one hand, and move his tin hat back from his eyes with the other". Jock was getting cross, and it showed in his voice "what's the matter man? your not backing out now are you". "No" replied Sparrer, struggling to hold on with one hand, "You've still got the Semtex Jock, hurry up I can't hold on much longer". Jock retrieved the block of Semtex, from where he had left it on the bridge girders. Then went to hand it over to Sparrer, who refused it saying " I can't let go with my hands, put it in between my teeth". So Sparrer, holding on grimly to the rope with both hands, and with a two-pound block of Semtex between his teeth, disappeared from view.

Jock and the Captain lowered away on the rope, until Sparrer's voice was heard from below, saying, "that will do hold it there". For some minutes Jock and the Captain held on to the rope, nervously looking all around them. It was Jock who's patience left him first, he called over the bridge "every thing alright Sparrer". All that could be heard from below, was an indistinct

mumbling sound. Jock worried and called out again "everything all right down there Sparrer". At last Sparrer's rung out from below, "no its bloody not, I've got the Semtex between my teeth how can I speak to you, I will call up when I've finished". Further minutes passed with nothing heard from Sparrer. Jock was getting decidedly more and more nervous. The Captain was now regretting, that he ever got involved in this crazy stunt, at all. Jock called out again, "have you finished yet Sparrer" again after a pause, Sparrer's voice drifted up from below saying tersely. "No I haven't, I've told you once, I will call you when I have finished". Jock called straight back down to him, "what's up, is there a problem". This time Sparrer's voice answered back straight away, somewhat crossly, saying " yes I can't find the end of the bloody Sellotape in the bloody dark".

It was the Captain, who spoke first, saying slowly and morosely, "you know what Jock, we thought we had planned for every eventuality". "Then what happens? we didn't anticipate for what must be one of the most difficult things in the world, to occur". "What are you on about" said Jock "what must be one of the most difficult things in the world". "Think about it Jock, Sparrer's dangling on a bit of string, from a bridge, in the middle of the river Thames. Then in the pitch black of night, he's got to find the end, of a roll of Sellotape!". "There can't be many more things in life, that are more impossible to do than that, can there!". "Then just to cap it all, Sparrer's had three pints of Powerfull, adding grimly "I doubt if he could do it, even if he was sober".

Jock called down over the bridge again "Sparrer, Sparrer, use the matches to find the end of the Sellotape with". After a short pause Sparrer's voice echoed back "I already have done, but the wind keeps blowing them out, but don't worry I think I have cracked it". On hearing the last remark made by Sparrer, Jock and the Captain relaxed a little. A further minute passed by and Jock began to worry yet again. He called down "Sparrer have you finished yet". Sparrer's voice annoyed again, called back "I've told you, I will call when I'm ready to come up". This time it was a worried Captain that called down "but Sparrer you said everything was all right, you had cracked it". This time Sparrer's echoing voice was downright annoyed, saying "and so I bloody have, I've lit the bloody fuse, and I'm looking for the end of the Sellotape, by the light of that".

The suspense and waiting was getting unbearable, both for the Captain and Jock. It seemed that all their work and planning was going to be undone, just because Sparrer couldn't find the end of a roll of Sellotape in the dark. "My kingdom for a nail groaned Jock, just as well for old King what's-his-name, they didn't stick horseshoe's on with Sellotape ain't it". "Cos if they did, he'd be offering his kingdom, to the man that could invent a Sellotape with non sticky ends, that can be undone easily."

At last the words they had both been waiting for, rang out clear from beneath the bridge. Sparrer's voice with an air of great urgency in it, sounded out from below. "Jock Captain, pull me up, quickly, hurry up". As Jock took in the slack of the rope, he called back over the bridge "everything all right Sparrer, have you done it". Sparrer's voice sounded pleadingly, "don't waste time talking man, pull me up quickly, hurry up". It was the by now, very anxious Captains turn to enquire, "what's up Sparrer something gone wrong". There was now a definite tone of fear, in Sparrer's voice as he shrieked. "For Christ's sake man pull me up quickly, there's a bloody great boat on the river, and its coming straight for me".

Jock and the Captain hauled with all their might on the rope, encouraged by Sparrer's excited cries of "hurry up, hurry up it almost here". At last Sparrer's head and shoulders, appeared above the bridge rail. He threw one arm over the rail to support his weight, saying "Christ that was a near thing, it nearly got me". Then almost as an afterthought, he brought his other arm up onto the bridge rail. There still clutched in his hand, was the two-pound block of Semtex, with its still spluttering fuse, with about half an inch left to burn. Then just as an after-thought he quickly handed the Semtex to the Captain, saying "better get rid of this Captain quick, it's only got a second or two to go". The Captain in an involuntary reflex action took the Semtex from him, in doing so he let go of the rope. The Captains arm went back, to throw the bomb up into the air and into the river. As the bomb curved gracefully through the air. The Captain having let go of the rope, caused Sparrer to descend not quite so gracefully through the air, back down into the murky darkness.

Seconds after the Captain despatched the Semtex; a large muffled underwater explosion was heard. Followed by a bright flash of light, then much gurgling, and hissing, and bubbling, of water. Slowly as all this noise and commotion died away, a fainter sound in the background. A human voice calling help! help! Sparrer was still alive, but obviously and as usual; in deep trouble.

Jock went to the rope to pull Sparrer back up again, but to his horror, there was no weight on the rope. After a few seconds pulling the end of the rope came into view, but with no Sparrer attached to it, Sparrer had disappeared!.

The Captain called out in a panic "where are you Sparrer, are you alright". Sparrer's voice echoed back from below "I'm down here where the hell do you think I am". Then followed by "no I'm not alright, I'm stuck on this bloody great boat, get me off". Both Jock and the Captain looked over the bridge together. There immediately below them was a huge, floating gin palace type boat. Below also, standing up on the sharp end of the boat, and vigorously waving his arms about was Sparrer. Who was repeating his urgent cries for rescue "come on lads don't muck about get me off, before someone comes along".

As Jock gathered up the rope ready to throw back down again, the Captain shouted "what boat is it Sparrer". Sparrer's terse voice came back "what stupid bloody question is that, it could be the Marie Celeste for all I know, cause there's no bugger on it". The Captain shouted down again "are you sure there's no one on it, at all". Well nobodies come along to say welcome aboard, and as I haven't carried out a roll call yet, I'm assuming, the boat's empty, now throw that bloody rope down". The Captains brain was now working overtime; he was trying to remember some obscure detail of nautical law from his seafaring days. He called down yet again "are you sure there's nobody on that boat Sparrer, somebody must have been on board to get it here". "Fer crying out loud Captain, how many more times, there's nobody on the boat but me". "There's two or three bloke's splashing about in the river, perhaps the boats got something to do with them, but they are all too busy swimming to chatter to me, now get me off of here!".

What to do next, was now clear in the Captains mind, and he again shouted down to Sparrer. "Sparrer if there's nobody on that boat at all, we could claim salvage on it, it could be worth a fortune". "All we have to do, is tie the rope to the boat, and then to the bridge, to make the boat secure and safe, we could be rich men". The rope crashed down alongside Sparrer, the Captains voice told him "its already tied to the bridge Sparrer, just make it fast to the boat".

Sparrer looked down at the rope lying on the deck, and agonised, if he tied it to the boat, that would be his escape route gone. If he didn't tie it to the boat, and escaped up it, that could be thousands of pounds gone. It was all right for the Captain up there on dry land, he was safe out of harms way. If anything went wrong it was he, Sparrer, that would have to go down with the sinking ship. He picked up the rope, still not knowing whether to tie it to the boat, or to escape up it. Sparrer needed help, help to make up his mind, should he, or shouldn't he secure the boat. Help came from a most unexpected direction; in fact it came from out of the complete darkness. It came from the general direction of the surrounding river. It came in the form of cries for help, "help, help me I'm drowning". The crew of the Marie Celeste, were in trouble, and having second thoughts about having abandoned the ship.

Sparrer was still standing on the deck of the boat, with the rope in his hands undecided. When yet more, urgent cries came, it came from above, it was the Captains voice. "Sparrer quick, get up here quick, the police are coming". "We can see their blue flashing light coming down the high street, if you hurry we can still get away". Poor old Sparrer! life never had been easy. It was always's him he thought to himself, that gets captured, as he sadly made fast the line to a bollard on the boat. Above him the voices of Jock and the Captain, called out apologetically and mournfully "Sparrer, we've got to go, the police are almost here now, sorry mate, good luck". As he heard the sound of their feet, hurrying away on the bridge above. He thought sadly again to himself, why was it was always him, Sparrer Williams, that got the shitty end of the stick, in life.

CHAPTER 11.

Some months later the bar of the Wherry, was the scene of great activity. Both Pearl the Captain, and a smart young waitress dressed neatly in black and white, were laying out the tables for a high-class function. The tables were immaculately dressed, with the best house silver and glassware. On each table were placed bouquets of flowers, set in small crystal vases. Sitting at the bar, disconsolately and all alone, though unusually smartly dressed was Jock. He sat nursing a half-empty glass of beer. Gloomily he said, "ain't quite the same in here, since you stopped selling Old Powerfull". Abruptly, Pearl stopped what she was doing, took up an aggressive stance with her hands on her hips and said. "I should damn well think so Jock, after all the mischief you and Sparrer got up to, when you were drinking Old Powerfull". The Captain who at first looked worried, when Jock had brought up the subject of Old Powerfull. Cheered up considerably, when he didn't hear his name, included in the list of miscreant's, then carried on with his work whistling.

"Some people came out of than night smelling of roses", said Jock loudly, and looking directly at the Captain. "Sparrer got what he deserved", said the Captain defensively, "and come to think of it you are lucky not to be in the same boat too". "Puningly speaking of course; just because you haven't been captured yet, doesn't mean you won't ever be". For a while Jock sipped his beer in sulky silence. Then Pearl, announced that she was off to the kitchen, to see how the buffet was coming along and left the bar. Jock immediately resumed the conversation with the Captain, saying accusingly. "You can talk, its all your fault that this has all happened to Sparrer". "If you hadn't told him about claiming salvage on the boat, he would have escaped with us, and none of it would have happened". The Captain also, was now quite annoyed, for he snapped back. "It's nothing to do with me, and you know it Jock, you're just upset because you have lost your drinking, and snooker partner". The conversation stopped abruptly again, as Pearl walked back into the bar.

Pearl as always, knew all things that were happening in the Wherry. She had known for some time now, that Jock had been blaming her husband the Captain, for Sparrer's fate. She thought it was time she cleared the air. Adopting her hands on hips stance, she said coldly "Jock Harper its no good you blaming my husband the Captain for what's happened to Sparrer". Call it women's intuition if you like, but I've seen what's been coming to him for a long time now. It's happened, there's nothing you or anyone else can do about it, so lets just forget it". "I suggest that in your case Jock, you just remember the good times". Then adding with a hint of a smile on her face. "I've no doubt that in the fullness of time, he will be back with you getting up to his old tricks, all over again, just like the old days". Pearl then cleared the bar, ordering the Captain to go and get the champagne out of the fridge, ready for the function. Then telling the pretty waitress Polly, who was in fact her much younger sister, to go and assist preparing the buffet meal. In effect leaving poor old Jock, to stew in his misery juices, all on his own.

The door to the bar swung open, and Fred Alderton walked in, greeting Jock breezily with, "see your still in mourning then Jock". Then turning to the tall thin sad looking man, who had followed him into the pub, said. "Got someone here Jock, I thought you'd like to meet". Fred made formal introductions, saying "Jock this is Tom, Tom this is Jock". Fred then went on to explain, "I only brought Tom here today, to see Gloria in action on the bridge". "I even took my invalid sticker down, to make it more exciting". "Of course I clean forgot; Gloria's got more important things to do today". "Then I remembered, this is the bloke that you lot didn't believe existed, so I brought him in to meet you".

The waitress Polly appeared behind the bar to serve them. Fred ordered a pint of bitter for himself, then turned to Tom saying, "suppose you want a pint of Guinness Tom Eh!". Polly started to pour the drinks, Fred added "when you have finished doing the drinks love, can we have a pen, and piece of paper please". "Then where's the Captain" asked Fred, "he ought to see this, old Tom's a genius". As with all good pub landlord's, the Captain had heard his name mentioned in the other bar, and immediately appeared, saying "see what". Fred waved the Captain over saying "come and watch this Captain, old Tom here is an artist and a genius". "Adding wait till Polly has served the drinks, then we'll show you a trick"

Fred took the piece of paper off Polly, and handed them to Tom saying "right oh Tom, show them your party piece write your name". Tom took the pen, and wrote upon the piece of paper the words YLLIER'O SAMAOHT. "What's so clever about that?" said Jock "it's a load of gibberish". Fred now had a huge grin on his face and said "right oh Tom, write the second bit". Tom took the pen and wrote, GNITIRW RORRIM OD NAC I ,CIXELSYD A TON MA I. This time it was the Captain that snorted, "more bloody gibberish, the man must be dyslexic". The mention of the word dyslexic, sent Fred into peals of laughter. He slapped his thigh in delight, then saying, "right Tom write that last word I told you". Tom picked up the pen again, and this time wrote down a single word XETMES. This time both Jock and the Captain remained quiet, for this word, they both recognised only to well! it was SEMTEX spelt backwards.

Fred gleefully picked up the piece of paper that Tom had written upon. He walked over to a mirror hanging in the bar, and held the paper in front of it. Then said both to the Captain and Jock "right now come over here, and read the writing in the mirror". It was the captain that read aloud "THOMAS O'REILLY. I AM NOT A DYSLEXIC, I CAN DO MIRROR WRITING. SEMTEX". The point, that Fred went on to make, was entirely lost upon both Jock and the Captain, for he shouted gleefully. "See I was right all along, he wasn't dyslexic, and he wasn't a Czechoslovakian, or even Polish, he was an Irishman all the time, just like I said he was".

Jock's mood suddenly changed to an even darker mood as he said quietly "so this is the bloke that sold you the Semtex then Fred". "Yes replied Fred cheerfully, I met up with him at the boot fair again last week". Jock now looked directly at Tom, and saying menacingly "so you're the man that's to blame for what's happened to my friend Sparrer". The Captain quickly interrupted "saying come on Jock, Sparrer didn't do to badly out of it, did he?". Jock persisted "saying, he might not have; but I've lost a good mate". Polly behind the bar had seen the mood's beginning to darken, and in an attempt to cheer things up said. "So far we've only heard bits and pieces of this story, why doesn't somebody tell us what actually, happened".

After a pause, the Captain said "I don't suppose it can do any harm now can it, I had better tell the story, Jock will only distort it". The Captain settled down and told the story, saying. "When the police car arrived on the bridge, me and Jock scarpered, leaving poor old Sparrer marooned on the boat". "Now Sparrer having nothing better to do, thought he might as well make himself useful". "So he set about helping all those people, shouting for help in the water". "Well Sparrer pulled them all out one by one, with a boat hook". "It then turns out, that the owner of the boat was a rich Arab prince". "Who because he was afraid of being assassinated, would only go out on the boat at night". "So that when the Semtex came sailing over the bridge, and went bang, he thought somebody was trying to do him in". "So him and the rest of the crew panicked and dived over the side, only to be later rescued by our gallant Sparrer"

Polly interrupted she was still puzzled "surely they must have known that Sparrer had something to do with the explosion, didn't they". "No" said the Captain smiling and shaking his head, "that was the funny side of it all". "The Arab thought Sparrer had actually climbed down the rope to rescue them, they thought he was a hero". "Then later when Sparrer got around to mentioning, a possible tiny little salvage claim on the boat". "That was all your fault captain, you put that idea into his head, broke in Jock". " Well continued the Captain, the Arab prince simply gave the boat to him, lock stock and barrel, for saving his life". Jock interrupted saying bitterly; "yes and then he sold the boat, for two hundred thousand pounds". Adding sadly "a fat lot it will do him now, he's not a free man anymore". The Captain was smiling gently to himself as he said. "Just to think Jock, all of this happened, just because Sparrer couldn't find the end of a roll of Sellotape, Eh!

Tom the Irishman who had been sitting very quietly, then thoughtfully said. "I don't think that I would mind to much, not being a free man, if I had two hundred thousand pounds in the bank". Ah! but that's the rub explained Jock, "he hasn't got it in the bank". "You all know Sparrer, easy come easy go, the day after he got a cheque for two hundred pounds, he wrote out, a cheque for two hundred thousand pounds, its all gone". "What he's spent it all," said Tom the Irishman incredulously. "Well" not exactly spent it, replied Jock "he calls it investing, but either way, he can't get his hands on the actual cash". Tom the Irishman shook his head sadly "sounds like a sorry mess, your mate Sparrer's got himself into alright".

The conversation was broken up abruptly by Pearls voice calling loudly "its here, the car is pulling up outside right now, everyone in their places quickly". Polly came around to the public

side of the bar; the Captain dashed outside to the car park, to escort the guest into the Wherry. Both Pearl and Polly began smoothing their dresses, and nervously touching their hair, so as to look their best. Jock and Fred stood down from their bar stools, and faced the entrance door to the Wherry. Tom the Irishman, although not quite sure what was happening, did likewise. For almost sixty seconds they all stood quietly, and waiting apprehensively.

The entrance door to the Wherry opened inwards, for a brief while hiding the person that had opened it behind the door. Then dressed in a smart lounge suit, and actually wearing a tie around his neck and a huge smile upon his face, into the bar stepped Sparrer. He turned back to the open doorway and held out his hand. Following behind him into the bar, dressed in a smartly tailored pink linen suit. Wearing a striking large brimmed hat to match, and holding in her hands a bouquet of flowers, came Gloria. Sparrer holding Gloria's hand, smiling hugely, announced "ladies and gentlemen I would like you to meet, the new Mrs Williams". Jock just could not believe his eyes, the terrible Gloria, the bridge Fuhress, was actually blushing. In fact in general, she was behaving just like a seventeen year old, nervous girl. The transformation was beyond belief!. Sparrer could never have effected that, in only fifteen minutes of married life, Jock thought to himself.

More cars and more guests arrived back from the registry office, where the civil ceremony had been held. Soon the Wherry was filled with happy chattering people, sipping Sherries out of dainty glasses. Pearl, who was serving behind the bar, called out to Jock in a severe voice. The tone of which, Jock new only to well, he looked towards Pearl a trifle apprehensively, to his surprise she had a broad smile upon her face. She placed on the bar in front of him, a pint glass full of amber beer. Smilingly she said to him "special occasion Jock, calls for special beer, Old Powerfull!. Adding grimly but behave yourself, don't go blowing anything up. will you".

As the reception went on, under the effects of old Powerfull Jock began to mellow. Jock became almost jovial; Gloria wasn't such a bad old stick after all. Now that his best mate Sparrer, was joint bridge manager and owner. He might even get a part time job, collecting the bridge tolls; life was looking rosy once again.

It was in the gent's urinals, that Tom the Irishman finally got to speak to Jock in peace and quiet. Saying I just don't understand it at all Jock, it's a bloody mystery. "I thought your mate Sparrer had been sent to prison, for blowing up Westchurch Bridge". "Yet here he is, married to the lady he's supposed to hate the most, how did it all come about".

"The funny thing" replied Jock "is that nobody actually did blow up Westchurch Bridge". "I know that" said Tom, "but you had a damn good try didn't you". "Anyway" Tom carried on; "the authorities don't exactly approve of people exploding two pounds of Semtex, even if it is in the middle of a river". Jock explained "no; that's the funny thing, there was no explosion, at least not officially". "The police frogmen, spent two days swanning about in the river, looking for the remains of a bomb". "Which of course they never found, cause it was only a lump of plastic that went bang". "They in their wisdom, decided that it must have been a pocket of methane gas that had erupted. It was that, which had caused the disturbance in the river". "So; if there wasn't any bomb or explosion, then it couldn't have been The Captain, Sparrer, or me what did it; could it?".

Tom looked a happier man, it was all now becoming clear, and just one thing remained unexplained. "How was it then" he asked "that Sparrer married the woman, he supposedly hated the most". Jock smiled and gently shook his head saying "Sparrer never really hated Gloria, except perhaps on the day she barred him from the bridge". "Looking back with hindsight, I suppose even I could see the signs, that he was in love with her all along". Jock went on "then of course when he got the two hundred thousand, from the sale of the boat". "Gloria saw him in a different light, he now had marriageable prospects". "Especially as Gloria had cash flow problems with the bridge, it seemed the two were made for each other".

The Captain put his head around the door, and interrupted the conversation saying. "The speeches are beginning lads, you don't want to miss them do you". The speeching and toasting proceeded without incident. There were one or two nervous smiles, when the Captain said, "he hoped the marriage would go off with a bang". For of course Gloria knew nothing of explosive incidents, other than perhaps those of her own making. Sparrer made a small gaffe in his speech, when he said "in happiness and wealth, when of course he meant health".

After the speeches, Jock who had been standing nervously around, went up to the couple,

and announced "that he had his own special wedding gift for them". He led Gloria and Sparrer over to a far corner of the bar. There standing in a corner, was a package wrapped in brown corrugated cardboard. The package was about five feet high, and two feet around. Jock said simply and quietly, "this is my present for you both, I hope you like it". Gloria undid the string holding the package together and removed the cardboard wrapping. As the wrapping fell away, Gloria gave a small squeal of delight, saying Oh! It's one of my beautiful ornate lamp standards, that was stolen from the bridge". Jock nodded his head, and again said quietly "Yes and there's another seven, outside in the garage for you as well". Three months ago, Jock would just never have believed it. If someone had then told him, three months hence, Gloria would be hugging and kissing him. At the same time calling him a wonderful man, for giving her the bestest wedding present of all. Her beautiful lamp standards back, for hers and Sparrer's bridge. Sparrer was also looking both surprised and pleased, but at the same time mightily relieved, that no awkward questions were going to be asked, as to how Jock came by the lamp standards. It also explained to him, why Smiffy Jocks brother in law, had travelled all the way from Crayford to attend the wedding reception.

The Captain walked to the centre of the bar, cleared his throat and called loudly for silence. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to announce, that tonight we have a very special guest, at Gloria and Sparrer's wedding". "This gentleman has travelled some thousands of miles to be present tonight in Westchurch". The Captain then turned, and held out his hand towards the rear entrance to the bar. Then announced "ladies and gentlemen, Prince Arrister Benhali, of Poldi Arabia". Through the rear door walked a very tall Arabic looking gentleman, wearing pure white Arab robes and head-dress. Sparra's face was a picture of delight to behold, as he said "its me old mate Arri the Arab, and he's come to my wedding". The two men met in the middle of the bar, and embraced each other warmly. At last after the greetings finished, Sparrer introduced Arri to Gloria. Arri held Gloria's hand and looked at her admiringly, then went on to say "worth at least fifty camels Sparrer, you got a bargain there". Gloria's smile began to fade from her face, but Sparrer reassured her "its alright Gloria he's only joking, he's like that". The smile on Arri's face grew larger as he said, "yes indeed I was joking, I would willingly pay 200 camels for such a lady". Which only served to send Gloria, back into her blushing, seventeen-year old girl mannerism's yet again.

Arri stood next to Sparrer and Gloria, and said for all in the Wherry to hear. "Ladies and gentlemen I have come here to tonight, in order celebrate the wedding, and again give thanks, to the man that saved my life". "My wedding gift to them will be a very special gift!" "I propose both to mark and remember, both the man that saved my life and the place that it happened, at the same time giving the happy couple a joint present". "In the river at Westchurch, at the very place where I almost drowned". "I propose to erect a grand monument to my good friend Sparrer". "This monument I think will not only serve to remind him of that eventful night, when he saved my life". "But also a means of income for him and his beautiful wife, for the rest of their lives". Then turning to Sparrer, Arri handed him a long cardboard cylinder, like that used to hold maps. Saying to him "inside there is an artists impression of what my monument will be like".

Sparrer eagerly took the cap off of the tube, and withdrew the rolled up paper inside. He unfurled the paper, and held it out at arms length to look at it. For some seconds he looked at it blankly, then his jaw dropped, then he said "bloody hell!". Gloria struck him sharply with her elbow, and glared at him, for daring to swear in front of all the gathered guests. Sparrer mutely moved his arms, and the paper around so that Gloria could see it. For some seconds Gloria looked at it blankly, then her jaw dropped, and then Gloria said "bloody hell". Jock called out from the floor, "come on Sparrer show us then, lets see what this monuments like". Sparrer looked at Gloria questioningly; Gloria shrugged her shoulders resignedly.

Sparrer turned the paper slowly around, so that all could see what was on it. There upon the paper was a most expert, architects drawing of a bridge. Every detail of the bridge was drawn beautifully and correct. The twin towers at each end of the bridge, the elevated walkway between the tops of the two towers. If one looked carefully at the drawing. It was possible to see that the carriageway which carried the traffic across the bridge, was just beginning to part in the middle, and rise upwards. The proposed monument to Sparrer's bravery was to be an exact replica, of London's famous Tower Bridge. To be built crossing over the river Thames at Westchurch, in rural Oxfordshire!