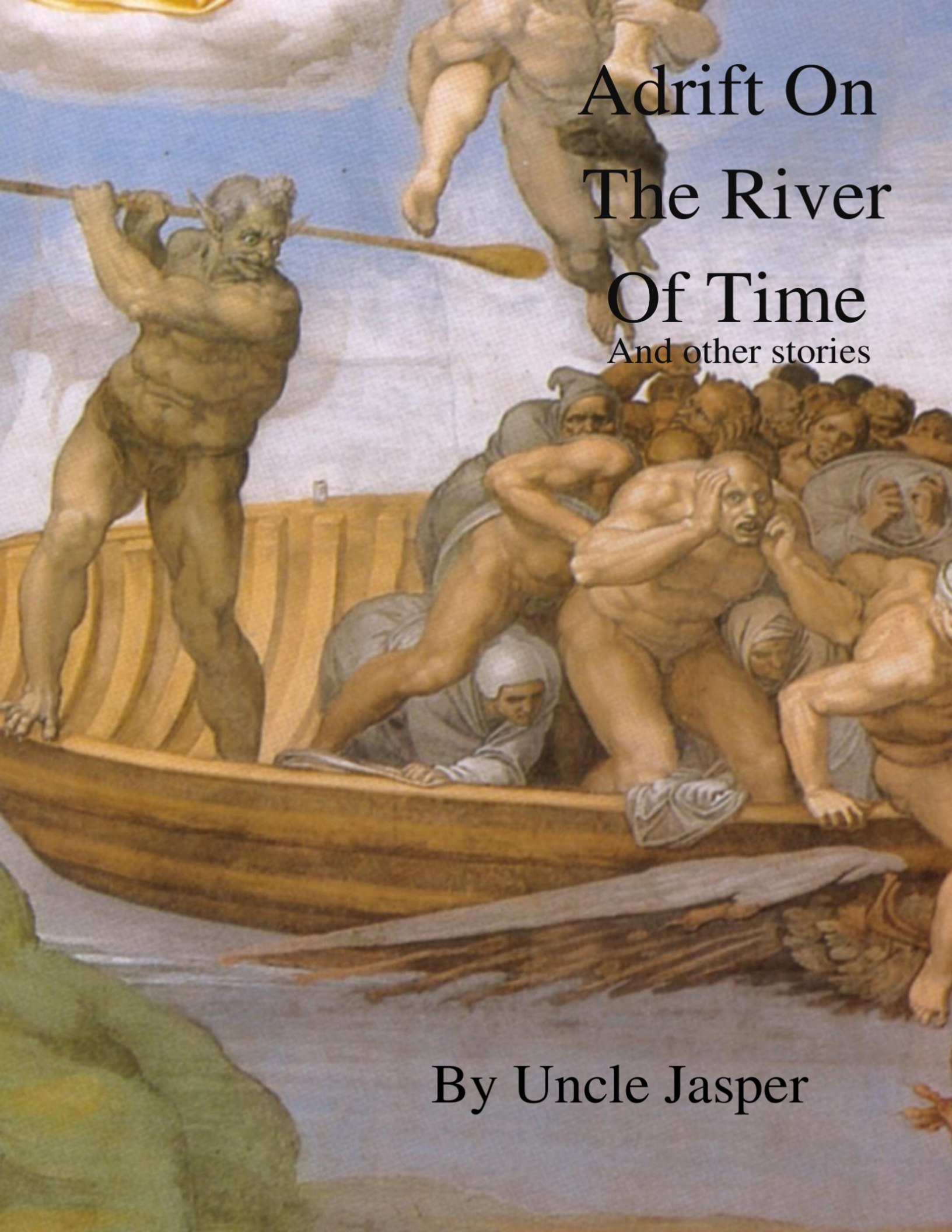




Adrift On The River Of Time

And other stories

By Uncle Jasper

ADRIFT ON THE RIVER OF TIME

And other stories

By Uncle Jasper

ISBN 978-0-9954192-6-1 (e-book)

Copyright© 2019 by Uncle Jasper
jasperlawson@hotmail.com

All rights reserved. The book contains material protected under international and national copyright laws and treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without express permission from the publisher.

Other books by this author

Derek Vortimer, MBA – Manager Of Worlds (ebook, 2018)

Detective In Time (ebook, 2018)

Queen Purpuss & Owl (ebook, 2018)

The Young Marvel (ebook, 2018)

Cover image: detail from the Last Judgement fresco by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

Some strange short stories
By Uncle Jasper

Suitable for weirdos, nerds, misfits and the downtrodden. The rest of you keep clear.

[Adrift on the River of Time](#)

[Patrick and the Serpent](#)

[The Veteran](#)

[The Lost City](#)

[The Ugly Duckling](#)

[The Soldier](#)

[The Bird of Life](#)

[The Art Appreciation Society](#)

[Pillow talk](#)

[Noah God and Mrs Noah](#)

[The Crooked Man](#)

Adrift On The River Of Time

I was caught off guard by members of the Local Chapter of the Killjoy Club they jumped me, forced me into a wooden, barrel, nailed down the top, and threw me, barrel and all, into the River of Time.

Before my barrel bobbed away from the bank someone shouted through the bung hole that the average speed of the current was about five kilometers an hour and that would give me plenty of time to arrange my thoughts before the barrel plunged over the edge into the Devil's Throat, which, he said, was about five kilometers downstream.

The Devil's Throat? Surely that was a mistake. The Devil's Throat was much further away than five kilometers. It was certainly on a river, but not the River of Time. It is a chasm, part of the Iguazu falls of South America. Vast volumes of water do not so much fall as collapse over the edge into The Devil's Throat with a terrible roaring noise. There are birds down there too, about the size of a magpie-lark. They fly through a mist of spume and spray churned up by the falling column of water

These birds prey on startled insects whose peaceful passage, floating along the river, had been turned into chaos. Water and spray is the world of these birds and they make nests on sheer rock faces protected by tumbling curtains of water. You can see them flying straight into a waterfall to get to the nest behind. If you don't believe me go to Buenos Aires and take the tour.

To return to our story. The River of Time could go anywhere. To Iguazu as well as countless other destinations. No one could predict the future and so I set out to an unknown ending in a leaking barrel and only a telephone for company.

I had pleaded with my enemies not to drop the phone into the barrel before they started to nail it shut. Arguing was useless with these bitter people, they just wanted me to suffer.

My wife rang soon after I was pushed away from the bank and was gliding through peaceful waters far from any waterfall. She wanted to know where I was.

I explained that I had been forced into a leaky barrel, thrown into the River of Time and could possibly disappear into the Devil's Throat in about an hour after the beginning of our conversation. I said 'If that is to be my fate I hope the barrel would not injure any birds on the way down.'

'You're a liar,' she screamed. 'I've never heard such a bizarre excuse for not coming home. You're in a sleazy club somewhere with those low-life, good for nothing, useless mongrels you call friends!'

'I don't know where they are,' I retorted, 'but I am sitting in a leaky barrel and floating to an unknown destination. Even if I don't go into the Devil's Throat I am bound to end up somewhere equally discouraging. Once one is afloat on the River of Time there is no saying where the voyage will end. Every one of us is on a one way trip into the future; apart from that all is uncertain.'

'Your future is to end up in a shelter for hopeless drunks because I'm not going to hang around waiting for you to come home,

I said 'I admit I do enjoy the company of cheerful, jovial friends, and am not averse to the occasional drink, but to imply that I am a victim of alcohol is going too far.'

She slammed the phone down before I could say anything further, perhaps we were fated never to meet again. At least that was one comforting thought to cheer me on this dismal voyage.

I was wondering if I could force the telephone through the bung-hole and let the river take care of the problem. It rang once more.

I pressed the button expecting another round of abuse, but it was someone else altogether. A familiar voice cried out 'Bernie, where are you? We're all down at the tavern waiting and the boys are getting restless. We can't start the serious drinking until you get here', and the quartette can't get going without its bass man.'

Once again I explained my predicament and the uncertain fate that awaited me.

'Oh, that's too bad Bernie', was the response. 'Have you rung triple zero yet? They might be able to send someone to look for you.'

I pointed out that the River of Time has neither a beginning nor an end, and if the cops went looking for me in the twenty-first century the barrel may have drifted into the twenty-second, or there may be a loop in time and I was back in the nineteenth or twentieth. If a river has no beginning and no ending then it can't have a middle either, so the cops would not have the remotest idea where to search for me.

'Hard luck, Bernie.' Was the response. 'We're gunna miss ya. I'll tell the boys they'll have to find another bass man. Have a nice day, now, and don't you do anything I wouldn't do.' He rang off.

Those conversations seemed to have cut me away from the life I knew, which was a relief but I was not free yet because I could not force the telephone through the bung-hole and dreaded another call from my wife.

The barrel was riding low in the water because of the leaks, and cold water was lapping around my behind. Most uncomfortable! I peered through the bung-hole to see where I was.

It was pitch black out there and I thought the river must have gone underground because the rustling, burbling sound of flowing water seemed to re-echo quietly from stony walls. The barrel would sink presently and I wondered how long I would lie in this watery grave before a maintenance crew found me.

My thoughts were interrupted by a heavy banging on the top of the barrel. The impact seemed to start the seams and even more water flowed in.

Someone, or something very powerful ripped the top off the barrel and a huge, angry face glared down at me.

'What the hell do you think yer doin?' It roared. 'You an illegal immigrant or somethin'; and 'you're a fare evader, aren't you? Thought you'd sneak in without paying the ferryman. Well, you thought wrong, pal. This is my patch and I've worked the ferry for the past three thousand years and never lost anyone overboard yet, Though I might start now I've found a low-down rotten scab trying to sneak past without paying.'

These remarks put me in mind of my wife but said 'It's not my fault! The Killjoys hate people who take a drink now and then and laugh a lot, so they jumped me, nailed me into the barrel and dropped it into the River of Time.'

The face said 'How do I know you didn't nail it shut and climb in afterwards?'

'Gimme a break will ya! How could I do that?'

The stranger had to think about this. He was not the sharpest reasoner I had ever met so it took a while, but at last he had a mental breakthrough and realized the position that I was in.

‘OK. Maybe it’s not your fault,’ he grumbled, ‘but I’m still the ferryman here and no one crosses the river except I take ‘em.’

I thought of something the ferryman had said.

‘You say you’ve been on the job for three thousand years?’

‘Yeah, give or take a century or two. I took over from me dad. He was getting a bit long in the tooth and I was old enough to look after the business, so I been here ever since.’

It was clear where we were. This was Charon the Ferryman, and the river was the Styx, which divided hell from the rest of the underworld. My barrel had drifted far off course.

Charon said, ‘Let me help you out.’ He caught my collar and lifted me out of the barrel one-handed.

It was dark and we were standing on a stone quay. The River Styx ran steadily between us and a distant bank on the other side which was illuminated from time to time by wandering plumes of fire.

I was cramped after sitting all that time squashed in a barrel, but managed to stand up. The barrel drifted away into the darkness.

A large and ancient rowing-boat was tied to the quay where it strained against the mooring ropes. The Styx was running so strongly past the quay that the stationary boat had a bow wave of its own.

‘You’re Charon?’

‘How’d ya know I’m Charon?’ he asked.

I said ‘I went on a tour of the Vatican once and in the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo painted a picture of you driving your passengers off the boat. They didn’t want hell as a destination. Have you seen your picture?’

‘I haven’t seen it, but I’ve heard about it often enough. All the cardinals and bishops who come through bound for hell tell me what a handsome fellow I am, and that it’s the most popular picture in the chapel, even though Michelangelo had painted the walls and ceiling with pictures. They all try to suck up to me, see, but it doesn’t do them any good. They go to hell anyway. I’ve even ferried a few Popes across in me time, but not so many since the Reformation.’

‘You should ask for leave to visit the Vatican’ I suggested, ‘and join one of the tours that go through the Sistine Chapel. Even though you’re a minor Greek deity they wouldn’t mind. Anyone can go on a tour, as long as they pay’.

Charon seemed interested in the idea so I pressed on. ‘Michelangelo did a good job with the painting. You look very commanding belting your passengers with an oar to make them get off the boat and finish their trip to hell.’

Charon looked even more thoughtful. I had appealed to his vanity and he would like to see the painting. If Michelangelo had painted my picture I would want to see it too.

‘Don’t forget, Charon, you haven’t had a holiday in three thousand years. You must have accrued a decent wad of long-service leave in all that time.’

‘Three hundred years,’ he said. ‘That’s not bad; and I could really use a holiday. But who would look after the business while I was away?’

‘I could do that,’ I said. ‘The Fates must have had some reason for sending me here.’

Charon looked at me thoughtfully. ‘Pick up that oar.’

The oars were lying on the cobblestones at our feet. They were not as thick as a telegraph pole, and not quite as long, but not far off. After a struggle I managed to raise one end.

Charon laughed at my endeavours.. ‘A pip-squeak like you couldn’t handle my job. How would you cross a river with this current if you can’t handle the oar, and how would drive the passengers off on the other side if you can’t even lift one end of it?’

‘You’ve been on this job a thousand years too long,’ I retorted. ‘All you need is the most powerful outboard motor on the market. It’d make this old boat of yours slice through the water like a hot knife through butter. Oars have had it. And as for getting the passengers off on the other side you can order a good quality electric cattle-prod, that should get rid of them in no time.

Charon seemed impressed by this

‘By the way’, I asked. ‘What sort of night life do they have here?’

‘Terrific!’ He said. ‘Go to the Firepit, tell them I sent you and you’ll get the hottest drinks in any known world; always good company there, too. The barmaids are beaut kids but you wouldn’t want to start any trouble; they got forked tails and they know how to use them.’

We talked things over for a while and eventually he decided to take his accrued leave and put me in charge of the business, together with the modern improvements I had suggested..

So Charon might be away for the next three hundred years and when you come this way you will probably meet me. The fare is no longer a penny because one has to allow for inflation. Bring \$50, nothing less, otherwise you will never be able to cross the river Styx and go to hell.

Replacing Charon

I was drifting down the river Styx, in charge of a boat full of lost souls destined for hell, when the phone rang. It was my wife calling; naturally I was upset.

Several times I had tried to throw the cell phone away but it kept coming back. I cautiously said, ‘Hello dear’.

‘Don’t you hello dear, me. Where are you now?’

‘I’m drifting down the Styx with a boat-load of discontented lost souls. I told you before, Charon, the ferryman, had a lot of long service leave to use up so I took over the business while he was away. I should be home in about three hundred years.’

I could hear heavy breathing at the other end of the phone.

‘These stories of yours are getting wilder and wilder. Now get out of the pub, night-club, wherever you are, and you come straight home. The children are crying for you, God knows why, and the rent’s due. The Housing Commission people say I have to pay up or else.’

‘Or else, what?’

‘They say we can have a house in Nar Nar Goon West. But first they have to buy some plastic sheeting to cover the holes in the roof, and get rid of a pack of dingos that are living off the rats in the house.’

‘Sorry dear, I can’t do anything about it. When I took over the business from Charon he ordered a large outboard motor because I couldn’t handle the oars; and an electric cattle prod so I could persuade the passengers to get out when we reached hell. Well, the outboard cut out a little while ago and I can’t fix it.’

An exasperated sigh was breathed into the phone. She said, ‘Just come home,. I’ll go to Centrelink and explain that I’ve got a lunatic on my hands and maybe Medicare will pay for psychiatric treatment.’

'I don't need a psychiatrist, I need a mechanic who can fix an outboard motor. None of the lost souls on board know a thing about outboards. Anyway, I sent you some money, didn't you get it?'

She answered through what seemed to be gritted teeth. 'Yes, I got it. A messenger brought the money. Very amusing, I don't think. He was almost naked, had wings on his heels a funny looking helmet and he carried a stick with snakes writhing round it. He said his name was Hermie.'

'No, no! My dear, that was Hermes, messenger of the gods; the stick you saw with the snakes on it is actually the Caduceus, his symbol of office. He plays an important part in the story of Mount Olympus which was the home of the Greek gods -She screeched, 'Bernie Shut up. I don't want any semi-naked men, even if they have winged heels, ringing the door bell, and I could have done without the snakes.'

'He tried every apartment on the ground floor looking for me. But no one could understand him, not that they were listening much on account of the snakes. I wish Xantippe hadn't been at home. He tried her apartment. She understands ancient Greek, and doesn't mind snakes, so she brought him up to me. We had the elevator to ourselves too.'

'Who's Xantippe?'

'Xantippe Socrates. You know her, ground floor, always fighting with the neighbors and screaming at her husband, poor old Mr Socrates, though she seems to like me.'

'Oh yeah, Mr Socrates. He's a bit of a Bolshie, isn't he? Always against the government, always speaking on street corners, stirring up young people to riot. What a nutter!'

'Yeah, that was the problem, Xantippe wanted him to get a decent job, and earn some money well he's died since you left, drank a big cup of hemlock. Xantippe said the government made him do it because they were sick of his agitating and causing trouble.'

'That's a bit extreme isn't it?' I said. 'He probably did it to get away from her nagging. I'm sorry the old boy's gone but you got the money didn't you? It was very kind of Hermes to go to all that trouble; we are only casual acquaintances after all. I suppose being messenger of the gods he likes to deliver things.'

'Yes, but what's the use of a lot of old Greek coins to me. The bank wouldn't take them.'

'Alright, if the bank won't take them try the landlord'.

'That didn't work either, and Hermie disappeared before the police and three ambulances arrived, and no one believed my story.'

'What were the ambulances for?'

'You idiot, they were there to revive the people who had seen the snakes. Some had heart attacks and had to be taken to the hospital. The government snake catcher was here too. He was telling me off for bringing snakes into a built up area. He asked me Hermie's address and I couldn't tell him.'

'I'm sorry but I can't talk right now. The lost souls are restless. We've passed the landing place at hell, and we're just drifting with the stream. They want to know where we're going and I don't know any more than they do.'

'Bernard, don't you hang up on me! If you want to send me something sensible do it through Australia Post. At least the posties don't carry snakes round with them'.

I had to close the phone at that point. There were other things to think about; the passengers were becoming menacing. Their leader was a fat bishop who had committed all fourteen deadly sins. There used to be seven but one of the Popes added seven more and the bishop broke those too. He was now trying to stir up trouble on the ferry.

The bishop was fat, still wore his clerical collar, and addressed me as though I was a congregation that was not putting enough money into the collection plate

'My man!' he said. I hate it when people call me "my man".

'My man, there are about a hundred people on this boat and we each paid \$50 for our fare.'

I hurriedly checked my phone to make sure it was off. I did not want my wife to hear any mention of people paying me \$50 per head for my services. Women should not have to worry about financial matters; besides she would squander the money on housekeeping or rent.

I threw the phone overboard but it bounced back after hitting the river and landed in my pocket. It always does that.

'The other passengers tell me you are not Charon the regular ferryman. If so I must enquire why is he not in charge. And why are we subject to this shameful incompetence. We appear to have missed the regular landing place because the "Welcome to Hell" signs are now behind us, and we are drifting further away.'

'Charon's away because he worked the ferry for three thousand years and now he's on three hundred years long service leave; so he won't be back for a while. Anyway bishop, you're more anxious than most people to get to hell.'

'I have urgent appointments, and duties to fulfill'. Some of my students at the theology college have predeceased me and were waiting at the landing in a welcome party; I saw them!

'There has been a change of plans, the motor has cut out so we're not going to hell.'

'Well, where are we going?'

'I don't know. This river runs pretty fast but we'll have to come ashore somewhere.'

The Bishop was enraged. 'But I am to deliver a lecture tonight on "Current Trends in Theology". It is most important that I get there.'

'You'll probably arrive at hell in the end, but not for a while.'

The bishop turned away. I think he wanted to stir up some trouble with the passengers.

A young man dressed in a tunic, once white but now grey and tattered, which reached to his knees, and with a frayed rope tied round his waist approached me when the bishop left. He carried a lyre, which is a sort of harp, and had been busking on the ferry, plucking away at the strings, singing, and trying to cadge a few coins, without much success.

He introduced himself. 'I am Prometheus, a fallen Greek god.'

'Oh, yeah!, and I'm Emperor of China.' I had heard this line before. There were quite a few beggars around the landing stage who claimed to be Prometheus.

No, no. I am the real one. I saved the human race once because I stole fire from heaven and brought it down to earth. You humans were in a bad way until I gave you fire, You couldn't cook your food, you couldn't warm yourselves.'

'That was very kind, but could you do us another favor and tell me how to fix this outboard motor?'

'I don't know about such things, but I think its vital essence has gone.'

'What, it's out of fuel?'

'I don't know but I feel its life force has drained away.'

I checked, and the god was right. The tank was bone dry. We drifted on with the current.

'Zeus, the chief god, Lord of Mount Olympus, punished me for giving you that great gift. He had me chained to the highest peak in the Caucasus Mountains, and every day an eagle came and tore out my liver with its beak'

'That's terrible, but you do look a bit pale and skinny. Surely you must have a liver otherwise you wouldn't be still be walking around. I guess even a god needs a liver.'

'The liver grew back magically every night. Zeus didn't believe in easy punishments. Anyway the whole thing undermined my health; I'm not the god I was.'

His story could have been true. He looked young, and gods never age or die, no matter how far they fall, or what happens to their livers.

The bishop had been making a speech. He turned back to me, now supported by a group of very angry passengers.

'I am told there is nothing wrong with the motor, it is merely out of fuel. You must use your oars to get us to our destination.'

'Look, bishop. Don't be a dill. You're going spend eternity in hell, why are you in such a hurry to get there.'

'I am a bishop of the church and I have a lecture to deliver. Now, where are the oars to row us to hell?'

'Sorry bishop. There are none on the ferry, Charon never used more than two and they're still lying on the quay where he left them.'

'I have never heard of such incompetence. You can be sure my man that this will be reported to the highest authorities. I will put in a formal complaint as soon as we reach hell.'

He would probably have other things to worry about when, and if, he reached hell, but we were all distracted by a huge noise made by someone on the side of the river that we had left a short while before.

A giant, angry figure was running along the bank. He carried two lengths of timber over his shoulders and was roaring at us to stop; which, of course, we could not do.

With a sudden sinking of my heart I recognised the giant as Charon and the two lengths of timber were the missing oars.

He must have been told about our mishap, but I knew there had been other complaints about the service. Every time the ferry crossed the river with a load of passengers there were unhappy souls on board, and they complained bitterly. The bishop was the first person I met who actually wanted to go to hell. Naturally people blamed the ferryman, and word of this must have got to Charon.

It was not long before he caught up and started roaring insults at me.

'You wait until I get you, Bernard, you hopeless idiot, I'll take you apart. I been the ferryman here for three thousand years, and you ruined the business as soon as I turned me back.'

He mentioned something about ripping off my head and what he would do with it afterwards.

He took one of the oars in his hand and threw it like a spear towards the ferry. It landed short and splashed down in the middle of the river. He then threw the other one. and followed it with a run to hurl himself off the bank, an exercise which caused the most tremendous belly flop into the water that I have ever seen.

As part of my wasted youth my mates and I used to water bomb the local pool from the top diving board, but I had never seen anything like the wave created by Charon.

When he arose from the deep puffing and ferocious, he started to swim towards the ferry pushing the oars before him.

It was time to abandon ship. I moved towards the far rail.

Prometheus grabbed my arm. He said, 'If you're thinking of going over the side, whatever you do don't open your mouth underwater. Keep it shut all the time; this river's deadly. I'll come with you. He doesn't like me either.'

We jumped together into the River Styx, no water bombing this time, it was a matter of life or death. I kept my mouth firmly closed.

We came up, not far from the bank and heard a rattling behind us as Charon threw the oars into the ferry.

He climbed aboard, rushed to the side and shook his fist at us.

'You keep out of me sight, Prometheus,' he roared. I know what you done, and if I catch you you'll wish you were back with the eagle. And as for you Bernard, you'll have to take the ferry ride someday, same as everyone else, and when you do I'll give you the worst passage anyone's ever had. By the time I finish with yer you'll be glad to get off at hell. No one mucks up my business and gets away with it.'

I am ashamed to say I made a rude gesture at him, but no doubt I will regret it when next we meet.

The waves created by Charon washed us up the river bank on to a dreary looking shore. I gazed around wondering what misfortunes would befall me next. We had landed on a dark, place illuminated only by the flaring lights of hell that reflected on the roof of the cavern which now was our world.

Prometheus seemed to recognise this dismal place. He said 'I've been here before. I remember coming to this very spot with Thetis, the mother of Achilles.

'What was she doing here?'

'Achilles was just a baby and she brought him to this place to lower him into the waters of the Styx.'

'But you said it was poisonous. Did she want to get rid of the kid?'

'No, not at all. She wanted him to be a great warrior, and anyone who bathes in the waters of this river is proof against all weapons and all accidents.'

'But wouldn't the kid howl when he was dumped in the river by his Mum. He'd get a mouthful of water and bingo, she's got a dead baby on her hands. How would she get on at the inquest? She would have to tell the court that she loved her little boy and dumped him in a poisonous river because she thought it would help him in his career. I reckon the Coroner would take a very dim view of that story.'

'Oh, Achilles was never known to cry. I think he knew from birth that he was to be a great warrior, and warriors don't weep.'

'Well, did it work? Did he have a long and happy life killing people?'

'Actually no. When Thetis dipped him in the water she held him by the heel, and that was the only part that didn't get wet, so when someone shot him in the heel he died. But you'll be alright, you were completely submerged in the water, and now you are proof against the knocks and shocks of this world.'

'Well, that should be a comfort next time I meet my wife.'

'There are worse things than your wife down here There are The Children of the Minotaur. Their specialty is catching passing travelers and eating them, alive.'

'Well, do you know the way out?'

'I told Theseus he should have killed the whole family while he was at it, not just the Minotaur alone.'

'I don't want to reminisce,' I said. 'Just get us out of here. How did you and Thetis find this place?'

'We came down through a series of descending caves. I think the entrance is over there.' He pointed vaguely away from the river.

'Let's go and find it.'

A horrible gurgling, shrieking noise broke out nearby.

'It's the Children of the Minotaur,' cried Theseus! 'Run!!'

'Is this the way to the exit??'

'It had better be, just run!' I ran, we both ran.

The Garden of Statues

Prometheus and I finally reached the surface. It was toilsome, heavy work, through narrow places, over rocks jagged and dangerous. Through caverns, crawling round boulders that were liable at any moment to roll and crush us.

All the time during our escape we could hear the panting and bellowing of the Children of the Minotaur clamoring after us as we scrambled in blackness up those long steep tunnels.

At last we crawled out through the entrance, a cave, and fell onto grass and into a deafening silence relieved only by birdsong.

I had forgotten how vast the sky was, how blue. The light hurt after the long darkness of the underworld. It was nice to lie face down in the sunshine, taking in the scent of crushed grass and looking at the green through half closed eyes. The howling of the Children of the Minotaur died away as, unable to face the light, they retreated down to the underworld.

An equally unwanted noise broke the silence. The shrilling of my telephone announced that my wife wished to speak to me. I reluctantly picked it up and pressed a button.

She said, 'Bernard I'm not going to ask where you are because I'll just have to listen to a pack of lies about you associating with gods or ferrying people over a river I've never heard of.'

That was my wife's problem, a lack of education and, a lack of imagination. I had just left a post as ferryman on the River Styx, running through Hades. My companion was a fallen god, Prometheus. In fact all the Greek gods, of which he was one, had fallen, and no longer dwelled on Mount Olympus, no one believed in them anymore. They had to support themselves as best they could.

My wife spoke to me bitterly. 'You know those coins you sent me and nobody wants,' she asked.

'Yes,' I answered cautiously, I remembered them very well.

'I wish I'd never seen them. I found an ad in the paper that said a shop in the city wanted to buy gold, silver, old coins and medals. So I rang to say I had old coins to sell, and could they send someone out to inspect them.'

'What happened?'

'Well, a man came from the shop. This guy looked at the coins for quite a while through a magnifying glass and he seemed a bit shaken. He rang up the shop and the boss came out and looked at the coins and he seemed surprised too.'

'They wanted to know where I'd got them from, and I told them you'd sent them by someone called Hermie who said he was a messenger of the gods and he carried a stick with snakes crawling all over it and had wings growing out of his heels. He was wearing a funny looking helmet. There were wings on it as well'.

'I don't think they believed me, but they asked where you were and I said the last time we spoke you said you were in some joint called The Greek Underworld. Then the boss made another call and a detective from Interpol came out.'

'From Interpol!!'

'Yes, the International Police.'

'I know what Interpol is, but why would they be interested in your coins?'

'I don't know, but after I told my story again the Interpol guy rang Athens police to warn them that you've joined the Greek underworld and specialise in stealing ancient Greek coins. Then he rang some museums overseas and told them to check their coin collections. I don't know how I'll be able to pay the next phone bill.'

'Bernie, why are doing this to me? Why did you steal all those old coins and send them to me by a half naked winged messenger. I tried to be a good wife yet you get me into all this trouble.'

I defended my reputation by saying, 'Those coins are very common down below, and I didn't steal them. I taught some young devils on leave from hell to play poker and they paid my winnings in coins, so I decided to send them to you to help with the housekeeping.'

'Well, they're not common here, and no one wants them.'

'Don't worry dear, it will soon blow over. Tell the man from Interpol to go and talk to the neighbors. They'll back up your story about Hermes carrying snakes with him, when he's on a job, and the wings on his heels, and how he came knocking on doors in the building looking for you. They remember that, don't they?'

'They sure do! the one's that had heart attacks are back from hospital and everyone blames me for the trouble. Alright, I'll tell Interpol to check with the other tenants. But why don't you get out of that cheap dive, night club, whatever it is you call The Greek Underworld It can't be much of place, it isn't listed on the internet' or on the telephone. Get out and come home. The kids miss you. I miss you.'

'I'll try and get back as soon as I can. I'm up on the surface now. Prometheus and I were chased through long, dangerous tunnels by the Children of the Minotaur but in the end we escaped out into the open and they couldn't follow us --'

'Oh God!!' she screeched and slammed the phone down. I don't think she believed my story either.'

When she finished I realized that Prometheus had disappeared. He was a bit vague like most of the gods. He must have lost interest in my conversation and wandered away.

No point in staying near the cave. The Children of the Minotaur might get sunglasses, or sun-block, and come out into the open and go after me. I walked on. After strolling a kilometer or so I came to a stone wall I couldn't see over. A little way along was an opened gate and a sign which read

Garden statue Display

props.

Medusa Gorgon and Silenus

Please enter.

Having nothing else to do I walked in and saw dozens of statues in a walled garden. Lifelike statues of people in all sorts of positions. I was reminded of a crowd waiting for something to happen.

Usually those old Greek sculptors produced the body beautiful. Young athletes, gorgeous girls, muscle bound gods, all with a fig leaf, or windblown bits of robes to hide the vital spots and preserve modesty.

Here I saw ordinary people, naked, but no fig leaves, nothing to hide behind. Some figures were skinny, some fat, some just lumpy. There were a few in the old Grecian style, beautiful young men and women, but not many.

What spoiled the statues was the look of horror that the maker had chiselled into their faces. He gave them the appearance of one who had just seen something shameful or terrifying.

Another thing I noticed were the eyes. The eyes seemed to be almost real, probably colored glass, that looked out from faces of marble. The young girl I was studying stared back at me and her face was a mask of horror. I had to turn away. It wasn't the sight of me that upset her, the expression on her face was there before I arrived.

A feature of the garden was a large half round pool. It was opposite the entrance and backed up by the wall around the garden. Some statues were seated on a lower stone wall that, together with the garden wall, surrounded the pond and raised the water level, which nearly lapped over the top.

A horrible, ugly stone face was carved on the wall and a stream of water poured out of its mouth into the pool.

The season had turned while I had been underground working the ferry. Spring had arrived. The grass was starred with daisies. While low growing flowering shrubs were playing the part of fig leaves for some of the statues.

The day had turned hot. I looked at the water and was thinking how pleasant it would be to get in and cool down when someone, who had come up behind me, said. 'You are right, a dip would be very pleasant in this heat.'

I turned round startled, to see who had spoken.

The stranger had two horns rising up through black curly hair, a beard trimmed to a point, strange eyes that reminded me of a goat I once knew, and hairy legs. His feet were like goat hoofs. Apart from all this there was nothing unusual about him except what appeared to be an ancient Greek shopping bag he carried. Inside the bag was something round, but not particularly heavy.

'You have been admiring our collection,' he said. 'My partner and I have assembled this display over centuries. It has been slow to develop but in a few more years we will start charging admission.'

I sensed a business opportunity here and said, 'If you're looking for a manager to run the show I'm available. The first thing I would recommend would be to order statues that look happier than the miserable lot you have here.'

'What a clever thought,' murmured the stranger. 'My name is Silenus, and yours is ----?'

'Bernard,' I said, 'But everyone calls me Bernie.'

'Excellent! I can see you are brimming with ideas, what else should we do?'

'A children's section would be nice. And don't forget a souvenir shop that everyone would have to pass through on the way out.'

Silenus seemed rapt with my ideas. He cried out, 'This is marvelous! But you must not overheat yourself with all these wonderful schemes of yours. I will introduce you to my partner after you have had a swim.'

'I don't have my bathers,' I said. 'They're still at home.'

'Not to worry, there's no one about but me. You're the first visitor we've had all day and nakedness is the fashion here.' He gestured at the statues, which appeared to be looking at me with pained expressions.

'After you have finished in the pool you can meet my colleague and we can talk about your future here.'

The invitation was so kindly, the water so inviting that I slipped off my clothes and dropped them on the grass without a second thought.

I stepped up on to the low wall and straight into the water. 'Delightful!' It was too shallow for diving or swimming but good for frolicking. I wished the girl statues could come to life and jump in with me. They would soon lose that look of horror; or maybe not.

After about half an hour I came out to dry myself in the sunshine, close to some statues already sitting on the wall.

Silenus sat down next to me. He put down his bag to lean it against the foot of the wall. 'I should have introduced myself properly' he said. 'I am a Satyr, part of the pantheon of Greek gods. Our role was to create mischief and chase nymphs. But, of course, all changed when people lost faith in us. Our religion no longer has any worshippers to pay for our shrines so I have become a changed god. Together with my partner we try to look after people. It is time you met her.'

I looked round, expecting to see someone approaching.

'No, no! She's already here with us.'

'Where?'

'She's in the bag.' He reached into his shopping bag, pulled out a severed head and held it in front of me. He looked at me, not the head.

'This is Medusa Gorgon' he said, 'One of the Harpies. It was that blundering oaf Perseus who cut off her head.'

There were snakes growing up through hair, lots of them, and Silenus was holding the head up by two of the serpents which he held in either hand.

None of them liked this treatment and showed it by hissing loudly but Silenus seemed immune from being struck at or bitten.

'She is quite beautiful', said Silenus. 'In the way of Greek women. Her type is still to be seen on the islands of the Cyclades. What a pity you will never go there.'

'Her eyes are her best feature, look deep into them, you will see what I mean.'

I couldn't look away. Her eyes were black pools of unknown depth, and I could not stop myself from falling in.

Silenus was telling me something but he seemed a long way off. 'I found her,' he said, 'In a pawn shop in ancient Athens. The owner of the shop could not understand why members of his staff kept turning to stone, until he traced the problem to this bag. It was the gaze of Medusa that did it, so the bag and contents were offered to me at a greatly reduced price.'

I could not take my eyes from the horror he was holding up.

'That should do it,' said Silenus. 'Welcome to our collection.'

I tried to struggle, to get up and run from the park, but it was hopeless and my skin was turning to the color of marble.

'Don't fuss,' said Silenus. 'It only makes thing worse. Now I will set you up in a new pose I just thought of. He started pushing and prodding me into the shape he had in mind.'

He talked as he worked. 'You will like it here,' he said. 'Plenty of company, and you will never feel heat or cold again, never be hungry or thirsty, just a quiet existence sitting on this wall until the world comes to an end.'

This talking did not stop him from molding me into position. He guided my left elbow to rest on my leg just above the knee, and my fingers were clenched into a fist. My head was pushed down so I sat there chin resting on the fist and gazing downwards, looking at the fat legs of an ugly statue opposite. My right forearm rested on my thigh with my hand hanging down between my knees.

'Very artistic,' said Silenus. I could see his feet step back to admire what he had done. 'You are hardening up nicely. I will call you *The Thinker*. Perhaps in the future some sculptor will make a similar statue, but he will be too late. I was the first to create your pose, it's all mine.'

If I had been capable of speaking I would have asked him to turn me so I could see a girl statue nearby. Looking at her legs would have been preferable to the ones I could see, but it was not to be, I was fixed immovably like the other statues.

The sun shone on us, but other times it rained, or the wind blew. I remember being covered in snow which melted in its turn. Days and nights followed in a regular succession, but how long we were there I couldn't tell you.

Silenus' collection was coming along nicely. The occasional passerby came in to view the statues and ended up like the rest of us, though I could see very little of what happened, I could not turn my head to watch.

Prometheus returns

It seemed, after months had passed that someone else came to view us. I did not know there was a visitor present until I saw another pair of legs before my lowered eyes. The owner of the legs leaned down so he could look upwards at my face.

'Oh, there you are,' he said. 'I wondered what had happened to you.' It was Prometheus.

Silenus appeared. 'I see that you are admiring our collection,' he said. 'My colleague and I have spent many years putting it together.'

'Oh, yes. A very fine display. Some of your statues are modern others have been here for a century or more.'

'I can see that you are an expert judge of art. But I can't help noticing that you have travelled a long way. You are very dusty and, I think, tired. A dip in our pool would make you feel so much better.'

'No thank you,' answered Prometheus. 'I am not going to fall for that old trick.'

'What do you mean, trick?' demanded Silenus. 'Are you questioning my honour?'

'Yes I am. You are one of the Satyrs and your race was never known for its honor or honesty.'

'I'm not going to put with lies of this kind. Get out or I will turn the dogs on you'

'You don't have any dogs and I have been savaged by worse things than them, as you should know,' retorted Prometheus.

Silenus looked closely at his face. 'By Zeus I do know you,' he said. 'Last time I saw you you were chained to a rock on the top peak of the Caucasus mountains, and an eagle was ripping your guts out.'

'Yes, I remember. You found it most amusing. I can still hear your laughter echoing among the rocks as you walked down the pass leaving me to my torment.'

'Ah well,' said Silenus. 'It was a long time ago. But tell me old boy, how did you escape?'

Prometheus paused before answering, calling up painful memories. He shook off the feeling and said, 'The eagle lost its power. No one believed in it any more, not after a Christian mob destroyed Zeus' last shrine and killed his last priest. My chains just fell away and I came down from the mountain to find the shrine still burning and the sacred grove cut down.'

'Well you scored something from those mad Christians, but for Medusa and me it was dead loss. Our shrines got the chop too. What have you been doing since then?'

I married a mortal woman. She was the shrine keeper's daughter, but it was no good. Galatea was a beautiful girl and we loved each other dearly, but she grew old and died. I have been alone ever since, wandering the world and doing what I could for mankind.'

'You always were a bleeding heart, it's no wonder Zeus turned the eagle loose on you. Now clear off, there's a good chap, leave Medusa and me to our little hobby.'

'No, I can't do that. I can't leave these poor souls to your cruelty. Free them now.'

'Always the do-gooder. You brought fire down from heaven and gave it to the ungrateful sods. Did they thank you? Did they climb the mountain to shoo the bird away, or try to free you from your chains? Not them. They turned Christian, or some other useless religion. They destroyed our temples and turned us out of our comfortable billets on Mount Olympus. Would you believe Zeus is a busker now? He travels the world playing the lyre and trying to score enough coins to buy a meal. Who wants to listen to a lyre? That's what brought us all down, he wasn't able to change.'

Free them!'

'They won't like it! Some of them have been here for long time. This is their home. They'll be back tomorrow asking to be turned into statues again.'

'That's their choice, do it!'

Silenus sulkily waved his hand and I felt life stirring again through my body. An effort to stand up ended in failure and I sank back again to the wall. It hurt, but never mind, the paralysis of stone no longer held me in its grip. All the statues were coming to life, stretching, staggering, taking their first step for ages.

Hard luck! The girl I had admired was clinging to a young man, resting her head on his shoulder. The other young statues paired off, male and female, almost immediately.

'Give them back their clothes,' Prometheus ordered.

Silenus shook his head. 'Can't do it. We sold their clothes to pay expenses. A dealer comes once a month and buys all the clothes we have.'

Everyone was looking at him. He gestured towards the gate. 'Bugger off, you lot!' he roared. 'You're all trespassers. Anyone who wants his job back as a statue come see me tomorrow. The rest of you can just stay away.'

The crowd was shambling towards the gates, glad to escape from the garden. The young couples walked hand in hand.

'Look at that,' grumbled Silenus. 'I do something nice for them and not a word of thanks from anyone. I expect that sort of ingratitude because I lost faith in human nature a long time ago.'

'There'll be hell to pay when they get home without a stitch of clothing between them,' he said, a little more cheerfully. 'There's going to be a few family quarrels when their great grandparents turn up naked and want to be housed and fed and given clothes.'

As the last of the crowd limped out of the gate my telephone started to ring. I had hoped that the batteries would have run out by now. I sighed, picked up the thing and said 'Hello Dear.'

Silenus and the Gorgon

When I pressed the button on the portable my wife sounded surprised, and even relieved. 'It is you!' she said. 'I've been trying this number for a year, why didn't pick you up the phone?'

'If I told you the real reason you probably wouldn't believe me.

'I'm sure I wouldn't. You've never told me the truth in your life.

'Yes I have, I've often told you the truth, and this one of those times. A year ago I looked into the eyes of the goddess Medusa and was turned into a marble statue. She has that effect on people, and I'm sorry to say it ruined her love life.'

There was a pained silence at the other end. She spoke. 'You haven't changed, have you? But then I wouldn't expect anything better. But that's not important. Do you remember those coins you sent me?'

'Yes,' I said guardedly, thinking I was about to cop another round of abuse.

'Can you get some more, and send them by Australia Post, or courier, this time.'

This was an unexpected request. 'But you said they weren't worth anything!'

They are now. They were all in first class condition and a lot of them dated from the reign of some old king called Creases.'

'Ah, that would Croesus. He was a king in Asia Minor about 400 BC. He was said to be the richest king in all history.'

'Bernie, shut up, I'm talking. They tried every museum in the world and none of them had lost any old Greek coins so in the end they were awarded to me and the man at the coin shop sent them to New York to be sold at auction.'

Was it a success?'

'I think so. The manager of the shop called me in a fortnight ago and gave me a cheque for four hundred and fifty thousand dollars.'

There were not many times in my life when I was unable to speak, this was one of them.

She went on, 'He said there were bidders from all over the world and there was nearly a riot in the auction room.'

'I've paid the rent six months in advance. The debt on the credit card has been paid off. We've all got new clothes, I gave Xantippe Socrates a thousand dollars for bringing Hermie to our apartment and translating for me, and we're up in Queensland at the moment in a fun park. The kids are loving all the rides, and meeting the dolphins. It's a pity you aren't with us.'

Oh, the unfairness of it all. I had taught some demons from hell to play poker, which is a chancy business at the best of times, and they had paid my winnings in coins.

This conversation proved what I had always thought about my wife. She doesn't understand the value of money. If ever I get my hands on four hundred and fifty thousand dollars I would have a helluva good time, blow the lot, and worry about rent and the kids' shoes afterwards. I could see it was time to go home and take charge of the situation.

'I bought a car,' she said. 'When we get back from Queensland I'll start having driving lessons. The instructor is really hot. He told me his wife walked out on him.'

This sounded serious. I had a feeling I should get home straight away; before she had more big ideas about spending my money, or giving it to some hunky driving instructor.

I was interrupted and had to break off the conversation. The ex statues had left and Silenus came to take away the ancient Greek shopping bag. It still contained Medusa's head.

'No you don't,' said Prometheus. 'Just leave it where it is and clear off. You're not going to turn any more poor people into statues. Go and get a decent job.'

Silenus was enraged at this. 'It's no wonder Zeus chained you to a rock, and programmed an eagle to come every night and tear your liver out,' he cried. 'Mate, you're a fascist, an enemy of private enterprise. I bought that bag from a pawn shop in ancient Athens. It's my property!'

Prometheus stood firm. 'You can have the bag as soon as you bring another one where we can store Medusa's head until she goes home.'

'I bought her with the bag, she's mine. Now hand it over.'

'No, I'll see she goes back to the Gorgon family, she'll be with her sisters.'

'What's this about Medusa's head? Where is she?' said a scratchy, frightening voice behind me. I turned. The scariest woman I had seen since I looked into Medusa's eyes was standing behind me. White scraggly hair, snaggly teeth, nose like an eagle's beak, and they were her better features.

She glared at us and spread her wings, which I hadn't noticed at first. It looked as though she would take off and come back in a screaming dive. I backed away and stood behind Silenus. If he was claiming Medusa's head he could talk to this fearsome harpy,

She ignored us, came over to the bag and took out the head. We all looked away.

'Be careful!' I cried. 'If you gaze into her eyes you'll turn to stone.'

'Garbage!' she said. 'If I want to talk to my little sister I'll do it. The family has been looking for her forever. So just shut up.'

She was kissing the thing on the mouth. 'How are you darling?' she said in her scratchy voice. 'You've never been the same since Perseus chopped off your head. But that's alright, sweetheart, he's on the list and we'll get him someday.'

The harpy was gazing straight into her sister's eyes, but not turning to stone. I could hear the head muttering something. The newcomer ignored the snakes, which were hissing and swaying. She raised the strange trophy to her ear so she could hear what was being said.

She listened for a moment and then glared at me. 'Are you Silenus?' she asked.

I shook my head vigorously. 'No! No! He is.' I pointed at Silenus, who was now trying to hide behind me.

'No I'm not!' screamed Silenus. 'He's Silenus, take him!' He pushed me forward and she grinned, showing her fangs.

She looked at me malevolently 'Of course you are. I remember you now Silenus, always a rotter, a coward, a sneak, now you want someone else to take the rap for you.' I'd know your ugly face anywhere.

The harpy listened again to her sister

'She tells me you have been carrying her head in a bag for centuries. The least you could have done was let us know where she was. She says you've been treating her badly. Well, Mister Silenus, it's pay back time.'

Silenus lost his nerve and bolted towards the entrance.

'Wrong one!!' roared Prometheus. 'That's Silenus! The one doing a runner.'

Big sister was on the case instantly. She flapped her wings once, was airborne, and then swooped on him before he was anywhere near the gates.

She had talons instead of feet, another feature I had not noticed before. She used them to haul Silenus back to where she had dropped Medusa's head. She picked it up while still holding on to her captive.

'You've been carrying her head round in this stinking old bag. No time off, no holidays, no superannuation, no notification to the Gorgon family. Now you're going to look deep into my sister's eyes and tell her you're sorry.'

'No!' screamed Silenus. 'Don't do it to me, please!

'Yes!' said the harpy. No one treats my little sister like that and gets away with it. All she wants is an apology, nothing more, but you have to look deep into her eyes as you say it.'

Silenus screwed his eyes tight shut and squeaked, 'Sorry, sorry!'

'Not good enough.' She was holding Medusa's head by the snakes, and they were quiet. I think they were frightened of her too.

With the other hand she caught one of his ears. A long, dirty thumb, uncleaned for centuries, extended round to one eye, and forced up the eyelid. The eye rotated wildly in its socket but could not avoid looking at Medusa's face which was pressed against his own.

In a minute it was over and Silenus stood rocking slightly, he was quite stiff. His face, which was turning white had the look of horror that I had seen on his victims, I suppose mine was the same when I was under Medusa's spell.

'Let me arrange his pose,' I cried.

Prometheus shrugged, and Big Sister was talking to Medusa. They were catching up with all the family gossip.

I sat Silenus down on the low wall where I had been. He made one last effort to run away.

'Don't fuss, it only makes things worse.' I pushed and prodded until he was sitting with his left elbow resting on his thigh just above the knee. His chin was resting on his clenched fist.

I laughed. 'You'll probably end up in the British Museum. I hope they give you something incredibly ugly to look at.'

Moments after he was sitting immovable and glaring at the ground. Serve him right.

'She's very talented,' said big sister, as she tucked the head under her arm. Not many girls have that effect on men. I won't kill you two because she said you were kind, and were going to bring her home. Well, no need, the Gorgon family will take care of her from now on.' She flapped her wings and flew away with her sister to some fearful place where the Gorgons make their nest.

My phone rang once more.

'Bernard, you cut me off,' said my wife. 'Don't do it again.'

'Sorry dear, something came up unexpectedly.' She always calls me Bernard when she's annoyed. 'Do you want me to tell you what the problem is?'

No, because it will be another of your wild lies.'

'You just can't handle the truth, can you?'

'I can't handle the dream world you live in.'

'It's not a dream world right now, it's a nightmare. I'm starkers, all my clothes were stolen when I was a statue and sold to some Greek second hand clothes merchant.'

'I can't waste time listening to all this bizarre nonsense,' she said. 'Just get me some more of those coins. and don't send them by Hermie unless he promises to lose the snakes and put on some clothes.' She hung up.

Patrick and the Serpent

When the great, rampaging, fire-breathing Serpent first arrived in Ballymorgan they were not ready for it and thought it would be another monster come to burn their houses and lay the village waste; they were sick of all that.

But this Serpent was not like other monsters they had met. It did not fly in on its great wings to burn and destroy, instead it came waddling quietly along the road on big flat feet, and with its wings folded. It didn't eat anyone or burn down any houses

All it did was squat on the grassy common in the centre of the village and wait for people to come out from wherever they were hiding.

One fierce old warrior ran home, got his sword and waved it in face of the Serpent, and very small he looked in front of that mighty beast. He challenged the Serpent to fight him to the death. The Serpent was not annoyed. All it did was grin at the old man and puff a little of its fiery breath, just enough to singe his whiskers, that was all. The warrior retired from the fight before anything worse happened.

Some of the braver villagers tried to shoo the creature away with brooms, but he wouldn't go. Just smiled at everyone and bubbled a bit of flame and tiny wisps of smoke.

They soon got used to it. In the end it was quite a credit to the village to have the creature living there. It did wonders for the tourist trade because Ballymorgan was not an interesting village. No great battles had been fought nearby, and no famous people had ever been born or murdered there. What it did have was an obliging Serpent who puffed out great billows of fire on the hour and half hour, or when requested, and didn't eat anyone.

When winter came, and the tourists left, other uses were found for the Serpent. He was wonderful at getting kitchen fires started on cold and rainy mornings. If a housewife was struggling with poor matches and damp firewood he would stick his head through the window and breathe carefully, not wanting to set the house on fire. Instead his breath would start a comfortable blaze in the fireplace so she could get on with her cooking.

It was pleasant too for people out of doors at night to warm themselves by his breath and read their newspapers by the light of the flames.

A fine time it was, but it didn't last. To his credit one can say that the Serpent never stole anything from Ballymorgan, never did anything wrong. That was true, but stories started to come from neighboring villages of cattle being stolen and eaten, of haystacks catching fire and burning to the ground because of the breath of a marauding Serpent as it hunted for things to eat.

The people of Ballymorgan couldn't believe it, their gentle Serpent, a criminal? But there was only one Serpent in the district at that time and witnesses had seen him at his terrible activities.

They asked the Serpent about these stories but he denied everything. They asked him again when people arrived from neighboring villages with even worse stories, and he became angry. It is very difficult to argue with a huge, scaly, fire breathing Serpent, especially when he is upset.

He had big teeth too, very sharp they were, which everyone noticed.

More reports about a rampaging Serpent was too much and a town meeting decided that Mayor O'Reilly would have to order him out of the village.

Naturally the mayor didn't want to do any such thing, he said he was too kind-hearted, but after a long argument he agreed to give the creature notice to quit if the aldermen of the village came to back him up.

Well, there was a terrible fuss when the Serpent heard what had been decided. He was in the biggest rage ever and his flames could be seen, and he could be heard all over Ballymorgan.

Mayor O'Reilly and the aldermen were singed and smoking afterwards, and they were knocked over when the Serpent clapped his wings together and shot straight up in the air like a rocket. He did some flying passes over the village after that to set fire to their thatched roofs; then he flew away like a bright, flaming star and disappeared.

They thought they had seen the last of the Serpent, but not so. He found a cave quite close by and moved in to use it as a base to terrify the neighborhood.

He was soon eating more cattle than ever and such was his temper that he sent out a message demanding a young cow to eat every day.

This was too much, the Serpent had to be dealt with, and to everyone's relief they heard that Patrick, a famous warrior, was passing through the district, so they sent for him.

Patrick was indeed a mighty warrior. He was the number one top ceded battle-axe champion of the British Isles, and had won the title three years running. This was the very man they needed to tackle the Serpent.

Patrick was in a hurry. Ireland had been invaded by an army of Viking warriors and his king, Brian Boru, had sent for him to come at once.

Luckily the cave he was to visit was on his line of march and his business with the Serpent would not take long. He agreed to help and set off with his battle-axe over his shoulder to find the Serpent's lair, which was near a large lake.

The Serpent was at home when Patrick dropped by. He was watching and saw this tall figure walking nearer and nearer. His eyes were as big as dinner plates but they were not that strong and he thought his visitor was a neighbor come to complain about stolen cattle, or perhaps a tax collector.

Great gusts of smoke and flame billowed out of his cave. He roared in a voice that loosened stones from a nearby mountain so that they came tumbling down. This display would have frightened away thousands, but it meant nothing to Patrick, he came steadily on.

Suddenly the Serpent realized who it was he was threatening; it was Patrick, the greatest warrior of the age.

Once Patrick had come to see him in the days before he turned outlaw. He had been proud to display his talents before such a man, but now he knew why Patrick had come on this second visit.

The roaring and the flames died down, the smoke was carried away by the wind; suddenly the Serpent was afraid.

'Is it yerself, Pathrick?' he asked, very meek and mild.

'Aye, it's me,' answered the warrior, 'and I've come to chop off your head.'

'Chop off me head, Pathric, and why would yer be after doin' that?' asked the Serpent in a trembly voice.'

'I've heard terrible stories about a Serpent that's gone bad. Layin' the countryside waste he is, eating cattle, burning down haystacks and houses, and now he wants prime young heifers to eat.' 'One a day, they said. Why shouldn't I chop the head off that guilty creature? Step outside the cave, now. There's a big log here, come and lay your neck on it so I can get a good swing with me axe. It'll be over in a second or two and then I can be on me way.'

The Serpent did not come out of the cave but started to cry. He wept, sniveled and moaned. He choked and gurgled, he hiccupped and shrieked until he was no more than a blubbery green mass of scaly misery.

All the time he was moaning and gurgling and saying stuff like – ‘Not my fault. They shouldn’t’ve picked on me. It wasn’t fair. I made ’em a lot of money during the tourist season, and this is the way they treat me.’

Patrick was not an unreasonable man, except when he was fighting his king’s enemies, and he didn’t like killing anything that was not ready to fight back.

He said, ‘Now look. It won’t be so bad, I’m the top-ceded battle-axe champion in the whole of Britain, and if the Olympic Games were invented by now I’d have won a gold medal for sure. When I hit something it stays hit. Now there’s a good Serpent. Lay your neck on this log and I’ll have your head off in a second.’

It was no use, the creature screamed, and wailed all the more. He wept a river of tears which later became the River Liffey.

Patrick looked down sternly at this pitiful sight. ‘I don’t know what to do with you, Serpent,’ he said. ‘I don’t like to kill you when you’re crying and sniveling for mercy. I tell you what, I’ll decide on Monday, because right now I’m in a hurry. My king, Brian Boru, is expecting a battle. He sent for me and I must go. Do you see that lake over there?’

The Serpent sniffed, looked at the lake and nodded.

‘Well, I’m not going to leave you loose to do more bad things. You get into that lake and stay there until I come for you next Monday. Look for me on Monday and I’ll tell you what your punishment is to be.’

The miserable Serpent crawled over to the lake shore and flopped into the waves. His head appeared above the water.

‘Monday, Pathrick?’

‘Yes, yes!, Monday. But I have to go now, see you Monday,’ and he went away.

What you have heard so far is a very ordinary tale. In those days flying Serpents were two a penny. They were everywhere, and there was no shortage of brave heroes ready to fight them, but the next part will shock you. Patrick broke his word. He did not go back to the lake the next Monday, or the Monday after, or the Monday after that. He did not go back any Monday, leaving the Serpent marooned in the lake.

Even though Patrick did not return to release the Serpent one can say in his defense that he was dead. He was killed at the Battle of Clontarf, in the year 1014.

He died defending his king, Brian Boru, against a group of Norseman who had fled from the main battle.

In those days the Norse gods operated a pick up and delivery service. Whenever a warrior died in a battle female spirits, called Valkyries, would swoop down and transport him to Valhalla. The condition was that the deceased had to be holding his sword as he died. Patrick had a battleaxe but that was acceptable, so he ended up in Valhalla and the Serpent was left behind waiting impatiently for him to return.

Every Monday the Serpent would rise to the top of the lake and roar pleas for Patrick to return. He would cry out, ‘where are you Pathrick? It’s a long Monday Pathrick!; when are you coming to let me out. Please Pathrick, won’t you let me go?’

This went on for years, and then for centuries, and every Monday for hundreds of years those living around the lake had to put up with this tremendous racket.

A family, which lived close by, had been in the same house for many years. In fact they had been there before the Serpent was confined in the lake. They knew the story of course, of how the great hero Patrick had forced the Serpent into the lake and was killed in battle before he could return to release the creature.

They continued living there because no one wanted to buy their house. The noise every Monday was deafening. But at last a baby boy, Tristram, was born to the family. Tristram grew up wishing to perform great deeds like Patrick, his hero.

Once, when he was quite small he rowed out on the lake to talk to the Serpent. The boat was swamped and he got a beating afterwards for losing the boat and putting himself in such danger; but it seemed that only Patrick could release the creature from its long imprisonment.

He resolved that night to find Patrick, even in the very depths of the underworld, and have him break the spell. Apart from anything else it would do wonders for real-estate values in the area around the lake.

When he was old enough he left home, telling his parents he was off to see the world, that he would be back, and they were not to worry about him. If they had known he was going to seek Valhalla they would have been very worried.

Tristram made enquiries in all parts of the world asking people how to get to Valhalla. Most of those he met thought he was mad, and if there was such a place why would he want to go there.

Some had a vague remembrance of Valhalla but thought it had been closed down years ago. It used to be sponsored by the gods, now out of favor, and was a refuge for old soldiers.

The girls he spoke to were full of pity to see such a fine handsome young man about to throw his life away; but he went on.

The general opinion was that if such a place as Valhalla existed it would be far to the north, so that was where he went.

It was a terrible journey into frozen lands, across glaciers, dodging avalanches of snow and ice, head down, one step after another, while leaning against howling winds in high mountain passes.

At last he found the place far off in the midst of an icy waste.

It was a big building, shabby and neglected and much weatherbeaten. He thought it the right address because a crumbling statue of Odin, chief of the Norse Gods, stood in front of the gates.

He opened the door and went in. Someone roared at him to shut the door and he did so after struggling with the wind.

Two grizzled warriors were fighting with swords in the middle of the floor, but no one paid attention.

The laughter and talking of men sitting round a large table stopped when Tristram appeared and all looked at him some had not seen a living soul for centuries. Patrick was sitting at the table and particularly pleased to meet a man from his own country with all the latest news, but was sorry to hear about the plight of the Serpent who had spent centuries in the cold, dark lake.

'You'd better apply for leave of absence,' said one of the hairy old warriors sitting round the table. He wore a circlet of gold on his head and Tristram thought he must be the famous Irish king Brian Boru. 'You go and tell the Serpent to leave, and not come back.'

"But don't forget the battle of Bosworth's about to start at any moment and if Richard the Third loses and you're not here you'll miss his welcome to hell party.' Oh, and get a pass for young Tristram too,' he added, nodding at Tristram. 'We'll be glad to see you here when your time comes, young feller, but not yet. Have lots of adventures so we can hear about them when we meet again, but for now, off you go with Patrick.'

Tristram and Patrick did get a pass each out of Valhalla, and it worked wonders. In no time at all they were standing on the shore of the lake, and Patrick was enjoying the cold breeze blowing off the water.

Just by chance it was Monday.

The Serpent popped his head out of the water and began his ancient cry for help. 'It's a long Monday Pathrick,' he bawled. 'Where are you Pathrick? Why don't you come and let me out? It's awful cold and dark down in this lake and I never want to eat another fish in me life, and me fires went out long ago. I want to go home! Pathrick where are you?'

"I'm here," said Patrick, "on the shore."

The eyes of the Serpent opened even wider than before, he swam over to have a good look. His head rested on a long neck and he could look his visitors in the eye.

'Is it yerself Pathrick?' He said

"Aye, Serpent. It's me, how've you been?"

'Oh it's been a long week Pathrick. I've never known a week like it. Monday seemed to come round a million times and you didn't. It seemed to go on forever. How long have I been here?'

'I don't know three or four years I guess.' Said Patrick diplomatically

'No, it wasn't,' said Tristram who believed in telling the truth at all times. 'More like four hundred years I should say.'

The Serpent was shocked, "Are yez tellin' me I've been eatin' raw fish for four hundred years? Do yer know what it's like to belch and get the taste of fish in yer mouth?"

"I've been working it out in my head,' said Tristram. "I think it's more like four hundred and fifty years."

'Oh, is it now? Do youse have any idea how cold it is down there when the lake freezes over? Do you know what it's like to bash yer head against the underside of the ice every Monday so you can stick it out of the water calling for someone who doesn't come back for four hundred and fifty years? Look at me head, it's flattened on top after all these years and I get headaches you wouldn't believe."

"Well, why didn't you go and find somewhere warm to live?"

"How could I?" Cried the Serpent shrilly. "I'm under a magic spell, aren't I, and I have to stay in the lake until you let me out."

"No you're not. I'm very good with a battle-axe, but I'm not a magician. All I did was to tell you to stay in the lake until I came the next Monday.

Smoke started to billow from the Serpent's nostrils. Students of Serpent behaviour regard this as a very bad sign. "Are youse tellin' me," he said, "That anytime in the last four hundred years I could have walked away from this rotten lake and gone somewhere warm?"

"Four hundred and fifty years," corrected Tristram.

"Shut up!!" screeched the creature, and the two heroes had to stand back to escape the flames.

"Well, Serpent," said Patrick, "I didn't expect to come back and find you in the lake. I hoped that you would have escaped by that time and become someone else's responsibility. And

I find it hard to believe that in all this time you didn't even attempt to escape. All I can conclude from this is that you are not very bright."

"Not very bright, eh!!" roared the Serpent. I'll show you who's bright. I'll kill both of yer. Tristram drew his sword and stepped forward. "You can't kill Patrick, he's already dead, but you can kill me, I'm alive. Come and try it."

The Serpent looked at Tristram's shiny new sword. It was long and sharp and the young man seemed most confident. The Serpent moved away from where they were standing.

"I ain't got no quarrel with you," he said. "All I want is to just get out of this lake and never come back."

"Well, do it then. No one's stopping you."

The Serpent burst out of the lake deliberately swamping the two heroes. They got another shower when he flapped his wings for the first time in centuries. He flew away.

"He didn't say goodbye, or thank you," said Patrick, a little hurt by the rapid departure of the Serpent.

"Well, he didn't ask to be put in the lake in the first place," said Tristram. He noticed that Patrick was soaked and shivering. 'My house is very close, do you want to warm yourself by the fire?'

"No. No fire in this world would warm me, I'm going home and I hope I'll be back there in time to greet Richard the Third, that is if he loses the battle. "

"You did very well on your first quest Tristram, so have plenty of adventures and battles and I'll nominate you for our ex-services club when you come to join us."

They shook hands and Patrick returned to where he belonged while Tristram went home to rest for a while before he started any new adventures.

The Veteran

'There's a smell in here, Bill, I said. What does it remind you of?'

He answered promptly, 'Napalm, it reminds me of napalm.'

I shouldn't have asked him; after all these years I should have known better. Everything reminded him of napalm, and when it does he starts talking about Vietnam. He'd been talking about Vietnam for the last thirty years or so, telling everyone about his experiences, and never noticing it was the same story every time.

He coughed a bit. 'Did I tell you about the battle of Long Tan?'

'You were there, weren't you, Bill. You were infantry.'

'Yair, I was. He was pleased to think I remembered. 'We were based in a village called Nui Dat. The Aussies built a base there because it was their job to hold the province it was in. I can't think of its name anymore.

'Phuoc Tuy,' I said, I had heard him say the name hundreds of times.

'Yair, Phuoc Tuy ; that was it. It was given to us to hold and we had to take on the Viet Cong if they came over the border.'

His voice was quiet, and he was interrupted sometimes by fits of coughing. I wondered if I should call the doctor; but decided to let him tell his story one more time. It didn't matter about the voice I knew it all by heart, anyway.

He told it to strangers in pubs because he craved the attention and respect due to a man who had defended his country at the risk of his life. It had earned him many a glass of beer.

'The Viet Cong decided to fix us right up,' said Bill. 'Thousands of the little yellow bastards were out in jungle waiting for us to make a false move. We moved alright, I was in D company. There were about three hundred of us and we were sent out to do a recce of the area. We had three days rations and sixty rounds of ammo; which was a hell of a lot to carry in the heat.'

'When we got to the rubber plantation near Long Tan village the rain was pissing down, and they were waiting for us. We'd shot one or two on the way, but the balloon really went up at Long Tan. When we entered the rubber plantation they hit us with everything; thousands of guns opened up.'

'Some blokes were killed but we formed the best perimeter we could and the C.O. got on the blower and called for artillery support. The New Zealand gunners were on duty at Nui Dat. Their artillery opened up almost straight away; and the Australian artillery wasn't far behind.'

Bill paused, partly because of exhaustion, partly to think about the accuracy of the New Zealand and Australian gunners and the incredible noise the bursting shells made as they shredded the Viet Cong battalions and spoiled their attack.

A blonde young nurse came in and expertly stuck something in Bill's ear. She smiled at me because I was a regular visitor. He had told her about Long Tan, but not much because she was too busy to listen. It meant nothing to her. The war had ended long before she was born. There was still some residual suffering, such as Bill's, but he may as well have talked to her about Troy or the Crusades.

She took the gadget out of his ear, read something on the dial, and made a note on the pad at the foot of the bed.

We learned that the doctor would be along soon, and Bill had better stop his yakking and get some rest or he would be in big trouble when the doctor saw him. She left to continue her busy round.

'Cheeky, bloody kid,' said Bill. 'She oughta have more respect.'

She was nearly young enough to be a granddaughter of his. Though truth to tell, he didn't much mind. It wasn't too bad being bullied by a pretty girl, especially when she had your best interests at heart.

'We were shooting off our sixty rounds at a great rate', said Bill. 'Once all our ammo was gone it'd be all over Red Rover with us, we'd be dead or captured. But we got more. A couple'a choppers that were supposed to lift a concert party out of Nui Dat were loaded up with boxes of ammo and they came in at tree top level and dropped the boxes smack on target. After that ammo wasn't a problem; we could've fought for days.'

He stopped, overcome with weariness, and slept. The nurse's advice had been good.

There were some Vietnam medals lying on the bedside table. I whispered to his blank face and closed eyes, 'I've put the medals in my pocket, Bill. I'll keep them safe until I come back tomorrow.' He may have heard, me, I don't know.

Long Tan was a victory for the Australians, and the supporting artillery. Armoured personnel carriers and reinforcements turned up at first light and after a short battle the Viet Cong faded away into the jungle; carrying their wounded. The Australians lost eighteen men,

against hundreds for the Viet Cong and the enemy never took them on again in an open fight. Phuoc Tuy Province was ours for the rest of the war.

I went back the next day to visit Bill, but someone else was in his bed. The woman at the counter told me, as kindly as she could, that Bill had died during the night and his body was now in the hospital morgue.

'Are you family?'

I hesitated a moment. I couldn't pay for a funeral. 'No, I'm a friend of his. He had a wife once, but he couldn't hold down a job and she walked out on him. I think he had a cousin living in Perth, but I don't know anything about her.'

'What about a funeral plan? Had he made any arrangements?'

'No, Bill wouldn't think about stuff like that; besides he didn't have any money.'

'Ah well, the government will have to deal with it. If you wish to attend his burial I will pass your name on to the authorities. You will be notified of the time and place.'

'I didn't see the blonde nurse while I was at the hospital. I wanted to thank her for caring for Bill.'

I thought of him lying cold and dead on the mortuary slab, finished with life's problems and all his disappointments and misfortunes. Somehow it seemed such a waste. Silly old bugger, he hadn't been to Vietnam in his entire life. He hadn't been in the army either, though he thought he had. The medals were mine. A delusion had taken hold of him over the years and he believed his story because he longed for the respect it brought him. Still, he was my brother, there was no one else, and I was going to miss him.

As I walked along the street towards the bus stop people looked at me curiously. They wondered why I was crying.

The Lost City

To appreciate this story you must understand the state of the chewing gum market in America in 1902. Chewing gum had not long been invented and was regarded with great favour as an improvement on chewing tobacco, which was a dirty habit that discoloured teeth, tainted the breath of those who used it, and led to much spitting.

The American public gladly accepted the custom of chewing gum instead, and sales soared. However, the very success of the chewing gum market led to an unexpected problem. The main ingredient of the chewing gum of the time was chicle, a substance extracted from the sap of sapodilla trees, which grew in Central and South America.

Unless fresh supplies of chicle were found the manufacture of chewing gum would cease, profits would collapse and the very foundations of capitalism would be under threat.

In the midst of this crisis a man named Chester Browning approached Mr Wrigley, head of the most famous chewing gum firm of all. He claimed to have an intimate knowledge of Central America and knew where there were many large groves of sapodillo trees. If Mr Wrigley would finance an expedition he was prepared to lead his men to these valuable groves and the botanists with the party could gather as much chicle as could be carried by the porters back to civilization.

Also there would be enough seeds and sapodillo shoots to grow whole forests of them back in the United States.

Mr Wrigley had never met Chester Browning before, knew nothing of his background and was doubtful of his claims, but desperately needed fresh supplies of chicle. At last he reluctantly engaged his services by supplying enough money to outfit an expedition to search for the elusive trees.

Some weeks later Browning and his party landed on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. In those days it was little known to westerners, largely covered in forests which still hid undiscovered temples and cities.

Browning and his companions were not interested in the history of the area; all that concerned them was to find the elusive Sapodilla trees.

Whether Chester Browning's memory was at fault or his sense of direction no one knew but the forest groves to which he led the naturalists did not contain sapodilla trees. He refused to give up the quest and in a series of wearying treks led them ever further into the interior. Each time his optimism was undimmed and he promised an increasingly unwilling party ever more trees which he claimed to have seen only a short distance away on previous journeys in the area. Yet each time their struggles through dense jungle led to disappointments, quarrels broke out and he was accused of total incompetence.

After one bitter row he took his pack and walked off into the forest leaving the other expedition members to find their own way home.

Nothing more was heard of Chester Browning and he was assumed to be dead until Indians found him wandering in the jungles of British Honduras, hundreds of miles from where he had walked away from his colleagues.

When carried to a nearby village he was disoriented and suffering from malaria. He did not live long but between bouts of delirium he told the villagers about a walled city he had found far in the hinterland. He told them feverishly that thousands of people must have lived there, but it was deserted. It had not been engulfed by jungle and there seemed no reason why its inhabitants would have migrated elsewhere.

When he was lucid he told them of finding a wall in the jungle that barred his way, he walked a long distance along its base until he found an opening where the great gates had fallen and were lying in a heap of rubble.

Seemingly a watch tower by the gate had also collapsed. He peered into the city looking for enemies then, seeing none, clambered over the stones and splintered gates; over some giant bones which he could not identify and into the city itself.

The streets and courts through which he walked were empty and quiet except for the chattering of birds, while snakes and lizards sunned themselves in crevices in the stonework. Crowds of butterflies drank from pools of rainwater on the paving slabs and rose up in dazzling displays of colour when he disturbed them.

The rooms in the buildings were low and dark with mouldering, wormy furniture here and there; the walls were decorated everywhere with strange paintings, seemingly of long forgotten ceremonies.

Browning spent a day exploring the quiet, mysterious shell of a dead civilization. Then he found another wrecked gate and opening in the wall at the other end of the city and trudged northwards, as he thought, making for the coast and still intent on proving he had been right all along about the sapodilla trees.

He was so ill when his rescuers laid him down in a hut that they thought he was raving when talking about his great find; there were plenty of ruined buildings in the jungle and carved stone fragments of Mayan civilization but no one had ever heard of such a thing as a lost city, and they believed they knew the area better than any North American stranger.

He died and they sent a message to Belize notifying the colonial authorities of his death and then buried him on a hill-side overlooking the village.

The story about a lost city suddenly revealed to a wandering stranger faded into the past as had traditions of other lost cities. Ur, Babylon, Nineveh, and Troy. These and many others were no more than names from old legends until their remains were found and identified one by one. Some day Browning will be proved right. He was not to know but his city was already a thousand years old when he found it.

The downfall of the city began with the arrival of a terrible witch-demon that flew in from the north and alighted on the city wall. From there she surveyed her new surroundings.

She was hideous to look at and wore a heavy cloak of black feathers, with a large hat of the same. Her feet were turned backwards at the ankles and she teetered uncertainly on the edge of the wall, but no one dared laugh.

The news of her arrival went through the community like a shock. Citizens came out of their homes and workshops to see her. The laborers in the fields came into the city to stare at the monster. She was an evil sight to behold; and children screamed when they saw her face.

All agreed that the chief priest of the temple should approach the witch and ask her to go far away from their city and never return.

'Be careful!' said a visiting priest who knew much about the ways of the world. 'I have seen her from afar. She is one of the vile brood of a demon whose feet are turned backwards at the ankles and who enjoy catching and strangling travellers on lonely roads. What could have happened to her temple to drive her here? Don't get too close, she may be in an evil mood.'

The chief priest was not reassured by these words, but as there was no one higher to whom he could pass the task. He walked reluctantly along the otherwise deserted wall towards the newcomer.

The witch slowly turned her head to see who it was that approached.

'What do you want, old man?' She said in a harsh, grating voice that made him tremble. 'Why do you come to me dressed in a priest's robe and headdress. Are you here to plead for mercy for your city? You should come crawling. Tell them there is no pity, none!'

'Oh mighty spirit, why have you come to our little, poor town? We have nothing of value for such a mighty being as you. You would be welcomed in Tenochtitlán, capital of the Aztec empire, here we are nothing but poor Mayans, worth less than the dust beneath your feet.'

As he mentioned this the witch demon uttered a mighty screech of pure hatred. Those listening staggered back and covered their ears.

'I could kill you now,' she grated, 'but I will let you live so you can tell the miserable wretches that hide and peep at me from round corners that I now rule this city. Tell them also that my name is Cholula and they are now my cattle. I can slay them or use them as I will.'

'But, but, Great Cholula,' quavered the terrified man, 'Tenochtitlán needs a divine god of your talents. You could have a temple all of your own.'

The witch screeched again. 'Say that once more and I will wrench your arms and legs from your body. The Spanish under Cortes are even now destroying Tenochtitlán; there is little of it left. They propose to build a new city on the site, to be called Mexico City. They burned my temple and drove me out to wander the world. This miserable little dung heap, which you call a

city is now mine, and I will stay here until the Spanish are purged from the land. I will live in the tower by the gate. Tell the guards if they are still there when I move in I will kill them and rend their souls out of their bodies so they will have to wander forever, and never find peace. Tell them that!"

The high priest goggled at the horrid sprite and tried to plead with her.

She lost her temper. 'Never mind, I'll tell them myself!' She lashed out with a heavy claw and swept the old man off the wall on to the rocks below. He was dead when his fellow townsmen picked him up.

Whatever the reason for her sudden appearance Chulula killed the guards and gained possession of the watch-tower by the city gate, there to live and persecute the people of the city.

She was a bane and a terror to them and no one knew how to get rid of this wicked spirit. When the Aztecs, driven south by defeat, attacked to gain slaves and human sacrifices she stopped the city gate from being closed to keep them out. Not that she cared who won the battle, or whether or not the people of the city were driven away to be sacrificed so the sun god would relent and give the Aztecs victory over the Spaniards. She did this only out of spite, and no one knew why, or what they had done to arouse her hatred.

When the first wave of European plagues came with travellers over the mountains it was a different story. That time she kept the gate shut so no one could escape and once again people died in their hundreds. Of course she was not as clever or as successfully wicked as she thought; with the gates shut no one was able to get out and the plague did not spread throughout the tribes of Central America; many thousands were spared the terrible diseases.

The people thought to escape her cruelties by building another gate in the wall on the far side of the city and using that, but the demon-witch soon saw what they were about and came screeching out of her lair. She flew across on stinking wings to attack the workers and drive them away. She smashed the scaffolding and struck terrible blows against the gates that were to be installed in an opening cut in the wall. The gates splintered and fell over.

Her arrival had not been unexpected for the defenders of the city had hoped to lure her into the open where she could be dealt with more easily than when in her tower taunting them. Many brave archers and warriors from all over Central America who had assembled in secret came running to defend the walls. She was greeted with flights of arrows, while those without bows or arrows waved their swords and shouted insults, challenging her to meet them in single combat.

Instead of respecting the bravery of those who were fighting for their native city and their homes the creature became enraged. She disdained the arrows which, because of magic, bounced harmlessly off her flowing black feather robes. She was in such a tearing rage that the work of destruction was soon over. The scaffolding put up for the labourers was smashed into pieces no bigger than so many splinters; those who survived were running for their lives. In spite of this the defenders on the wall were not dismayed though their arrows were disappearing fast as they tried to find some spot on the terrible enemy where their shots would have an effect.

When all the work had been undone and the building material scattered far and wide the demon-witch turned her rage on the warriors manning the wall. She screamed in a voice to freeze the bravest hearts and swooped down ignoring a hail of arrows and the swords thirsting to drink her blood. She alighted on the wall and bared great, yellow fangs at her enemies. The front rank of archers knelt while loosing their arrows so their comrades in the rear ranks could fire also, but it was to no avail. The demon witch pulled her black hat low over her eyes and ignored the arrows as though they were no worse than pelting rain.

Chulula advanced waving her claws in the air. With no more weapons than these she towered over the archers and shoved them to right and left so they fell off the wall screaming and were broken on the ground below. Many a brave warrior ran forward with sword at the ready to offer her single combat: but it was no use; she snarled at each one, picked him up and threw him to one side or the other. All met the same fate as the demon witch raged back and forth on the wall until every defender was dead or had run away.

Among those who fled was one warrior, Itzamna, who had returned to his native city hoping to find employment for a brave swordsman. He was a landless warrior, named after the god who watched over the Mayans. He followed any chief who could pay him enough to live on and had been to every part of Central America. Until that terrible day on the wall of the city no foe had ever seen his back.

He had heard stories about the evil being who lived in the tower by the city gate and wondered why she had not been dealt with long ago by the bold warriors of which there were so many in that land. Such was his pride that he thought little of the fighters of his home province for not killing her or driving her away.

Itzamna had been eager at first to meet Chulula on the wall but felt a terror he had never known before when he saw how she snarled and swept the boldest away to their deaths. Dozens of courageous warriors dashed forward to support the archers but all had been cruelly destroyed by the demon-witch and when his turn came to give battle his feet felt as though they were fastened to the ground.

The terror raged closer striking down everyone who tried to bar her way then, as she reached out to grasp him, his legs started to work again and he ran away as fast as he could.

In the midst of this great disaster no one cared about the shame of one warrior. Indeed, no one left alive on that fateful day had seen him flee and he was the only one who knew of his cowardice, but he felt it as keenly as though all the world had witnessed his disgrace and was mocking him.

An archer also had survived the terror for he too had run away rather than be thrown from the wall like the other members of his company. The two men met at the foot of the steps which led down from the high wall into the city; they glanced at one another with burning looks of shame.

The truth could not be hidden from each other. Itzamna gazed at his sword. 'I have brought disgrace on it!' he said. 'I must not use the sword to take my life because one cannot use a noble sword to let the life out of its cowardly owner. Shoot me with your arrows, I deserve nothing less.'

'No!' said the archer who was an ordinary soldier, not of the warrior caste, and therefore felt the disgrace less keenly. 'I will not kill you because it would be waste of arrows and another triumph for the demon. You might as well have died on the wall as do that.'

'How then can I atone for my cowardice?' asked Itzamna; 'The thought of having fled before an enemy, no matter how terrible, is more than I can bear.'

'We are both fighters,' said the archer, 'and we both ran instead of staying to be slaughtered; it may have been dishonourable, but at least it was sensible. The only way to remove the stain on our honour is to pledge ourselves to destroy the demon. An archer and a swordsman will go well together in a venture of this kind. She may kill us later even though we escaped her anger today, but if we vanquish her it will not be in open combat; first we must study to find out how she may be overcome. It could take years; we will have to ask every magician in the world the secret of her powers.'

Itzamna was given new hope by these words. He sheathed his sword and pledged himself to go with the archer in search of the knowledge that would help them destroy the demon-witch.

That day they hid in the city to escape the vigilance of their enemy and left by night.

For years the two men wandered the world seeking out magicians and soothsayers to ask how they could arm themselves to withstand the malice and power of their enemy.

Every wise one they consulted gave different advice. One told them to hang garlic about their necks because demons hate garlic; another said they must pray and recite the names of seventy gods before facing Chulula. One advised the archer to forge silver arrow heads because these would kill the demon stone dead if they pierced any part of her body. Another famous shaman sold them, at a special low price, a potion to make anyone who drank it proof against all weapons and against the attacks of even the cruellest enemy.

To test this claim before meeting their bloodthirsty sprite they found a drunk man and offered him a cup of the strange brew. He took it gladly, being very drunk, and swallowed the dose in one gulp. When it was down the archer fired an arrow and shot him through the heart. The poor man fell dead and the two comrades left hurriedly, while tipping the rest of the potion out on to the ground.

Another expert was sure the demon could be eliminated, but only by another, equally powerful being. However this did not seem wise; they did not know how to find other demons and in any case feared they might be destroyed before they could explain their mission, and worse still the city might end up being oppressed by two evil beings instead of one.

In the end they decided there were no more sages or magicians to consult and those they had met were of little use anyway. It was a bitter blow because their pledge to each other meant that at last they must go home to face the demon and fight her with no more protection than their own courage and weapons.

Upon returning they found the city a place of terror. Heaps of bones lay in their path for Chulula had the habit of catching unwary people, eating them and throwing their remains out of the windows of the tower by the city gates where she dwelt. A pack of dogs lived and fought over these bones, eating scraps of meat that were left, but no one dared drive them away.

'Our bones will soon join these and be eaten by dogs,' said Itzamna gloomily, trying not to tremble at the awful sight.

'Perhaps so,' replied his friend. 'I only hope we give her indigestion, and the dogs too; she won't get much satisfaction out of eating tough and stringy old warriors like us.'

'I shall call out and challenge her to come down and fight,' said Itzamna who thought his last minutes had come. 'While we are fighting you must try and bring her down with an arrow from close range.'

'Not yet,' replied the archer. 'In the open like this she could do battle against a hundred strong warriors and win, don't forget what happened on the wall; our only hope is to creep up to the room at the top of the tower when she is asleep and break in. At close quarters, and taking her by surprise something may yet be done.'

The doomed men could think of no better plan and after waiting for nightfall they crept to the city gates, which were still open because the guards had been slain long ago. Neither was the door to the guard tower locked, such was the witch-demon's contempt for the people left in the city, and they softly mounted the ladder inside the tower.

They were soon on the wall and put their ears against the door to the guardroom. All that could be heard was a heavy grunting noise and the deep rumble of snoring, Chulula was asleep.

Itzamna made a silent prayer to his ancestors and pushed the creaking door open ever so slowly and quietly while the archer stood by his shoulder with an arrow notched to the string of his bow.

The demon-witch had thrown herself down on a great bed and was snoring so hard the room shook; her mouth was open and the little light coming through the windows glinted on the fangs with which she had torn so many brave people.

Itzamna knew his moment had come. He softly walked to the side of the bed, raised his sword, and with a great cry slashed the creature's head from its shoulders. The head bounced into a corner of the room and lay there glaring at him and gnashing its teeth while the body leapt up spouting blood. It instantly started groping around on the floor trying to find the head while the two men looked on in horror scarcely able to speak or move.

The head cried out that it was lying in the corner but of course the great body had no ears to hear nor eyes to see and lunged about the room searching both for its head and the warrior who had struck the blow.

Itzamna ran in to attack yet again but he was not quick enough and one of the flailing claws caught him in a grip that not even the strongest could escape. The head was calling out for the body to strangle him, to tear him apart; which was like to happen for he was then caught by the other claw in a death grip. Between them they were squeezing his life away.

The archer ran to the corner, picked up the head by its hair and hurled it far out of the window, he heard dogs, wakened by the noise, snarling and fighting over this latest prize to fall from above. The barking became more distant as one lucky dog ran away with the head.

Even without a head the body was crushing Itzamna in its powerful grip. He had slashed it twice more with his sword but without a head it could feel no pain. No doubt it would grow weak and die, but Itzamna would die first.

The archer could not get a clear shot with his bow so he snatched arrows from his quiver and stabbed them into the demon's body, one after another. The creature could not scream but it stood up, relaxed its painful hold on the warrior, then fell with a crash that shook the tower. It lay dead on the floor pierced through and through with arrows.

The two men looked at one another and panted while the remaining citizens of the city stirred, wondering why the creature was making such a racket at that time of night.

'The third magician we called on got it right,' said the archer.

'What?'

'He told me to use silver arrow heads. I had some forged and that's what finished her off -- the silver in the arrows.'

'No doubt you are right,' said Itzamna, but you must admit that chopping off the witch's head slowed her down a bit. I think we can take equal credit.'

Next day the citizens cleaned up their city but would not touch the huge body in the top room of the guard tower. They buried the bones that Chulula had thrown out of the window and drove the dogs away, but the witch-demon's head was never found.

As for the two friends they enjoyed being heroes but it got boring after a while because their fellow townsmen had lost heart. They thought their city was forever cursed; perhaps it was.

They were proud of their success and decided to go into business as witch killers. Mayan civilization was being destroyed by bloodthirsty Aztec gods fleeing from Tenochtitlan, and the Spaniards who had destroyed it. Their services of the two men were in great demand and they prospered.

However, in the end, nothing could save the Mayan civilization.

The cities, emptied of people, were overgrown and hidden by the encroaching jungle, then they were forgotten

The Ugly Duckling

Henry Duckling was born in a settlement on the banks of the Lachlan River in New South Wales, not far from Booligal.

His home was big because it had to accommodate eighteen people. Henry was the last of sixteen children. He had eight sisters and seven brothers.

The seven brothers were formidable footballers and longed to be accepted for an Australian Football League team. As yet none had had any luck.

His eight sisters played hockey and no rival team members could stand against them if they valued their shins or their skulls. One could say that the Duckling family was renowned in the district for aggressive sporting skills, but not for intellectual qualities.

Seventeen Duckling children had a proud record of resisting any attempts to educate them and it was well known that not one had ever passed an examination at school.

This did not halt their progress through the education system. No teacher wished to have an overgrown, discontented, and disruptive Duckling sitting in the back row of the classroom and they passed from grade to grade until, to everyone's relief, they left school. The only downside to this custom was that every time a Duckling graduated the school's football or hockey team was weakened.

However, no family can expect to have a perfect record, and to everyone's surprise it was discovered that the eighteenth Duckling really enjoyed going to school, and finished his homework every night; a practice that had never been followed by his brothers and sisters.

The teachers were bemused and wary but his seventeen siblings, and his mother and father were mortified that this eighteenth and last child had no interest in sport and no wish to join the football team; a privilege automatically granted to his seven brothers.

Henry was regarded by Doug, a bully at school, as a nerd and a wimp. He would have made Henry's life hell except when he first tried it he was met on the way home by a deputation of sisters from the Duckling family armed with hockey sticks.

The opinion of the family was that Henry was indeed a nerd and a wimp, but he was theirs and they were the only ones entitled to point out these flaws in his character; an attitude which certainly eased Henry's way through school.

Henry was an excellent student and Mrs Duckling's teacher parent interviews passed off very well. In the past they had led to recriminations and tears - generally those of the teacher.

His school reports disturbed the Duckling family; they were excellent. Henry passed every subject and the teachers united in praising his desire to study, and his behavior in class.

He started bringing books home, and actually reading them. Books made the Ducklings uneasy; they were full of long words and strange ideas.

When he was young and still in primary school his brothers were inclined to bully him at times because his lack of sporting skills rankled with them. On one occasion they even threw him into the Lachlan River. He could not swim and no one attempted to rescue him, not that it mattered, the river was dry at the time.

The brothers did not bully him often because their sisters tended to find out and they would come to Henry's defence with their hockey sticks.

Eventually, to the regret of his teachers, who had grown fond of him, he entered secondary school where his courteous behaviour and studious nature was greatly appreciated by the staff, but not by all the students.

However he had his own private back-up squad which was prepared to descend on the school at short notice and sort out anyone who was causing grief to their little brother.

His family noticed that he was reading even more books than before and on one occasion his mother found a book under his bed which was very mysterious because no one in the Duckling household understood a word of it. None of them was totally illiterate but this book was quite beyond them.

Mrs Duckling was so concerned she took the book to the school to enquire about it and was directed to the French teacher. She was told that the book was a novel in the French language and the teacher had lent it to her son.

Mrs Duckling was distraught. She knew only two things about the French; one was that they were not to be trusted, and the other was that they ate frogs' legs. This was enough to condemn them in the eyes of any decent Australian mother.

This brazen woman had lent her corrupting French novel to the youngest Duckling of all. She was lucky that Mrs Duckling had not brought a hockey stick with her. The teacher managed to calm the fearful mother and explained that the book was a classic French novel universally admired but read by only a few. Its title in English was *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust.

She explained that it was to Henry's credit that he was able to read this book in its original language.

Mrs Duckling went home, only partly comforted. Mr Duckling disapproved of reading of any kind, particularly in French, and would have taken off his heavy leather belt to give Henry a belting but was warned not to by his elder sons, who were just as tough as he was.

The crisis in Henry's life happened soon after his sixteenth birthday. It was a bad year for the local football team. Two of Henry's brothers had been rubbed out for excessively rough play. Their only possible replacements had broken legs or arms; if it had been concussion or something mild like that they would have happily gone on. In this moment of crisis Henry's brothers recruited him to the team, but only to make up the numbers.

They bundled him into the family ute and sat him in the middle with a brother either side so he could not escape.

When he arrived on the ground in big football boots and a torn team jumper wrapped around his lanky frame the opposing side fell about laughing and it soon became clear that they were going to put Henry through the wringer to make up for all they had suffered at the hands of the Duckling family.

Henry's brothers explained that any ill treatment of Henry would be repaid in blood; his sisters went and got their hockey sticks. It seemed that the brawl after the match would be more interesting than the game itself.

Henry's brother, Donald, who was captain of the team, pointed out the goal posts and instructed Henry that if by any chance he got the ball that was the direction in which he was to kick it, and the direction would change every quarter.

Henry nodded fearfully, wishing he was back with his books.

The game commenced. There was some scuffling down the other end of the ground for a while and then, unexpectedly he saw the ball high in the air coming towards him.

Something happened to Henry and an event followed that was discussed in the district for years. The Duckling genes must have gone into overdrive at that very moment for he found himself jumping on an opposing team member's back, then he was standing on his shoulders and took a screamer of a mark about twelve feet off the ground.

He fell off, still clutching the ball and someone blew a whistle.

He was ashamed of his actions and wanted to apologize and hand the ball over until he realized the young man he had stood on was Doug, who had attempted to bully him at school and had barely escaped with his life from the Duckling family vengeance.

Doug was as disagreeable as ever, particularly at this moment and directed a stream of bad language at Henry.

Henry decided he was not worthy of having the ball after all and kicked it away so he couldn't get it.

The thing went straight through the middle of the goal posts. The grandstand nearly collapsed under the impact of the dancing, jumping Ducklings and their supporters.

Henry remembered little of the rest of the game, but everyone else did and they reminded him constantly of various aspects of play.

That day he leaped up and took marks in spectacular fashion; kicked goals; ran and danced round clumsy opponents, particularly Doug, who was lusting to punch the grin off his face.

When the match finished the Duckling's team was sixteen goals in front and Henry had kicked twelve of them.

The instant the final siren sounded everyone converged on him. His sisters hugged and kissed him, his brothers thumped him on the back.

His mother was busily attacking Doug's father with her umbrella. During the match she had overheard him – and it was difficult not to overhear him casting serious aspersions on Henry's parentage. She thought his remarks had impugned her honor as a virtuous wife and mother.

In the midst of this happy tumult a beefy, powerful looking man pushed his way into the circle and seized Henry by the shoulder.

'Righto son,' he said; you're mine. Sign this!' He had a printed form and a pen which he held in front of Henry's nose.

Everyone urged Henry to sign, but he shook his head. 'I want to go to university and get a degree.'

'That's alright Henry, you sign and we'll get you into any university you like, just name it. We'll look after you.'

Henry later reluctantly signed the form on the bar of the local pub after he had downed a large glass of orange juice. He signed on the solemn assurance, 'Scout's Honor' that he could go to the university of his choice.

Everyone was delighted. Henry, the baby of the family, was to be famous. His pictures would be in all the papers, he would appear on television, glamorous women would compete for his attention.

The man, with the signed form safely tucked in his pocket, produced a garishly coloured jumper which every member of the family helped Henry to pull on. He stood proudly before them wearing this borrowed plumage.

In one short, crowded afternoon he had transcended the name of Duckling and had become a beautiful, glorious swan, -- a swan of whom all his family could be proud, a Sydney Swan.

The Soldier

I've been to lots of executions in my time. Hated everyone of them. But if you're in the army you don't have much choice -- in fact, none! The army kills a lot of its own. Various reasons; cowardice in the face of the enemy; desertion; murder; refusal to obey orders; insolence to an officer. You can be court-martialed for any of the above. Not all carry the death penalty, but for those that do the accused man has to expect a short trial and a painful death.

Many times I have been ordered to join a squad detailed to bring about a someone's death, and later in my service I commanded a few. Killing an opponent in battle doesn't worry me. The other guy's got a sword or spear, and it's kill or be killed. That's fair enough in this hard world.

I met a few soldiers who didn't mind executing unarmed people, but I've never liked it, not once. It's a dreadful thing to carry out the sentence. But what can you do? In the army you shut up and obey orders.

The army doesn't mind if you have opinions as long as you don't mention them to anyone. Do what you're told, and keep your trap shut; that's the way to get on in the army.

I thank the gods I don't have to kill anyone any more. I have fought in many battles, done me twenty five years in the army, and now I'm retired on a pension. Got a wife, a small farm and a family. Life could be worse.

What used to worry me was that we get the dirty job of killing prisoners that had been found guilty by the civil courts. Why us? We're soldiers, not paid executioners. Before I rose to the rank of Optio, or, as you would say, second in command of a century, I was sometimes ordered to take charge of a death squad and me and the rankers had to do the job.

These executions used to happen when we were on garrison duty somewhere. The town councils, or the local kings, were too cheap to hire their own executioners. They would send the condemned criminal to us with a death warrant and we would have to do the job for nix. The cheap-skates wouldn't even bother sending us a few bottles of drink.

There is one execution we carried out that I remember vividly. I still dream about it and wake up screaming so my poor wife has to hold me in her arms and comfort me until I stop trembling.

The bloke we had to kill was a middle-aged man, in his thirties, I guess. He was a terrorist, or agitator, or maybe both. He had been out in the back blocks talking to the peasants trying to get them to rise up and start a new kingdom. I don't know the details, and after we'd finished with him he couldn't tell us.

His mistake was in coming to town with some followers and trying the same caper there. He caused a few disturbances in the market and elsewhere before the law caught up with him and he was taken into custody.

The local king was interested in only one kingdom, that was his own and he took a very dim view of this terrorist guy talking about starting another. I suppose he thought he would be bumped from his throne, and they had a short way of dealing with surplus kings where all this took place.

I forget the details of how it happened but the military governor got involved and there was a bit of tooing and froing. No one wanted to be responsible for condemning this terrorist guy so the military governor had to do the job. I've forgotten his name

This was the time when I was still an N.C.O. and was unlucky enough to draw the short straw and be put in charge of an execution detail. It was a straight forward job, only three condemned men were led out through the city gates and handed over to us.

I could understand two of them well enough, they were gallows bait from the day they were born. They were bandits who had robbed and killed, and had no respect for life or the law. They came out of the gates cracking hardy, joking with the escort, and the crowds that were coming to see them die; but inside they were terrified to their guts.

They knew what was going to happen to them. They'd seen executions often enough.

It was the third guy that surprised me, the terrorist, the agitator. Surely the courts and the governor had made a mistake. Some of the jailers enjoy this sort of thing and he had been whipped bloody, but he didn't wince, or cry out even though a sort of shirt someone had pulled over his back was dripping with blood and was stuck to his wounds.

He was the politest man I have ever met, and he carried himself like an officer rather than a condemned criminal. He would have chatted with me in spite of the preparations we were making to kill him. But an executioner can't talk to his victim. It's not right. If you start to feel sympathy with these people it would drive you mad.

He was even comforting the two criminals who were to die with him, and telling them that his dad would be along soon to take care of everything.

He must have been delusional because he was telling them that when his dad turned up they could all go to dinner in his house. I turned away in case he invited me too. It was bizarre. Their next dinner for those two would be whatever rations are served in hell.

A lot of people enjoy watching executions. It's not a thing that appeals to me, but then it takes all sorts. Some like carrying out death sentences others prefer watching. This one seemed to have drawn a larger crowd than usual. There were all sorts milling about, I think some were his supporters, and a lot of howling women. The trouble with big crowds is that people get too close and it upsets the orderly routine of the execution.

One, I think, was his mother, weeping over her son. I couldn't look her in the eye. Not his mother.

I ordered my men to drive the crowd back with their spear butts.

People die in different ways, and I've seen hundreds endure it, but never a man like this. He was steadfast to the end. He did not cry out when we laid him down and nailed him to the cross with all the women caterwauling about, and the men cursing us, and telling us we were killing the son of some god or another.

He did not even cry out when we lifted him up on his cross, together with his new found mates.

He took about nine hours to die and did it very quietly, though before the end he shouted out something in the native lingo. I was told he was calling on a god to save him; a bit late I guess. In the end In the end I ordered one of my men to stick a spear into him to make sure the job was done. The authorities didn't want anyone hanging round on crosses during a local feast day

That day has stayed in my memory; not only because of the man himself but because of all the wild rumors that swept the town afterwards. People were saying he wasn't dead at all, and came back to life a few days later.

That's crap. He was dead alright. I don't like these judicial murders, but I know how to do me job. When I'm in charge of an execution the victims stay dead. We won't be hearing from him again.

But I can't help me dreams. Sometimes I see his face, so calm and serene, and I wake up sweating and crying until my wife gets me back to sleep again. Did I really kill a son of God?

The Bird of Life

Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring

The Winter Garment of Repentance Fling:

The Bird of Life has but a little way

To fly – and Lo! The Bird is on the Wing.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

It's the first day of spring, and I don't like it. If only I could stay in bed until summer comes round I might feel better. Right now 'I'm lying in bed with the blankets pulled up over me head to keep out the sunlight. The Bird of Life is tapping at the bedroom window.

Bloody chook, I could do without it. Danii give me the flick last night, said I was too negative, and got on her nerves. So it was, 'goodbye Wayne, see you around'.

I'm not negative. I'm just a bit depressed sometimes and being turned down by the best girl I ever met doesn't help much.

That bloody Bird of Life just keeps tapping the window with its beak; it gets on ya nerves.

I turn over, sink deeper into bed, put the pillow over me head to cut out even the tiniest bit of sunshine, and to muffle the tapping noise; though I know it's still there.

Now Mum's banging on the bedroom door. 'Wayne, Wayne! Get up, you're going to be late for work. Come on, I know you're in there. It's the first day of spring. You should be out of bed by now; come on, get up!'".

I keep me head down and sing a little song I made up, 'Wayne, Wayne, go away, come again another day.' I sing very soft so Mum won't hear and go mad.

Mum doesn't give up easily. She knows she has to bang on the door until the lock nearly jumps out of its socket or the hinges are going to give way. She did break it once. The neighbors always know when I get up in the morning. It's the screaming and banging that wakes them. That's mum, she makes enough noise for both of us. I don't say nothin'; I just want to go back to sleep.

She keeps it up until I can't stand it no more. I jump out, unlock the door, and crawl back into bed as far as I can, so me head's down the bottom somewhere and me feet are on the pillow.

'This room of yours pongs,' she says. 'What have you been doing here?'

'I ain't been doin' nothin'.

'Don't try and hide, get up and dress yourself! You're going to be late for work as it is'. I hear her walk to the window. I scream at her to stop, and fight me way out from under the bed clothes.

'Don't open it! The Bird of Life wants to get in!' Too late, the damn thing flaps through the open window and is peckin' at me.

She doesn't look at it, maybe she hasn't seen it at all.

'You're out too late at night, that's your problem. What were you doing this time?'

'Dannii give me the flick, that's what happened.'

'Did she, now? Well, I thought she might be a sensible girl in spite of that orange-striped hair, and her belly button, Dumping you was the smartest thing she's thought of for a while. I wish I could do the same. Anyway, your breakfast's downstairs. You'd better eat it and run. If you hurry you might not be too late for work.'

'I'm not going today. I'm sick of varnishing coffins, and screwing on handles. I 'm not gunna do it no more.'

'It's all your good for! Now you just bloody-well get dressed, go downstairs, eat your breakfast, and hurry. I want you out of the house so I can get some work done.'

I can't concentrate with the bird flapping around me head. It's real colorful bird, too, with a long shiny tail, but I wish it wouldn't attack me. I say, 'I ain't got a job in the factory no more; they give me the boot.'

'What the hell did you do this time?'

'It was the boss's fault. He kept saying me spray work was sloppy and I was putting the handles in the wrong places. So I told him what he could do with his job.'

'Well, you go straight into his office this morning and apologize, and say you'll try and do better in the future. If you're lucky he might take you back.'

'Nah! I don't think they want me, now. After I told the boss what I thought of him and his factory I decked him. I think they've given me job to someone else.'

I try to flap the bird away with me hands, but it's no use.

Mum looks at me. 'Oh Gawd, what did I do to deserve this? Anyway, I'm not having you hanging round, lying in bed all day. You're going out straight after breakfast to look for another job. I'll be back in five minutes with a jug of cold water I've got in the fridge. 'If you're not up and dressed by then I'll tip it all over you, and over your bed as well; now, get cracking! And stop waving your hands around like that!' She marches out of the room.

What am I gunna do? I want to crawl back into bed and pull the blankets over me head again and wait for summer; things might get better then, and the bird might have gone away. But

I know mum, and if she says she'll bring up a jug of water she'll do it. Even if we have a fight the jug'll be spilt; and the water'll go on me, or on to the bed.

I start to fossick round on the floor to see what clothes I'll wear today. The weather's turned a bit cold. Bloody spring!

I'm trying to dress, and it's real hard. 'Get away, you stupid bird, leave me alone!' It's no use, the bird's going at me like a dive-bomber, and I have to put me clothes on one-handed, or get pecked to buggery.

I spill milk and cornflakes all over the table because of that rotten bird. Mum's mad with me because I lost Dannii, and me job, all in one day. The mess in the kitchen didn't help much, either. The Bird of Life wants me out of the place. It keeps on peckin', and peckin' until I have to make a run for it. out the front door and into the street.

People walking past are looking at me like I'm round the bend. Maybe they can't see the bird either, and they're wondering why I'm waving me arms and running like crazy down the footpath.

Where to go to look for a job? There used to be factories around here, but they closed down years ago. All the jobs went to China and the factories were sold to developers, and now they're flash places to live.

There's one factory still holding out; not far from my place. I walk to it to have a look. Beauty! There's a door in the side wall of this old factory and someone's nailed a notice on the door, it says HANDS WANTED. ENQUIRE WITHIN.

I'm standing there reading the sign, and The Bird of Life's gone bananas. It flaps around like mad, and is sort of driving me towards the door, slapping with its wings at me head, and peckin'. No use standing out here. If I open the door quickly and jump in and slam it behind me I might leave the poultry outside.

I try it and fall over the step on to the factory. floor.

Inside this joint they're all laughin' at me. There's a mob of people in the place. They're all dressed funny and cackling like mad with me stretched out on the floor. The bird lands on the back of me head, just so it can get in another peck.

I look up. There weirdest lot I've ever seen, in me life and they're near packing themselves. and laughin' at me so. hard. they're all fallin' about. A fat old bloke with a big, red shiny nose comes over. He's dressed in a crummy, tatty old suit, covered with coloured checks. There was a dirty great daisy, or something, in his lapel. Mum wouldn't 've let that suit in the front door at our place.

He looks at me, and he's still laughing. 'Well done, Wayne!' he says. 'That was the best pratfall I seen in years. Ya got the job. We can use fresh young talent like yours.' He reaches down to help me up, I take his hand, and like – Wow!! There's a big bang, green smoke everywhere, and I'm tingling' and shakin' all over. Me hand hurts.

This sets everyone off again. The old guy's laughing harder than ever so that all his fat is jigglin' like a jelly in an earthquake. 'Ain't it a hoot,' he says. 'That's one of our oldest products, and still the best. The Hand-Shake for Dumbos was invented by the great man who founded our company, Lorenzo Superbo. Every time I think of that wonderful guy it gets me right here in the heart.'

He slaps his belly, and a burst of water from the daisy hits me smack in the eye like a fire-hose. I stand there water dripping from me face and wondering what the hell I've walked

into. They're all laughing so much I think to myself maybe there won't be a dry seat in the house.

The old bloke slaps me on the back, hard. 'Good on ya, Wayne. We need smart young blokes like you to make sure the company keeps up with the times. I can see a big future for you here.'

'How d'ja know me name?'

He nudges me in the ribs, harder than he needs to, and giggles. 'A little bird told me.'

The bird of Life has disappeared. I'm not sorry, but I wonder where it's gone to.

'We're on a recruiting drive, and Oscar, that's the bird's name, is our agent. We pay him in peanuts. So many peanuts a week, plus commission. And my name's Noel; but you can call me Noel.'

I'm workin' on this when someone comes along and gives me a kick on the behind.

'What the hell did you do that for? '

'Just trying to be helpful, if you don't want to be kicked you shouldn't have that sign on your back.' This guy is carrying two big cartons, both labeled, Lorenzo's Magical Marvels, but he don't look like a storeman. He's another clown with red braces, floppy pants, and a bright red checked shirt.

I'm gunna deck him, but Noel catches hold of me arm. 'Just calm down Wayne. He's right, you know. If you don't want to be kicked you shouldn't be walking around carrying that sign on your back.'

'What sign?'

'The one that says, Kick Me!'

I rip off me jumper, and sure enough there's a big sign on the back inviting people to do just that.

'You stuck that there when you slapped me on the back!'

'Me? Oh, to think me favorite employee should accuse me of playing such a mean, nasty, low-down trick!' He bursts into tears. There's a hanky hanging out of the top pocket of his coat and he pulls it out to wipe his eyes, but it keeps coming and coming. I watch to see what's going to happen next. He keeps on hauling on the hanky and blubbering. It turns out to be a whole string of flags, ending with the Australian flag, which comes complete with its own pole. He waves it in the air and everyone cheers.

'There you are, Wayne. This is what we're all about Not only do we specialize in magic props, and funny wheezes, but we're also one of the largest exporters of jokes in the entire world.'

'Jokes! What d'yer mean?'

'Australian jokes are famous all over the world, and most of them come from this factory. We got teams of talented writers who create jokes for export, and the sale of our jokes does wonders for Australia's balance of trade. There's another big container load of them in the warehouse ready for shipment to Japan.'

He pulls a funny face, crosses his eyes and looks at me. 'You brought your twin brother, that's alright, he can have a job too. Now, we'll set up an interview with the company shrinks. They'll decide where we can use you best. Sales, stores, security, art, perhaps even on the joke committee. Have a peanut.'

He tips some peanuts out on to me hand and puts the rest, still in the bag, in me pocket. I throw the peanuts in me hand into me mouth. I should'a known better! Me head nearly explodes, me throat burns, and I'm drinkin' water for the rest of the day.

He didn't stop.' 'And we got the Christmas cracker market sewn up, as well as the Chinese Fortune Cookie franchise. Listen to this, I say, *What fur do we get from a tiger?* Then you say, *As fur away as possible.* There you are, Wayne, only high quality jokes and riddles round here. *What do you get if you cross a chicken with a cement mixer?* Concentrate lad! *You get a bricklayer.* Boom - Boom!!

I said 'I dunno, I may not be any good in this job, I suffer a lot from depression.'

'Good news everyone!' roared the boss. 'Wayne here's a manic depressive, couldn't be better.' Everyone cheered. 'You see,' he said, 'Most of the great comics suffered from depression, it comes with talent, we need people like you.' I stepped away before he could slap me on the back.

'The committee's working on new material.' He says. 'They say blonde jokes have just about had it for a while, but in the American clubs there's a steady demand for mother-in-law jokes, and the Irish are always good for a laugh. Now the China market is opening up we'll repack some of the oldies, have them translated into Chinese, and see how they go.'

Anyway, I see the shrinks when I feel a bit better and they tell me what clown outfit I'll be issued with, and that I have to wear at work. And they say I can sit on the joke committee for a while to see how it works out.

It's five o'clock. There's a sound like a huge fart, and it's time to knock off for the day. Outside the Bird of Life is sitting on someone's front fence. He doesn't attack me and to show there's no hard feelings I go up and let him have a peck at me bag of peanuts. The greedy bugger eats two, then gives a squawk and falls off the fence. I walk home laughing.

Mum'll be pleased about the job. Maybe I'll go and see Dannii tonight in spite of what she said, and tell her the news; Spring's not so bad after all.

The Art Appreciation Society

This story comes with apologies to
Damon Runyon

The weekly Art Appreciation And Boozing Society was in session in the back room of O'Flaherty's pub having a friendly game of cards and discussing the problems of slow horses and fast bookies when O'Flaherty came in carrying a painting in a gilt frame..

'Will youse characters just take a look at this,' he said. They learned that Jimmy the Dip was in the bar a minute ago with a painting for sale. He said it was a picture of his old mum when she was young and it had great sentimental value, but he sold it to the publican for \$50 because he was a bit hard up.

Members of the society gathered around to assess the artistic value of the painting and to decide whether or not O'Flaherty had been jipped. Jimmy the Dip, was well known to them and many suspected that he made his drinking money by selling articles not lawfully acquired.

Harry the Horse, who gained his name, as far as anyone knew, by his resemblance to certain members of the equine family and a long and costly acquaintance with race course bookies was of the opinion that Jimmy the Dip's mum didn't look like this young woman and never had. Furthermore, as far as he was aware, it was not her practice to lean over and gaze at her reflection in the mirror while her pants were in the wash.

Harry's opinions were always treated with respect because of his profession. He was a standover man employed by The Easy Loan and Friendly Society and his duty was to make sure the clients of the society reciprocated the friendly feelings it felt towards them.

No one but Harry is quite sure where the offices of the society are situated. No one cares to ask. There is an old saying 'Curiosity Killed the Cat' If one is curious about Harry's business affairs it may lead to personal trauma, such a busted arm, or a trip to the dentist to have damaged teeth repaired, or removed.

Clarence the Clocker, though deferring to Harry's judgment, was yet to be convinced that Jimmy the Dip had ever had a mum in his life, and if there was such a person she had met his father only once, and then briefly. Some faulty information Clarence had received from the Dip regarding the racing capacities of certain horses in the recently run Melbourne Cup still rankled, so his opinion was discounted.

The majority of the connoisseurs present opined that as they could not see the young lady's face it was impossible to determine whether or not there was a family resemblance; though if she looked like Jimmy in any way it would be better to see her from the back rather than the front.

However, putting aside such matters, it was decided that the painting had sufficient artistic merit to be worthy of hanging in the front bar.

They thought it might possibly shock some of the more delicate minded customers of the pub, but on the whole should have a salutary effect on trade.

Roger Randy, President of the Anti Vice Co-operative came several times to inspect the painting before declaring it salacious and an offence to family morals. He demanded that it be removed forthwith, and even offered to take charge of it himself so it could not fall into the hands of an innocent person, easily influenced to sin.

His kindly offer was refused and he wrote to the editor of the local paper denouncing the painting as depraved and pornographic. He warned his readers that even going in to the bar where the painting was hung was like entering into the jaws of the particular hell reserved for sinners.

This letter did wonders for patronage at the pub. Hundreds came to pass judgment on the controversial painting and each patron was good for two or three drinks at bar prices while they debated whether the painting was art or smut.

In point of fact it was art because it soon transpired that Jimmy the Dip had been duplicitous yet again. A valuable painting had disappeared from the art gallery in the next street and the curator wanted it back.

Jimmy the Dip has not been seen in the pub lately but when he does appear O'Flaherty is confident that he will gladly return the \$50, once the circumstances have been explained.

If the Dip fails to see the force of O'Flaherty's arguments Harry the Horse has promised to call on him in his professional capacity to persuade that errant young man that if he desires to continue in good health it would be advisable to reimburse the publican the full \$50 plus 40 per cent commission to Harry to cover his expenses. Harry estimates his 40 per cent at \$60 which is

normal accounting practise at the offices of The Easy Loan and Friendly Society where Harry is, as we understand, head of the human relations department.

Note. I have written the story above in the style of Damon Runyon. He was a famous journalist, resident of New York, who turned to fiction. He wrote stories about the bookies, punters, crooks, standover men, and their women, whom he had met from Broadway to Brooklyn. One of stories was *Guys and Dolls*, which became a top grossing Broadway musical.

Pillow talk

Mummy! Mummy, wake up!

Uh! What is it? What's wrong sweetheart.

The crocodile's back under my bed, and I'm frightened.

There's no crocodile here sweetie. You go back to bed like a good girl.

Yes there is, it's a big crocodile, and he said he was going to eat me. I want to sleep with you and Daddy.

Oh, alright then. Come on, snuggle down, but there are no crocodiles here. We don't allow them into the house.

What the hell's going on around here. Is that bloody kid in our bed again?

Yes, she is, and don't swear. I've been getting into trouble at kindy because she says naughty words, and I know where she picks them up.

Well, I'm sick of this, why can't she stay in her own bed? She's always coming into our room in the middle of the night and wanting to get in with us.

'It's because she's afraid, poor little thing. Weren't you afraid of the dark when you were her age?'

'Four years old! I can't remember what I was doing last week; let alone what I was like at four.'

'I bet you were a sook. I'll bet you ran to mummy in the middle of the night because there were monsters hiding behind the door.'

'No I didn't I was a manly sort of kid. I wasn't frightened of the dark.'

How do you know, if you can't remember?

I can remember that much.

I'll ring your mother tomorrow and ask her. She'll tell me what you were like at four. She remembers everything about you – especially the parts you don't want to hear.

No, don't ring her. Mum's an earbasher. She'll rabbit on for hours about me, and I get sick of it. She's always going on about my first tooth, measles, mumps, the time I fell off the swing, and God knows what else.

You'll be at work. It won't worry you because you won't hear what we're saying. Your mother loves to talk about you, and most of the time you won't let her.

Don't bother ringing her. She talks too much

Oh, it's all coming out is it? This great big strong man I married doesn't want me to find out he was afraid of the dark, and that crocodile that lives under Bubby's bed. Did she inherit that from you?

Well. I don't know.

I wondered where it came from. I don't remember anything like that from my childhood.

I'll bet there was. Girls are more timid than boys.

That's the most sexist thing you've said for a while.

You're going to get a slap on the bum unless you stop picking on me.

You do that and I'll report you.

Who would you report me to?

Your mother, my mother. They'll be very dark on you if they hear you're ill treating the mother of their darling granddaughter. I'll tell Bubby too, and she'll realize what sort of a father she has.

You don't give me much of a choice, do you?

You've got no choice at all, pal. I can call on the sisterhood any time, and they'll know how to deal with you.

I think I'll form a men's liberation movement. We really need one.

Oh, you poor thing. Do you want me to hold you tight, like your mummy used to, and keep the nasties away,

Yeah – that sounds good to me. Is she asleep yet?

Ssh! I'll have a look. Yes, she's drifted off.

OK, you stay there. I'll carry her off to her own bed. Come on sweetie, Daddy's got you off to beddies now.

Watch out for the crocodile.

Oh, shut up!

Is she still asleep?

Yep. Out like a light. Gawd, I'm cold now. Move over and let me on to the warm spot.

No, warm up your own your own spot; this is mine.

Life's not fair.

Oh, alright. If you're going to sulk move closer and I'll put my arms around you. There, does that feel better? Ooh! You are cold. Go back to your own side of the bed.

Not a chance. I'm warming up fast. Yeah. That's good. How about taking off your nightie? That'd be even better.

No! Well, maybe, but only if you take your jarmies off too.

Fair enough, and we'll settle the question of who's on top in this family.

Ooh! That sounds good, but be gentle with me.

Mummy, Mummy, the Crocodile's back, I want to sleep with you and daddy.

Oh, Hell!! Look sweetie, there's no crocodile !! After I put you to bed last time I dragged it outside, kicked it up to the bus stop and gave it a dollar for its fare back to Queensland. It caught a bus and it's on its way. You'll never see it again.

Was it crying?

Yes, there were crocodile tears everywhere.

Can I sleep with you and Mummy?.

Oh, bloody hell, no!

Daddy! I'm going to tell Miss Jenkins you used some naughty words.

Well, bugger Miss Jenkins.

I'll tell her everything you said.

Don't do that dear, she wouldn't be interested. I'll put you to bed this time. You shouldn't hear Daddy when he's in a naughty mood.

Is she asleep this time?

Yes, and I'm cold now.

Well, hop in. Now what were we discussing before?

You know very well what we were talking about. Just shut up and put your arms around me. When I'm warm we can discuss it.

Mummy! The crocodile's back and I'm frightened.

Oh, bugger me -- Goodnight!!

Noah, God and Mrs Noah

The English language has been greatly enriched by the translators of the bible. Genesis, the first book of the bible, tells of the creation of the world, of Adam and Eve, and their eviction from the Garden of Eden. The story moves on at a cracking pace, and with an economy of words that should be studied by every writer.

In The Book of Genesis we read that God spoke to Noah and warned him that he was sending a flood that would cover the earth.

Imagine the conversation that might have taken place between God, Noah, and Mrs Noah. It may have happened as your script tells you --- who knows?

Our story opens and we find Noah sitting on the front step of his house enjoying the sunset when he hears the voice of the Lord.

God

Noah, I have an announcement to make, and a job for you.

Noah

(Apprehensively) Yes Lord. What is it you want?

God

I've been giving the matter a lot of consideration, and I intend to destroy the human race.

Noah

What for? What have we done this time?

God

You've done everything that's wrong. I must admit I was quite proud when I made your ancestors. I thought I had done a lovely job in creating the first man in my image. I created him out of dust and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils. His name was Adam, you know.

Noah

Yes Lord, I've heard you say so lots of times, but what's with this idea of yours of destroying us all?

God

And then I put Adam to sleep, took one of his ribs and made it into a woman to be a help meet for him. I thought I had done a terrific job in making this fine young couple and giving them life. Did you know, because of that act of creation in the beautiful garden I had made, that men have one less rib than women.?

Noah

No we haven't, they're exactly the same number. Everyone knows that.

God

Are you sure?

Noah

Of course I'm sure. Why don't you count them?'

God

Oh! Well they're your ribs, and all that happened a long time ago; sometimes the details slip one's mind.

Mrs Noah

Noah, who's that you're talking to?

Noah

My dear, it's the Lord God Almighty. He's back .

Mrs Noah

Oh, He's back is he. He goes away for a long time, but when he comes back there is always trouble; and he gives you the most awful jobs to do. I do wish we had had a Lady Goddess Almighty. She would arrange things so much more sensibly than now.

Noah

He's decided to destroy the human race.

Mrs Noah

He's decided to do what?

Noah

He's tired of his creation and wants to get rid of us.

Mrs Noah

Is he indeed. I'll talk to him I'll see if I can get some sense into his head.

Noah

(Alarmed) Be careful, my dear. Don't forget the Lord made us as well as everything else, and he could unmake us with a flick of his little finger, so speak to him respectfully.

Mrs Noah

I'll be respectful, but while I have a tongue in my head I will speak. And I can't stand foolishness, as you well know.

Noah

(Resignedly) Yes, my dear. I know ---- There are lots of things you can't stand, that's just one of them.

Mrs Noah

Well, why can't he show himself? All we ever hear is his voice, nothing else.

God

I am the Lord God almighty. No man can look upon my face and live.

Mrs Noah

I'm a woman

God

No woman can look on my face and live.

Mrs Noah

O, very well, if you insist!! Now what's all this nonsense about wanting to destroy everyone.

God

Your ancestors, Adam and Eve, whom I created, started my problems. When I made the garden for them I put a beautiful tree right in the middle. I was particularly fond of that tree.. And I told them several times not to touch it because I wanted the fruit for myself.'

Mrs Noah

And they ate an apple off it, right?'

God

It was worse than that. serpent got into the garden while my back was turned and persuaded them that it was good to eat the fruit, and I wouldn't mind.'

Mrs Noah

But Lord, one lousy apple. Did it matter?'

God

Of course it mattered, my plan went down hill from there. It was not one piece of fruit they ate, you know. They had stripped the tree in a sort of feeding frenzy egged on by that wretched serpent. I was looking forward to eating some of the fruit when I came back, and it was all gone. Naturally I was annoyed.'

Mrs Noah

You're the creator. Why couldn't you create another fruit tree? You were just practicing the first time, Perhaps you could have made an even better tree the second time round?.'

Noah

My dear, it is not for us to question the decisions of the Lord God Almighty. The Lord giveth and, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.

Mrs Noah

O, shut up Noah. I'm talking to the Lord, and I want answers.

God

Mrs Noah, you don't understand what effort there is creating something, and I'd made a whole universe in one go. I was exhausted after that and had to go away for a while. That's when everything began to go wrong and the serpent got in on the act. You know what happened next, while they were eating all my favorite fruit?'

Noah

Yes, the serpent persuaded Adam and Eve that it was wrong to go around naked and they covered their private parts with fig leaves.'

God

Exactly! It was the beginning of the fashion industry. I could see it all with my all knowing powers. There would soon be dress boutiques, perhaps even sweat shops in that

glorious garden. It was all too much. They had to go, and after they went I put cherubims with flaming swords at the gates so they couldn't sneak back in'.

Mrs Noah

Well, Lord, I am not an all-wise, all-seeing God like you, but I do think a bit of counseling would not have been out of place. A little chat to point out where they had gone wrong, perhaps. As you know the serpent can be pretty persuasive, and at least he talked to them, why couldn't you? They found life very hard after you turned them out of the garden. They had to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, and all that.

God

Yes, yes. That son of theirs, Cain, he was a nasty piece of work. I never did like him and he murdered his brother, Abel, in a fit of rage.'

Noah

Well, he was jealous of Abel, and wanted his flock of sheep.

God

That's no reason kill one's brother.

Mrs Noah

I don't want to be presumptuous Lord, but I don't think you were a great deal of help at that point.

God

Woman, be careful. I am your lord and God. I can do no wrong.

Mrs Noah

Be that as it may, I still don't understand why you favored Abel above Cain when they brought their offerings. You knew how jealous Cain was of poor old Abel. I thought you should have buttered Cain up, at least a bit, at the same time. Cain would not have gone off in a blind rage and it would have saved us all from that terrible tragedy.

God

I put the mark of Cain on him afterwards. That was so no one would avenge Abel's death By murdering him.

Mrs Noah

Putting a mark on him after the event was not a great deal of help. And as for poor old Eve, she never got over it, even though later she had other children. One son murdering the other was about the most awful thing that could happen to any family.

God

We will not harp on the matter, these things befall, and if I was not a God beyond reproach I would be sorry. Can we change the subject?'

Noah

Please excuse Mrs Noah, she was a bit carried away. Now you wanted to talk about your plan to kill everyone in the world.'

God

Yes, quite so.

Noah

Could I ask why you want to do this thing?'

God

Well, it started with Adam and Eve eating all my delicious fruit after I told them not to. Then, when I locked them out of the garden, their descendants formed kingdoms and tribes and armies; starting with Cain, and killed one another wholesale. They went whoring after strange gods and turned their backs on Me, their creator and God. They're still at it. I can't control them anymore.

Noah

You are not going to put up with that sort of behavior, are you?

God

Certainly not!

Mrs Noah

The cure's a bit extreme, isn't it?

Noah

Shhhh! Let the Lord speak.

God

(Loftily) Exactly one year from now I will open the fountains of heaven and rain will fall on the earth for forty days and forty nights. A great flood will rise to cover the mountain tops and every living thing that draws breath will be destroyed.

Mrs N

If you're going to kill everyone in the world that's genocide. That's what it is, genocide.

God

So be it. If that is what you call it -- genocide, get used to it. It may happen to you again some day.. Now, if you will hold your tongue, even for a little while, Mrs Noah, I will tell you the next part of my plan.

Mrs Noah

Hmphhh.

God

You, Noah, are to build a large vessel which I will call the Ark. There are plenty of cedar trees around so you can build a big one; four stories at least. It is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty high.

Noah

But Lord, I don't know how to build a ship.

God

If you don't trust me enough to guide you in the job I will go and have a word with Barabbas in the next village. He is talking about building ships to see if there is more land on the other side of the Mediterranean.

Mrs Noah

(urgently) Noah will do it! He'll do it!! And I'll make sure he does it properly. Our boys, Shem, Ham, and Japeth can go straight away to start cutting down trees.

Noah

Lord, why is the Ark to be so big?

God

Ah! That is another part of my plan. Before the rain starts I will gather together breeding pairs of every animal from all over the world and they will walk two by two into the Ark. and they and your family will be safe when the waters cover the earth.

Mrs Noah

What!! Locked up for months with those stinky animals, and how will Noah separate them if they start fighting?

God

Mrs Noah, if you and Noah don't like any part of my plans just say so and I will go to see Barabbas --- and you can all stay here and drown.

Noah

(Hurriedly) We accept Lord, we accept. We'll do the job, and start straight away.

Mrs Noah

Yes Lord. What marvelous ideas you do have. I'm sorry that our neighbors will all drown, but I don't like them much anyway.

The Crooked Man

The crooked man named himself. No one else would be that unkind. He had had a difficult birth, and his chin almost rested on his right shoulder, and he limped. He even lived in a crooked house at the end of a dusty road, near a country town. The house was crooked because the supporting stumps were giving way. He refused to have them replaced in case the workmen discovered his secret.

He was not a man who cared about money. He had inherited wealth, but it had all gone in pursuing a dream. He craved art and beauty and his ambition was to have the most valuable collection of art ever held by an individual.

He haggled and beat down many owners who did not understand the worth of their valuables. With a discerning eye, and ruthless in bargaining, treasure after treasure had passed into his possession for a fraction of their true value.

He travelled the world to feed his obsession. India, China, Europe, Africa, North and South America, Central Asia, and the Pacific had been virtually looted of their artistic heritage. Hundreds of securely sealed packing cases arrived back at his town from overseas and been stored, by prior arrangement, in a furniture repository until he arrived home to claim them.

Looking at his old and crooked house from outside no one guessed what works of art, what curios of lost civilizations were amassed within. If the news leaked out collectors from all over the world would come with open cheque books pleading to buy even the least part of his collection. Curators from the great museums and art galleries of the world would knock on his door, willing to pay any price for this or that lost masterpiece, to round out their collections.

The crooked man had to consider the future. He did not want his collection dispersed after his death but kept in one institution, carefully conserved for the delight of future generations. The National Museum at Canberra seemed an ideal repository for the fruits of his life's work so he resolved to make that institution the beneficiary of his will. It was pleasant to think that alongside each treasured piece would be a small neatly lettered sign saying- *Bequest of the Crooked Man*. Possibly they would have to build a new wing to display his treasure trove.

He decided to contact the gallery; they could study his collection and be ready for the far distant day when it would arrive at their doors to be prepared for display. Perhaps they would install a burglar alarm in his house, and fire protection, it was only fair. He had spent a lot of money for the benefit of the people of Australia; the tourist traffic generated by his collection, when it became known, would pay for such services many times over. He wrote to the director of the museum inviting him to come to study the treasures he had stored in his unpromising, crooked house.

He had no telephone so letters passed back and forth and an appointment was made for someone to visit.

On a certain day a man and a woman drove up in a car leaving a plume of dust hovering over the unmade road; they seemed taken aback by the sight of the crooked house, and of its owner, the crooked man.

He invited them in. In preparation for their arrival he had searched through the priceless paintings which were leaned against the crooked walls and each other until he found one he particularly liked. It was the Mona Lisa. It had been stolen about 1910, and never recovered. He happened to know that only a copy of the original had been returned to the Louvre. The one in his possession was from the hand of Leonardo da Vinci himself, and immensely valuable.

The experts were astonished to find such a masterpiece in this out of the way house. The man, who claimed to be the assistant curator of mediaeval and renaissance paintings, inspected the portrait front and back with a magnifying glass. He then moved on to the others.

Miss Smith, who had been introduced as an expert in jewellery and silverware, took an interest in a different class of treasures. The crooked man showed her the jewels of the Romanovs. They had been smuggled, together with the coronation regalia and crown, at great risk out of Russia after the death of the royal family. He had bought the jewels and regalia at a ridiculously low price from a penniless Russian aristocrat.

The death mask of the great pharaoh Ramses II was hanging on the wall. It had been taken by grave robbers in ancient times and after centuries it had found its way into the crooked man's eager hands. He had smuggled it out of Egypt and the authorities did not even know of its existence. The young woman, Miss Smith, examined it closely.

After a while the man looking over the paintings stood up. He had not studied all the great masters assembled in the house, there were just too many, and they were leaning one against the other; it was difficult to shift them all.

He did not look at the crooked man but seemed intent on dusting the knees of his trousers, nor did Miss Smith show any of the signs of the excitement one might expect after she had viewed the wonders of the crooked man's collection.

'It is very kind of you to offer to leave all this to us,' said the assistant curator at last, gesturing vaguely round the room, and encompassing all the treasures crammed into other rooms..

The crooked man nodded; it was kind of him.

'But really, it's not what we are looking for to expand our holdings. If you wish to dispose of it all I suggest you send it to an auction house. Not one of the art-houses, of course; they wouldn't be interested.' He turned to Miss Smith, 'do you agree, Sharon?'

She nodded. 'There is nothing I have seen here that would fit our needs.' She looked nervously at the crooked man, who had become agitated.

'Are you going to spurn these great treasures of civilization?' he asked angrily.

'They would be great treasures if they were genuine, but I'm sorry to say they're not'

The crooked man turned indignantly to the girl. 'But the Romanov crown and the regalia, surely you want those great artefacts; putting aside their historical value they are loaded with diamonds. He gestured wildly at Ramses golden funeral mask which glinted in the light from the dusty windows. 'Look at that. It has a greater value than your museum and its entire miserable collection.'

Miss Smith shrugged. 'I'm sorry, but the diamonds are bits of glass, and you can get the funeral mask of any pharaoh you ask for; they're made in a factory in Cairo.'

The crooked man could stand these ignorant, so called experts no longer. He ordered them out and they went willingly.

He saw them through the front window as they drove away. It seemed to him they were laughing as they went. They could laugh! He knew that every piece he possessed was one hundred percent genuine.

It took him hours to simmer down. He decided to go to town the following day and change his will. The entire collection would go to the National Gallery in Melbourne; the Feds could whistle for it.

He would consult no more so called experts; instead he would give instructions that after his death his solicitor was to hire sufficient furniture vans to carry every one of his treasures

to Melbourne. The cartage could be paid out of his estate, when the house and land were sold. The curator in Melbourne would have no inkling of this great bonanza until it actually arrived on his doorstep.

Wouldn't those idiots in Canberra be jealous then?



This is an authorized free edition from

www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author.