

With Bells on his Toes

Sacher Torte

Local Legend Publishing UK

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A Record of this Publication is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-907203-10-7

Local Legend Publishing
Park Issa
St Martin's Road
Gobowen, Shropshire
SY11 3NP, UK
www.local-legend.co.uk

Cover Design by Titanium Design
www.titaniumdesign.co.uk

Cover illustration courtesy of
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Dedication and Acknowledgement

To my old badger, so many thanks. Love you, forever.

Also my heartfelt gratitude goes to Beth Roberts at Local Legend Publishing for leading me up a very steep learning curve. The story writing is but a small part of the finished work. Without her help and faith, I could not have done it.

About the Author

Following a career in teaching, Sacher writes from her home in Mallorca where she lives with her designer husband, the illustrator of this book cover. She has three adult sons; one an internet developer, another, an A.A. man, and the youngest, a plumber. She considers herself very fortunate to have an artistic director, a computer consultant, a car mechanic and a central heating repair man, all catered for within her immediate family.

Table of Contents

One.....	7
Two.....	21
Three.....	35
Four.....	47
Five.....	53
Six.....	65
Seven.....	73
Eight.....	79
Nine.....	97
Ten.....	111
Eleven.....	119
Twelve.....	123
Thirteen.....	129
Fourteen.....	143
Fifteen.....	155
Sixteen.....	163
Seventeen.....	175
Eighteen.....	195
Nineteen.....	203
Twenty.....	213
Twenty-one.....	221
Twenty-two.....	233
Twenty-three.....	245
Twenty-four.....	257
Twenty-five.....	269
Twenty-six.....	285
Twenty-seven.....	299
Twenty-eight.....	313
Twenty-nine.....	325
Thirty.....	341

One

What a horrible, long, fraught, cold, unpleasant day! Leonie Jones was entirely disgruntled as she trudged home late from her work at the Fairview Country Club Hotel, down the long and winding hill, in the dark, to the village, gone eleven at night in the freezing depths of winter. Her duties for the day were not yet finished. She had a detour still to make which would delay her arrival home even further; an errand to be made on behalf of Mr. Ross; asked of her as a favour.

Leonie Jones was not a happy bunny! Nothing had gone right. Her first training day as a hotel receptionist, under the guidance of her employers, which had been made possible only because the hotel had yet to open for the Christmas season, had been a disaster from start to finish.

Most irritating had been her proximity to Mr. Ross, joint owner with his mother, who seemed to have a 'thing' about her; a man old enough, in fact, to be her father. He had continually hovered over her, standing too close, eyes adoring, blushing like a sixteen year old, even. His mouth trembling with the need to ask her something which, thank God, he hadn't! Her life would have been made a misery had he blurted out whatever it was he had wanted to say.

What was it with this kind of man, Leonie wondered, when they constantly harassed young women such as herself, while showing no interest in those of their own generation, having declined the responsibility of marriage and family much earlier on in their lives? It was not only uncomfortable but embarrassing. From now on, it would be almost impossible to get away from him, trapped as she had become, via her promotion, between the reception desk and his office, with few opportunities for the avoidance of his unwanted attentions when, in the past, she had always managed to hide behind Chef.

The question also had to be asked, tiredly, with an uncomprehending shake of her hooded head, as she trudged the deserted pavements of a village where most of its residents had more sense than to be anywhere but warmly tucked up in bed...what had possessed her to think that the change would be beneficial? She had, so far, found nothing to like about the job, she thought, as she looked down at her feet travelling along the glistening blur caused by the ice crystals covering the pavements, in order to ground her hopes for the next day.

Why had she ever agreed to take the job of receptionist in the first place? It had not turned out to be the glamorous post her predecessor, Belinda, had seemed to make it. An eleven hour shift, in fact, without a

Sacher Torte

proper break, while she had tried her best to make friends with an unfriendly computer, take calls, place bookings, charge deposits for those booking late for the Christmas break, make up invoices, learn how to bring up staff details and print off information; all this seemingly beyond her, even before she had the clientele to pester her to death. There were two days still to go before the hotel opened its doors for its Christmas guests; fully booked, too, the place was geared up and ready to take off like a well oiled jet plane. Say what one wanted of Mrs. Fairbrother, her employer and the mother of Mr. Ross, but she certainly knew how to roll out the red carpet to encourage her guests to come back to the Fairview Country Club Hotel, time and time again, year after year.

Yet, on this, Leonie's first day front of house, as Mr. Ross liked to refer to her position, adjacent to a wide front door with its plate glass screening, the counter framed by tubs of palm plants and all about her a lobby comfortably appointed with blue and beige sofas around small, elegant coffee tables, Leonie had felt abandoned. She had openly resented the way that the unfortunate problem, caused by the wrongdoing of another member of the hotel staff, had robbed her of the help she had needed to make her first day feel successful. She could hardly believe it when suddenly she was left on her own with the telephones ringing, staff wanting information, potential clients requiring brochures to be sent out, and nagged by another million and one other things, most of which she had been unable to fathom.

The words she had used earlier, when telephoning her mother to explain that she would be very late home, had been, "I've been dropped in it, Mum. I want to go back to the kitchens and Chef, who appreciates me." Though she had not given in to the urge to blubber into tears or to go into a long deluge of explanations which others might overhear.

It had just been the most horrible day of her entire life; she considered morosely, the challenges rolling over her, one after the other. She had even found herself having to use some of her own initiative, a situation which would never have been allowed by Chef in the hotel kitchen where she had previously been comfortably bovine amongst the broccoli and green beans. She had never been expected to think much beyond organising pots and pans while getting Chef the right ingredients for his recipes. Sometimes, when he was a bit too drunk, she had got on with the cooking herself but she had seen him do it all so often that it came as second nature after nine years in the kitchens. Now she was truly out of her comfort zone when she had been left alone, mid morning, with all the trouble brewing with Blithe Harcourt and Mr. Ross and his mother simply disappearing into the lift, leaving her alone to get on with it. Cannon, Head

With Bells on his Toes

Waiter, was behind it all, of course. She had seen him whispering in Mrs. Fairbrother's ear and the resultant, furious look on her face when Mrs. F. had digested his information. But it simply had not been fair to leave her to muddle through without guidance on her first day, centre stage, with everyone watching her and making comments about her proximity to Mr. Ross, with wryly spoken jibes disguised as small gems of advice. Such as the one made by Cannon, who had told her that a virgin such as herself might find an older man like Mr. Ross to be her best teacher if only she would let him. How her cheeks had flamed! How dare he speak to her like that?

What Leonie had come to learn, already, was that she had accepted a position where unfair blame would be accorded on a regular basis, so much being gauged from the reaction of the staff when she had had to tell them that their Christmas duty rotas were not ready because some kind of emergency had called the management upstairs. Also, when a supplier had phoned to check up on an order and arrange a delivery time, she had had to tell them to phone back later in the day, only to be told, angrily, that if the Fairview Hotel wanted a half stone of carrots, ten turnips...not swede...a crate of sprouts, a Mediterranean selection box, and assorted fruits baskets for the dining room breakfast bar, etcetera, etcetera...in time for Christmas, she might have to go and get them herself because there was snow on the way. She had said to deliver them, right or wrong, because she had been unable to ascertain if the order was correct due to Chef not answering the kitchen phone, most probably because he was still in a drunken sulk, with her having been stolen right out from under his nose.

There had been no one about, either, to take the telephone call from the hired entertainer who had asked if he could come a day ahead of schedule. To learn the lie of the land, he said. More likely to get an extra day's board and lodgings free of charge. Name of Slick Lick Johnson. He had sounded nice on the phone, as most people do, so she had allowed herself to be persuaded and given her permission. One of those Manchester accents with flat vowels curled up teasingly at the edges; very showbiz, she had thought. She'd said yes, but then he hadn't turned up at the time he said he would so the hotel doors had been locked and barred against him. A staff dinner wasted. Not even a telephone call to say if he'd still be on his way. She had not told Mr. Ross because she had forgotten about it, truth be told. Something else she would have to come to grips with was making notes as she went along, so that at least she'd pass on the messages right if she could understand them properly in the first place. If she tried to learn by her mistakes, kept her nose clean and repeated things for confirmation, and stayed out of Mr. Ross's way, maybe the job could

Sacher Torte

only get better. It was her only hope of coping.

Her mood improved, somewhat, as she came to the streets where she would have to decide her way, making a right turn, but only until she remembered that she would have to deal on a daily basis with Mrs. Fairbrother, as well as Mr. Ross. It wasn't fair that some people could inflict themselves on others in double doses, like extra strong medicine, and get away with it. Leonie had found herself silently agreeing with the other staff, who had spent the later part of the day muttering under their mingling breaths, that the old bag had deserved every name she'd been called by Blithe Harcourt in the course of him earning the letter she had in her hand now; his P45 to be exact. His address was clearly printed by Mr. Ross on the envelope; 12, Hillview Crescent, to be delivered on her way home. One of the council houses on the back fringes of the village, he had explained, when she had pretended the address to be unfamiliar, because of the lateness of the hour, even though she knew exactly where it was because she used to play with the girl who lived in the same street and had walked with her to the village school every day.

Had to be there, didn't it? It couldn't be closer to the centre of the village where she lived. Her toes had already turned numb in the thin-soled shoes she was wearing over thick black tights, but hardly sufficient to keep out the perishing cold. It was a bit of a cheek of Mr. Ross asking her to deliver it as if she passed this way to and from work, every day, when it was a full five minutes out of her way. But he had apologised and explained that he had a prior appointment and already he was late. Even if having a tryst at eleven at night did seem to Leonie to be a trifle unusual. Some day she'd get the hang of this self-assertiveness which women were advised in magazines to adopt before they ended up becoming doormats. The trouble was that every time she tried it she ended up blushing bright orange to the roots of her fair, frizzy hair. It was a damned nuisance, that, and finding herself unable to extract herself from situations without becoming aggressive in her manner or running away. Head down further, now, she made her way to Hillview Crescent, feeling trapped already. Just how long she could keep her temper without snapping, was anyone's guess.

Leonie Jones was head down and deep in a sulk as she 'stomped' along...short for 'stomping in a strop' as her dad liked to tease her when her mood turned sour, usually when she was tired or overtaxed. Cold, too; hands in mittens sunk in pockets, elbows jutting, head down, the plastic bag with the almost burnt mince pies...'a bit too dark for Cannon to serve at table', Chef had said...swinging from one arm. A present for her mum, Gloria, who never turned her nose up at food because she was 'gravely, morbidly obese' as her doctor liked to refer to her. Leonie tried not to be

embarrassed by her mother's size but it was one reason why she had never felt able to take friends home and boyfriends in particular. What she needed was a friend to talk to, other than her mother. She had no really close friends these days, not since most of them had married and had babies, the most childish and demanding always seeming to be the husband, himself.

What a bitch she was turning into! "Now don't be mean to your best friend," she told herself, thinking of her loving mum, as she huddled into her clothing to try to ward off the penetrating cold. She was frowning fiercely, her expression bringing her chin up in dimpled fashion and causing her eyes to squash together more closely. Usually a pleasant face, now it became pleated at the sides of her turned-up nose, nostrils flared, eyes glinting like pale rhinestones in the gloom under the street light. The least gracious feature of this expression, not all that often seen, truth be told, was a flat top lip and a puckered bottom; what her mother called her dummy face. Stromping through the darkness, too, as she turned right again, two roads on, heading towards where the woodland started, instead of making down the hill, to the square itself, across it and homeward. Her slim, petit figure huddled into the folds of her only winter coat, with a decision made that should she meet with anyone she knew she wouldn't stop to talk to them. The usual conversation being the now total agoraphobia of her mother, which had been the initial cause of her becoming so obese in the first place. Poor mum, who relied on her in the evenings to keep house and cook for them both; her dad preferring to eat at the pub or the pie shop, even when she was forever urging Leonie to go out, make friends, have a bit of fun. At least such was the excuse Leonie had given Mr. Ross when he had offered her a staff cubicle in the hotel staff accommodation quarters, which she had refused because she hadn't liked the look in his eye. Maybe he had no lady friends, these days, but it was well known that Mr. Ross was a womaniser with a past because the staff gossiped about him, even yet. Apparently, he had got Lizzie Jubb pregnant and then refused to marry her, a shocking thing to do as far as Leonie was concerned, even if the tale was as old as she was herself. And he was always following her about so that even his own mother had noticed. As long as Mrs. Fairbrother realised that Leonie had never done anything to attract him in the first place. That would put the cat amongst the pigeons if Mrs. Fairbrother thought that Leonie was out for a rich husband, him soon to be in his bath chair and in need of pushing around, with all the prospect of being a rich, young widow once he was six feet under the ground. Not that Leonie could ever be attracted by wealth alone. She was still waiting for her knight in shining armour, who would come

Sacher Torte

riding over Barns Hill on his white charger, ready to sweep her up into his arms.

If only that could happen soon. Then she wouldn't need to work at that horrible place, day after day. Yet more complaints about her new job sprang to mind as she stromped along, envelope in hand, along the frosty pavements, thinking how she could now no longer find comfort in the close relationships she used to have with other members of staff. It was like being stranded on a desert island when they no longer seemed to have time to stop for a chat; looking at her as if she had become a stranger to them; a different creature, even, simply by exchanging a red overall for her dull, baggy, receptionist's clothing. It had been very evident during the emergency whole staff meeting, called that very afternoon, because Mrs Fairbrother had mislaid one of her very important, little, black notebooks, or such was the first point on her agenda as soon as they were all assembled in the freezing cold ballroom, waiting for a lecture of some kind. One of the same types of notebooks in which she kept her peevish, staff observations, to discuss with Mr. Ross later. Or wrote in as she did her morning inspections, white glove to the wainscoting and a face like an angry wasp if she found anything out of place. Only this one, she had said, was full of important names and addresses. There would be a reward for anyone finding it and returning it promptly. The information it contained would be needed over the next few days. As if they were each to blame for her losing it in the first place, as they had stood grouped before her, she and Mr. Ross, the only ones sitting.

It had been made obvious to Leonie just how separated she had become just by looking at the staff groupings. The under staff wearing the red and gold braided overalls with the projectile bullet logo and T.F.C.H. embroidered in gold on their tabards had stood in one group. Leonie, in her baggy, cheap black suit with a white shirt and new, grey and black taffeta cravat, had been instructed to join the other where Chef, Cannon, the Head of Housekeeping had been directed to stand, mid-way between Mr. Ross and his mother and the red brigade as Mrs. F. referred to the lesser paid staff ranking, exactly like the diagram she had seen Mr. Ross draw once of the hotel line management system; the layers of work force never overlapping.

They had all expected that the misplaced notebook was the only reason that the meeting had been called when the bombshell was dropped, by Mrs. Fairbrother herself, about Bluithe Harcourt's dismissal. First any of them had heard of it, though it would soon become a topic of conversation for several days to come.

The icy silence that fell in the ballroom might have been spread

with a butchering knife as everyone stilled to quietness to listen, so affording Mrs. Fairbrother, their employer cum benefactor, the respect that she insisted was hers. She had narrowed her green eyes and spoke defiantly while wrapping her plump, diamond-flashing, scarlet-nailed fingers about the red flannel of her business suit, a flounced blouse of expensive, genuine, French silk beneath, all of which emphasised her barrel-shaped figure. She had had her white hair newly done that very morning in the Health and Beauty salon within the Spa section, next to the new Jacuzzi pool. It remained uncoloured; as creamy white as her blouse, but smoothly swept up to be held by one of her vast array of combs which came in all shapes and sizes. This one glittered with diamante, the effect being an arrogant tribute to her advancing years while denying any senility. No rocking chair, yet, for Alicia Fairbrother. She still worked long hours and had the reigns of the Fairview Country Club Hotel tightly held in her strong and very capable hands. So tightly held that it was well-known that even her son had a job getting a word in sideways.

Leonie could feel the thrills of weakness enter her stomach just by recalling the situation which had confronted them all that very afternoon in the ballroom, as she walked along the back streets of Barns to deliver the result of it. Mrs. Fairbrother had put the fear of God into them all, when really it had been Bluithe Harcourt who was the sole culprit, with tactics she practised every day to keep the horses under control. It was her habit to let her cold, green, frog eyes travel over all in her company before speaking, nodding with little jerks of her head as if accounting the presence of each and every one of her staff on a mental abacus, before taking a very deeply drawn breath. In response, the staff, as usual prepared themselves for the rattle of her inspiration against her loose dentures which always caused her spittle to fly and a froth to form at the corners of her scarlet painted, letter box mouth. Today, however, the death rattle, as it was known, was such that no amount of stiff upper lip could hide the intensity of her anger. "You will be informed of this once only and then the matter dropped, never to be referred to again by anyone..." The pause had been deliberately intended for her message to get home before she had continued her shocking revelation. "Mr. Harcourt's employment as the Fairview Country Club Hotel decorator and handyman has been terminated, forthwith..."

If she had paused again, at this point, for an ensuing gasp, it was not forthcoming due to the very low temperature in the room diminishing all bodily functions other than those absolutely vital, her own vital signs exacerbated by the great heat her obvious anger had generated.

Instead, jaws had dropped open, eyes flickered to eyes and top

Sacher Torte

teeth were gripped onto bottom lips to prevent words coming out, probably something like "...please not me, too! Not so near to Christmas with a family to feed...!" Fear thumping in everyone's chest apart from those of her and Mr. Ross, of course, both of whom seemed to think that they owned the assembled company, body and soul.

Having to make do with silence, she had carried on even more defiantly. "He has been banished. Never again will that man set foot within this hotel. He will not be allowed access to the hotel or its grounds under any circumstance. If he is seen in this vicinity, he is to be given his marching orders and then the matter reported to me, personally. You are to give him his marching orders should he even dare show his face here ever again! When the new security guard comes tomorrow, I will be advising him of the same. As well as the only other temporary person who has yet to take up his duties for the Christmas period only...some musician or other..."

Here, her son, Mr. Ross, had intervened, coughing to attract their attention as he sat short and square of shoulder at his mother's side, and smiling benignly as if disassociating himself from his mother's curt, angry words. This, while pulling on the cuffs of his smart, navy blue blazer so that the silver buttons caught the lights from the chandeliers. As immaculately dressed as ever, the knife edges of his flannels were army sharp; brown leather shoes polished to brilliance; his fair but greying moustache stretching over yellowing teeth, as if intending a moment of lightness amidst the gloom of such a shocking announcement. "Here tomorrow, I think..."

The musician! Leonie cringed! The very thing that Leonie had failed to pass on to management. He would be here today, in fact! She would have to remember to ask Chef to provide one more staff dinner which, as it turned out, had ended up in the hotel dog because he had not turned up.

"...Name of Slick Lick Johnson. Tribute act. Does a few, I gather, as well as performing songs as himself. Promises to give us all some jolly good entertainment. Liked his demo tape and photo. He'll be a boon to have when we get down to the rehearsals for the staff pantomime. Snow White. New Year's Day. Entrance tickets gone like hot cakes, already. The village needs these things to bring us all together to get the New Year off to a proper..."

"If I can finish, Ross, please. Not now," his mother interrupted, frostily, before people could start to turn away, to go back to the very jobs they were paid to do, instead of freezing to death in a room the size of a football pitch that would not be heated until the Christmas Eve Ball and,

thereafter, not until the performance of the staff pantomime which most were dreading. They were already mentally shaking their heads over the prospect of a stupid, staff show with not a streak of talent present. Particularly Leonie who had been told that it would be her extra duty, as well as playing Snow White, to get suitable costumes from somewhere, without spending money. "...when, without going into quite what was said, I have something very important to say. I would warn all staff that I will not tolerate being spoken to in the way that I was spoken to earlier. I own this hotel - at least my son and I own this hotel - and anyone who gives cheek and insolence or flaunts its rules will find themselves being similarly dealt with. Their employment cut off, forthwith. Let it be known that the no smoking ban means what it says. Anyone caught drinking alcohol on duty - especially after purloining the miniatures from the mini-bars in the guest bedrooms - will have their employment terminated with immediate effect. The hotel beds are there for the comfort of the hotel guests only. Staff may not recline upon them for any reason at all and especially when there is work to be done. Neither will they...!"

"Enough, Mother, please. We should remember the Christmas spirit."

Her eyes had narrowed even further. "I will say no more upon this matter..." cold, bitter green eyes sweeping over the shivering flock, hands now thrust into pockets to keep out the bitter chill of her threats, "... other than to remind you that if I find people gossiping together about this matter, the Christmas bonus will be withdrawn. I will not tolerate tittle-tattle."

Then, quite unexpectedly, she had found herself being singled out. "Leonie, stay behind, if you would be so kind. I wish to have a word about your promotion. My son seems to have forgotten that staff appointments are usually both our concern and final decisions made only after the candidate has been interviewed."

That was when she had learnt about the qualifications she would have to gain once her trial period as a general dogsbody to everyone, not forgetting his dog, had got them over a shortfall in the Christmas staffing, since Belinda was not coming back this year. Some people have the gift of the gab, Mr. Ross being one of them. Flattering her with compliments concerning her aptitudes and diligence in order to persuade her to accept his proposition, when really all he had been was desperate to find someone idiot enough to stand in. This, while they quietly raked through the pile of leaflets from international staffing agencies for someone with an N.V.Q. in hotel management. Either that or he was taking a different tack in trying to compromise her once again. She had long learnt not to venture into lifts

Sacher Torte

with him, accept invitations into his office, or to stand any closer than the requisite metre in order to listen to his instructions.

And now this! Out tramping streets at eleven o'clock at night, after starting at just gone mid-day. Walking the back streets of the village, too - something her dad would object to loudly if he knew - envelope in hand, to find Bluithe Harcourt's home, to put his P45 through the door. Streets with flimsy, drawn curtains lit by flickering television screens, blaring out a repeat of Strictly Come Dancing, and no one listening out at this time of night for things that might happen, untoward, in the street outside their windows. Hillview Crescent was poorly lit, so that finding number twelve was not as straightforward as it might seem because there was no number on the gate. The one person, other than Mr. Ross, who she would rather not bump into on any dark street, late on at night, was Bluithe Harcourt. For one thing, he would probably have been drinking with his mates in the Bald Pheasant Inn. For two, he was likely to take his angst out on her as if she was personally responsible for his sacking after working at the Fairview for twenty-six years. Not physical violence, maybe, but unpleasant words. He had a lot to say for himself did Bluithe Harcourt. Not the type to go down quietly, either. Not that he would be stupid enough to have a go at Leonie, she being the daughter of the local bobby and everyone in Barns knowing it because they lived right opposite her dad's police station, right on the market square, with what her father called 'high visibility' within a village of some five thousand people at the last census, her mother said.

For reason number three; she just didn't like the man. He had always been coming to the kitchens for his flask to be filled with proper milk coffee for free and always when they were up to their eyes in it, and getting Chef and Cannon to gamble money they could never afford; the pair of them constantly ruing one particular horse in the three-thirty called Lost Again. Either that or producing bottles from under the bib of his grubby, paint-splattered, white overalls, glances all round, winks and Chef daft enough to pass over a fiver then get blotto well before his shift was over.

Leonie found the house eventually, between number ten and number fourteen, as a deduction she felt rather proud of. The gate was stiff to open and ice lay on the path which was unsalted, with snow threatened, though she didn't expect it to be that deep because the sky was clear as yet; just a few clouds closing in from a distance. They always got the Barns weather forecast wrong, did the Met Office.

Then, when she slipped the letter through the letterbox, it was to find the door opened very abruptly, with a snatching hand, and face to face with an angry shrew; his wife, Vera, who seemed to be expecting someone

else entirely. “You? I thought it might be my parcel arriving. One of them messages, is it? Bluithe said you’d been promoted over and above anyone else. He’ll still be at the pub. They’ve got something on tonight. Something about wrapping presents for the children’s party at the community centre. It’s the bobby’s daughter, isn’t it?”

Leonie nodded. “I’ve brought that letter for Mr. Harcourt. The one on the oil cloth. You’re walking all over it. From the hotel. Mr. Ross asked me to bring it.”

It was picked up without any curiosity and relegated to an apron pocket. “I was expecting someone with my Christmas order, not you. Blue’s not here. I’ll pass it on when I see him...if I see him! Most like he’s in the pub. It’ll be a late night tonight. Don’t know where he is for sure. Didn’t come home for his dinner. Wasn’t expecting him, anyway.”

It didn’t seem as if Mrs. Harcourt knew what had occurred, as yet. Leonie had done the job she had come to do. No business of hers. She wasn’t about to blurt out that her husband had been sacked from his job, just before Christmas, even if his wife was about to lay out good money on presents for her family which they probably didn’t need, anyway. Not that Leonie had time to say anything once the letter had been picked off the mat, Mrs. Harcourt’s gabbled communications made, and then the door slammed in her face.

Taking a short cut down a dark alleyway, she was soon walking over the village square, the mince pies which had caught slightly in Chef’s oven, due to the emergency staff meeting going on longer than expected, banging against her coat, crumbling probably because she could smell the sweet, spicy mincemeat and French brandy in them. Her mother would be ravenous unless her dad had managed to get home to make her something to eat, her being bedridden these days and expecting everyone to run around after her. Not that she could pop into his station to ask him. As she crossed the square she could see that the place was in darkness. He was out somewhere.

The big, blue riot van was in front of the station, though, as if he was not that far away. Not that it was used to quell disorder in a quiet place like Barns. Sometimes his specials brought it out of the butcher’s garage, where it was stored all year round, simply to clean it in lieu of nothing better to do. No sign of his specials, either, all three of them, who would be required for village duties with Christmas coming in a couple of days time and a lot of merchandise flooding the place which often had suspicious origins. It was the bane of her dad’s life in a place like Barns with a natural, geological facility for hiding stuff away by means of underground caves and caverns and potholes. The area was laced with

Sacher Torte

them. Those that still remained open, that is. Many of the caverns had been bricked up and sealed off because they were a danger to the village children.

Not that there was a single villager to be seen out as she crossed the square by the obelisk where some of her family names were engraved along with the youthful, Barns dead, of the first and second world wars which the village mourned, collectively, on Poppy Day, each November. No one was about at all, in fact, because the weather was so bitterly cold. Only her mother, as usual, looking out for her homecoming. Where she always was, in fact; at her bedroom window, her face to the glass, spotting her, raising a hand. Leonie waved back as she rummaged in her pocket with her other hand.

Home at last! She pulled down the hood from over her frizzy, yellow hair which tumbled around her face in unusual freedom, as she found the key to the front door; a single door, next to a dimly lit shop window bearing nothing but a dried sheaf of corn, and a range of mock loaves made from salt dough and painted to look real enough. A December fly had settled and died on one, looking to all the world like an innocent raisin.

The flat was over the bakery, in fact, where she still lived with her mum and dad, though her dad was rarely home these days. It was a few doors up, on the same side of the square as the Bald Pheasant Inn which took up the whole of the corner plot. She had already noted that the curtains were closed to the bar and snug area. Something going on in there; there was a face peering out, on look out, maybe. Ask no questions!

And over the road at the bottom of the square, the last bus was just coming in. People were getting off before it made its last run back to the depot. The driver was assisting off one of her old boyfriends who was rolling drunk from the look of him. That had been a thankful escape! Christmas party time in his office, if the streamers round his neck were telling the right tale, a balloon in hand to charm the girl he'd had to marry because she would do what Leonie wouldn't. Had more respect for herself than just to give it away, like most girls did, for nothing, these days.

In fact a few people alighted the bus with him, dispersing quickly as they were embraced by the cold air. One of them, a rough looking type who stood on the pavement as the bus pulled away, looking about him as if getting to know the layout of the place. Two big shapes deposited on the pavement at his feet, one of them a guitar, the other big enough to be a body bag. She could make them out, just, and sight of the guitar reminded her of something. Her mind went back then to the call she had taken from this entertainer chap, only that morning, the same one who Mr. Ross had

With Bells on his Toes

mentioned in the horrid, emergency staff meeting, that afternoon. If it was him. Had to be him! It could not be anyone else, could it? He would find himself a bit too late for the Fairview Country Club Hotel. If he went inside the grounds, where the front gates had been locked, Mr. Ross's dog would have him. Wasn't leashed at night when the hotel was closed and until the new security guard took over. But not her problem.

As she let herself inside, out of the cold, she thought she could hear a most peculiar sound. It sounded like children's musical bells tinkling.

Christmas was coming!

Two

He lifted his boots, first the right and then the left one, giving each one a shake to get the stiffness out of his ankles. Then he stood trying to get his bearings in the bus shelter where he yawned, stretched himself and looked about. His kit bag and guitar leant against the sides of the shelter. The bus seats had been cramped and too short for his long, thin legs to make himself comfortable on the hour long journey, when the bus had meandered through dark lanes, stopping to let its passengers alight at half a dozen places. He had had to sit with his feet flat to the cold, bus floor and because the bus was full of drunks, he had been unwilling to make a show of himself by stretching out further.

With each shake, the round, little bells on his boots made a light tinkling sound. The thin, coloured ribbons which fastened them to his laces, he was particularly pleased with, so he smiled at them as he bent to make sure that they hadn't come loose. These were new. Rainbow colours; pink, orange, yellow and blue, bought specially for his stage act; a bit like bringing your own percussion set when, as a one man band, he had to make his own music. That's what he'd come for, too. To make music, sing, help people to let down their hair and be merry. He liked to think of the bells on his boots as his gimmick. If they didn't remember him they always recalled the bells on his boots; Slick Lick Johnson's trademark.

But no time to dally, not if he was going to get a welcome pint before he made the very last stage of his journey which would be to find the hotel that had hired him for the full two weeks of the Christmas season.

The cheap watch on his wrist, viewed only after using the flickering, orange flame of his cigarette lighter, said that he was now approximately five hours later than his stated arrival time. A time made specific only by speaking with a chick on the other end of a telephone, earlier that morning, when he had phoned through to the Fairview Country Club Hotel to say that he would be coming a day early in order to do some research on stage presentation which was always beneficial to his performances, where possible. He knew he'd impressed her straight away with his commitment to his temporary job as the hotel's Christmas entertainment. It had been he who had phoned her and not the other way about, no one else to speak to being available as it turned out. Manager's out. Something along the lines of, "Mr. Fairbrother isn't available at present and Mrs. Fairbrother's out with him. Can I help?"

"You are...?"

Sacher Torte

She had said that she was the hotel receptionist. Pleasant in her manner; always a good sign of someone being happy in their work which would indicate that the Fairview Country Club Hotel would be all that he was expecting it to be; cool, real cool, and several steps up from his usual venues. She had sounded young, too, which always suited Lovick. Something in common. Old fogies were alright but you had to watch your p's and q's as his gran had taught him or get a frosty look back and no jam on your toast come the morning. He had asked her name just in case there was any comeback and there happened to be more than one receptionist, as there was bound to be from the look of the place on the brochure he had in his back pocket...a big, rambling place and posh, too, from the look of it and all that was on offer; nice rooms, silver service restaurant, spa pool and health and beauty salon, ballroom, sports and entertainment...that being provided by no other than himself! Not to mention a bar; the latter being the final satisfaction to contemplate even if he would arrive too late to sample its delights on this night in particular. He'd be lucky to get a last pint before the pub opposite closed for the evening. He was thirsty after a railway station pie that might have floated with all the salt it had in it, eaten two hours ago now, mid way through a hell of a journey, more of which would be recalled later.

The receptionist had given her name, straight into his ear, on his mobile, as Leonie Jones, in a silky-smooth voice, clear vowels but not so posh as to be off-putting for a lad who found it difficult to string sentences together away from a stage act, which allowed him to pretend that he was anyone but himself.

"I'll tell Mr. Fairbrother you'll be here early evening, shall I? Ask Chef to cater for one more staff. You are...?"

He'd given her his stage name. At first straight so that she could spell it. "Lick Johnson," an abbreviation of his real name; clever spin on words, too, as in guitar licks. And then, more memorably; "SSSSlick, Lick Johnson...Prince. Of. Soul. And. Rock. And. Roll," ...ending with, "Yeah!" deep and growly in his throat, James Brown style. Never failed to amuse, especially when they got a shot of the viz in the wig, and the stage clothes, and the moves. Not to mention the music, all of it cloned. Never failed to wow them; women, that is, not men. Not that he was in favour with women, at the moment. The last one had tipped a tray of cold peas and vinegary, greasy gravy over his expensive haircut after he had reminded her of a spare tyre and offered some dietary advice. He wouldn't have minded except that he had been wearing a brand new T-shirt at the time which had Macho-Man written all over it.

Then thirteen hours later he was still on his way. He had not

With Bells on his Toes

phoned to make an apology. Why should he? It was he who had been severely inconvenienced, not the hotel or its guests, as the latter, he had been informed, would not be there for another couple of days, yet. Opening especially for Christmas, it was, as it did every year, the brochure said. There was no real rush to get there other than to gain shelter and have a bed for the night. He had plenty of time to settle in before having to start singing for his supper for the Christmas period. He'd say sorry but only if he had to for getting someone up out of bed if there was no night porter to let him into the hotel. Explanations were not his way of smoothing over complications, either. They always made him confused and tongue-tied, feeling intrinsically, deep down, that he must be personally to blame for every wrong ever committed 'todo mondo'...one of his best friends, Quincey's, favourite expressions...on the whole twenty-five year time line of his existence, even while knowing at surface level that catastrophe was not always quite totally his fault. At least not absolutely, solely and completely his fault! His friend, Quincey, who was his accomplice in most things except anything which smacked of work, had been left behind in Manchester to make the best he could of an impoverished festive season. Quincey was usually the one who started the guilt in the first place by all his talk of wars, famines, murders, natural disasters, droughts...anything of detriment to anyone, anywhere, which always fascinated Lovick when he said it brought it home to him that there actually were people in the world worse off than himself. But Lovick knew himself to be guilty of major humanitarian lapses, at least in part, when despite being aware of these things happening in the world he did nothing about them, not even a penny in a charity box. Not that he ever had any spare pennies, but more to the point...couldn't be arsed!

So what was being late compared to international poverty, wars, famine, the economic world crisis and third world persecution? He wasn't due to start work until the day after tomorrow, anyway; contract of employment in his pocket, all signed, sealed and up to him to just get there, to this Fairview Country Club Hotel, though he couldn't say that he was delighted with its location on first introduction, even if he had been assured by his agent that he would be working in a friendly environment where all the staff pull together, gratuities were shared out equally and the workers accommodated as comfortably as the guests. "Landed on my feet for once with this one, Quince! Make no mistake about it!"

And so to all intents and purposes, he had. It was his first ever gig in a place where the employer would provide him with food and lodgings as well as thirty quid a day plus tips. Christmas remember, so he expected to be very well appreciated by an audience which was unlikely to throw

Sacher Torte

things at him or boo him off the stage. As if such a successful entertainer as he would know anything about being pilloried! He'd always denied it had ever happened to him, anyway, when asked. Too disappointing and hurtful to consider even in his private moments when honesty nudged at that little dried up kernel of self esteem within himself, so fragile that anything might see it disintegrate completely, if he wasn't careful. Like the week before at the Strolling Players in Liverpool. The recollection had already been put to the bottom of his memory sack. He still had a bruised ego about the feedback from the hire and fire chap. Though what did he know; ignorant Scouse git? Something to do with a lack of originality, he'd said. Elvis impersonators being two-a-penny. Ever thought of taking up cleaning toilets as a career development, instead? He'd need to get his act polished before they'd have him back. The peevish bugger had even lobbed at Lovick's departing back, "If you can polish a turd, that is!"

But this was no time for pessimism. He'd doubled his rehearsals in front of the mirror at his lodgings and bought some better stage clothes and props. The one thing that a prospective star of stage and screen cannot afford is a shrinking ego. It was Christmas, anyway; peace and goodwill to all men and all that. An audience captive to good manners, too. He'd play them with every ounce of charm he could muster. Songs by the fireside. A simple matter of catering for the musical tastes of old duffers, he thought, for whom a bit of early Bob Dillon and Elvis was sing-along stuff these days. Throw in a few traditional carols and a rendition of White Christmas, Bing Crosby style, and he'd covered all the angles. As he had told his friend, Quincey, repeatedly, he had landed on his feet with this one for a change. He would be living in comfort for the duration as well. The Fairview Country Club Hotel was four star rated.

His lateness was all Quincey's fault, anyway. The plans had all gone wrong with a shirt that needed ironing and him, Quincey, that is, staying overnight after too much booze. His 'friend' had somehow managed to seriously offend Lovick's landlady when he'd crashed out, stark naked, on her couch. If the shirt had not needed ironing before leaving his lodgings, Lovick might already have left the scene of the crime before Quincey's blatant nakedness had rubbed his landlady up the wrong way, considering that such was all that had happened when his pal had a thing about older women; older, stout women especially; layers on layers of protective clothing. A bit like breaking into the deepest vaults of the Bank of England to make a deposit, he had explained to Lovick, once, in tones of hallowed respect, when you could have gone to the first cash machine on any High Street and done the same business. Willingness on both sides a given, of course! Quincey did have a basic level of decency even if his

With Bells on his Toes

ethics were not always clearly represented in his actions. No harm intended, mate! None accorded!

It had been while ironing the shirt in her kitchen, Lovick's smallish, borrowed suitcase packed with his stage clothes and little else, that the landlady...whom he had borrowed the suitcase from...had told him very irately to vacate his room and find lodgings elsewhere, forthwith, cheeks aflame and her chest heaving with an indignation that caused Lovick some concern, should she fall down with a heart attack and he would have to give her the kiss of life. He did not have the same persuasions, as Quincey!

And rant! She would not have her home and her person abused in that way, ever again. Common decency had been offended, etcetera, etcetera. Finger jabbing at the window; "Out, out, out, out, out!"

Lovick had listened in silence, iron gathering heat and hissing steam in his stilled hand, his shirt creditable, even, to the same standards as a Royal Marine Commando...assuming he knew any, which he didn't. While with an open mouth and mind, all manner of conjecture ran through his vivid imagination, no descriptive explanation forthcoming. Though knowing, guilt ridden as ever, as one knows one's own brother, that whatever sin Quincey had committed it must have been bad because she had had a face like a mortified gorilla and meant every word she had said. On this occasion, she wasn't listening to a very heartfelt, "Sorry, Mrs. Butterworth," even when he tried his best to communicate a sincere apology on his friend's behalf.

Because of Quincey he was out! And what was he supposed to do with all the rest of his possessions if she expected the room cleared totally by twelve noon? Task impossible! She had taken back her suitcase after tipping his stage clothes all over the kitchen floor which, at least, was as clean as a whistle; you could eat your dinner off it. Hence the worst part of his delay in arriving at his illusive destination with the capacious kitbag; the biggest he could buy, which had needed to be ferreted out from an array of city centre shops, with unavoidable time consumption...as it was, from the nearest Army and Navy...and stuffed full to the draw string at the top. It was the only bag big enough and cheap enough to lug all his stuff.

Somewhere behind the distasteful memory of having to clear his room of all personal possessions, was a deep regret that he'd have to find somewhere else to doss when he got back to Manchester in the New Year. Quincey, having escaped already, was not in a position to offer to repair the damage he'd caused, other than to provide a very swift apology before his mobile ran out and made even swifter on account of him having to catch a punctual bus. He had, himself, recently been thrown out by his long

Sacher Torte

suffering partner and had had to go back to Chorlton-Cum-Hardy and paternal prison with his tail between his legs, carrying a begging bowl and issuing pleas for forgiveness in exchange for keeping his room as an altar to decent, family living. Quincey's life, in truth, away from his mother, was a bigger mess than his own. Both of them crocked by the intolerance of others for what was nought but a bit of fun. At least that could never happen to Lovick, not now with his grandparents gone and no other family to give a toss about him, aside from the occasional phone call from a distant aunt and uncle.

Where his own parents were these days was a matter for great debate. His Aunt Vi had said Cardiff; his Uncle Stu said they'd buggered off to Spain. Not even a postal order in a Christmas card would be forthcoming from them if the latter was the case. All his formative years had been spent with his grandparents, his granddad lasting barely a few months after his arrival, leaving his gran to wonder what to do with the small boy who had arrived on her doorstep in a taxi, with an owl nightlight, two plastic bags full of clothes and a traumatised look on his face. Gran had done her best to look after him. Until she'd had enough of him, too, and chucked him out. Nine years now of dead-end jobs, a short, very salutary stint as a guest of Her Majesty's Prison Service and then living in other people's spaces as a paying guest.

He had had a bum life all round. The bum day was not yet over. He still had to locate the Fairview Country Club Hotel, in the dark and the cold, with snow threatened and loaded up with kit, at the end of a twenty-five mile journey through the Pennine Chain from Manchester Victoria Station. What he had read on the instructions from his agent, Mr. Fifteen Percent, as Barnsley had turned out to be a teeny-weeny village: Barns; no direct trains or buses and a population so small that blink while passing through the village and it would go unnoticed.

The whole journey had been a nightmare from start to... hopefully, the finish, very soon! Please! It had been a challenge just to get out of Manchester with Christmas shoppers clogging up the pavements and jostling him mercilessly, as he tried to board any form of public transport to progress his journey, with everything he owned in the cumbersome kit bag under one arm and his guitar strung over the other shoulder. These shoppers were mainly foul-mouthed, genetically modified, barge women battling for seats on overcrowded buses or elbowing him out of the way on the train just as a seat was promising to be his.

Thereafter, standing room only. A train journey from hell. Then a last bus with the late bar flies, annoying him no end while he had sat quietly wanting to do nothing but look out the bus window as the landscape got

With Bells on his Toes

deeper and blacker and more remote from civilization, them blowing paper whistles and recounting stories they'd regret come the morning because they were still tanked up on the free booze from the Christmas office parties and he as sober as a bloody judge. Then everyone had been ejected by the bark of a surly driver at the crossroads in a village, in the middle of nowhere, which seemed to be as cheering as Death Row on first sight; little more than a few stone cottages about a square of dismal concrete, with an obelisk, a pub, butcher's shop, a post office, bakery, chemist shop, and a Star supermarket scattered around its perimeters. Lovick's eyes accounted for nothing even remotely resembling the photo on the brochure of the impressive hotel, set in its own grounds, fishing rights apparently, woods for paint balling games and a whole hillside for clay pigeon shooting. In fact, the only person he could see walking about was a slip of a girl in a duffle coat, trudging across the square looking miserable. Even she found a key from her coat pocket and let herself in from the biting cold. Bloody freezing it was. There was a distinct lack of buildings and bright lights to warm the place up.

Where had he come to? Not exactly his idea of the perfect environment; not a chippy in sight, but he'd make the best of it for the few days he'd be here because there was nothing to be gained, now, by being negative. Besides which, he had no other option whether he liked the look of the place or not. Mr. City Boy meets Country! Maybe he should bring Country into his act. He'd always liked the song 'Ring of Fire!'

The pub was an exception. It was called the Bald Pheasant Inn, advertised by a big, brightly painted bird with long tail feathers but lacking some pate plumage, portrayed on a sign hanging over the open, glass panelled, lobby doors through which a golden light shone most invitingly. The public house was right on the crossroads, opposite the square on one side and facing the bus shelter, where he had just got off the bus, on the other side of the road to where he stood, looking about with some disappointment, a sneer forming, until he realised that people actually lived here and he had better watch his attitude if he didn't want to attract trouble. At least until the drunks had teetered off to a safe distance.

God almighty! Noddy in Toy Town! The pub was actually the only aspect of all that he saw to promote his slightest interest even, as he crossed the road, noting that the curtains were drawn but its main doors still open. If he absently considered that he had never before known a pub to draw its curtains unless wishing to hide something going on inside...late night drinking or drug dealing being the usual scenario...it was an idle observation not worth another thought. He was more interested in despising the absence of other public houses, fast food establishments and

a complete lack of commercial outlets other than those already noted and what looked to be a farm chandlery with a brand, spanking-new, mini tractor centre window...a child's delight! He'd take a better look tomorrow.

The only other shop he could see was a charity shop from the look of it. You could always tell from the various, unrelated, shabby clutter in the window even when he couldn't see which charity name was on the board over the glass, in the dark; Help The Bloody Aged, no doubt! The village looked as if it would be full of them.

There was also a bank he could see with a hole in the wall machine, though he had no bank account so it was no use to him, and he assumed, due to the large, high-sided wagon with 'Police' written in large, white letters on the side, parked on the opposite side of the dark square, that there must be a Police Station somewhere; a place which Lovick planned to stay well clear of, he and policemen sharing a lack of compatibility which had been developed in his teenage years and had persisted to the present day.

Otherwise, tiny, terraced cottages around and behind all four sides of the square and leading out along a lane which ran by a steepled, stone and brick church with a board which proclaimed; St. George's And All Angels, though he had to narrow his eyes to read it over the distance, next to a long, low, wooden building of the type he associated most with school playgrounds or war films; what his gran would have called a Nissen hut.

Most of the buildings he could see in the streetlight were built out of stone, his sneer freely increasing on a youthful, disparaging face, now that the drunks had staggered off home. Not the kind of cosy dwelling he might choose for himself, once his boat came in, when his idea of a desirable domicile was a newly built, double-glazed semi, with white plastic windows and a front door with a stained glass panel bearing a Tudor rose. Not to forget, of course, a lean-to garage, inside which was a brand new Porsche 911, full of petrol and ready to go.

The pub seemed to be the only cheerful place amongst all that he surveyed. His final destination mischievously hid itself away from him, for the time being, that is. He liked the name, too. Found it inspiring. He harboured a passing thought as his foot hit the matting of the threshold that maybe he should allow himself to explore a Country music phase as another string to his bow; Jim Reeves, or Carl Perkins, for example. He might even get away with Dolly if he could find the right clothes. Had the legs for it. A couple of balloons, a wig, and Bob's your uncle! He could write a song, too, Country style, about a pub with a name like that. No better reason for a bit of research.

With Bells on his Toes

Almost closing time, his watch informed him, as he swung himself and all his kit inside with his barometer gauging the interior weather initially as sunny with no rain expected; chatter and clinks to be heard and that warm, stale smell of sodden, beer-logged carpet which called to him of home. Only a small clientele remained; about six men, he gauged, one barman only who had the controlling attitude of landlord, arms straight against the burnish of his bar counter where he stood next to highly polished brass beer pulls. He narrowed his eyes at Lovick and then glanced about to share similar looks with his other customers as if an ill wind had just blown in.

They all stopped talking, drinking, laughing; every man-Jack of them, looking down at the bells and ribbons on his boots with total derision, as if he'd spoil a select party with his down market appearance, though none of them looked to be much different than the ordinary man he considered himself to be. What was the matter with him? Two heads? Flying low? Time gone for last orders?

He wasn't too impressed with a first impression of the locals, either, even when they cleared a space at the bar, after turning cold shoulders and quietly walking away, to take up table space, beer glasses in hand and most of them ignoring the smoking ban in public places. All of them had looked his way, laughter stemmed, glum faced.

Even the landlord's approach had been grudging. "What can I do you for, lad?" His middle-aged face was creased with worry lines and a bold curiosity directly attributable to Lovick's entrance; his eyes looked Lovick over like a security guard. "We don't usually get strangers at this time of year in Barns. Not till Christmas."

Lovick might have taken a hint and left as quickly as he had arrived if he had seen anywhere else to quench his thirst, also to discover the information he needed concerning the whereabouts of the Fairview Country Club Hotel. "Pint of bitter, mate, ta. Nice little village you have here." There was never anything lost by being friendly to strangers.

Unfortunately, his sentiment was not returned. "Just stopped off on the way, have you? Don't usually get visitors at this time of night, either, like I say." Iterated, with deep curiosity, so that an explanation was more demanded than suggested. "You staying?"

Lovick felt pressured. "You could say that. Just got off the bus as a matter of fact. I'm on my way to the Fairview Country Club Hotel...know it?" chinking the change in his pocket as he found a couple of quid for a pint of ale.

The landlord's frown was sharp and a look of disbelief entered his eyes though he had his glance on Lovick's hand full of coins as he shuffled

Sacher Torte

through them. He picked up a glass with one hand and placed his other to a pump handle. His tut was evident as was the same from the rest of the men who Lovick realised had all eyes glued to him.

“The Fairview! Oh, aye! The Fairview, you say? Not open yet, son. A few days to go. There’s a room going spare here if you want one. You’ll have to take it now as we’ll be closing up shortly. Nowhere else does rooms in December in this neck of the woods.”

“Day after tomorrow it opens, I think. I’m to be the entertainment.”

The landlord glanced over the guitar and then onto the large, brown, canvas bag now propped against the counter. “What’s with the kit bag, then? Magic act are you? Got a couple of lions and a set of giant mirrors in there?”

Lovick shrugged. “Singer actually. Come up from Manchester special.”

There seemed to be more interest in the kit bag than it warranted. Bloody nose! What did it matter what he had in the kit bag? Truth be told, mainly threadbare clothing other than his stage clothes, his music centre, sports kit and football. His snooker cue, which folded in half and was protected by a plastic case, was the only rigid item stopping the bag from sagging to the floor. Most important was his nightlight, made out of blue pot with a smiley face cut out to make him feel that he was not alone and friendless, should he wake up at four o’clock in the morning with the dark closing in. Not something he liked to be common knowledge. He had spent the whole of his life being frightened of the dark.

Suspicious behaviour wasn’t in it! It was as if he had walked into the middle of something private but once having done so it had perhaps become necessary for him to be detained for a period of time, for some reason that did not become evident, though Lovick expected the cocaine to be fanned out and chopped up on the shiny tables at any time, rolled up notes at the ready. Either that or the nude dancer would come out of the closet, wiggling her fanny in a dance of the seven veils. He had always preferred the fan dance, himself. Then, while he watched the swill of a pint of strong bitter rise up the glass the landlord was holding to the pump, while levering it slowly and gently, Lovick had the suspicion that, maybe, something was going on outside which they did not want him to be aware of. Before even finishing pulling his pint, the landlord nodded to one of the men drinking at a table near the door but spoke to everyone present. “Time to close the doors, gentlemen, I think. The bar’ll be open for another hour.” Then to Lovick, “No need to fret, lad. We do things different here. You look like the type to enjoy a few pints.”

With Bells on his Toes

“Is that why the curtains are closed? A lock-in?”

“Ask no questions, be told no lies. Do you want a pint or don’t you?”

“Never been known to refuse.”

“Glad to hear it.”

A damned expensive pint too; three pounds eighty! But delivered unto him with worshipful adoration; a head on it that might have done justice to a bottle of full cream milk, coating his lips with promise. Now you’re talking!

Lovick paid the landlord’s price, even if with ill grace, because the taste pleased him, causing him to tip his head back and glug down the first few mouthfuls to quench his thirst. There was nothing like the flavour and sensation of that very first pint of the evening though he left the last gill to take his time with, placing his glass reverently on the table and looking at it fondly, too smooth a pint to be disrespected, a brimming jar, properly pulled from a cold cellar; homebrew if he was not mistaken, probably with a name like Gentle Hen or Butter Barrel.

A couple of fags later and a full hour had passed. He’d been encouraged to strum a tune or two by the landlord who had refused to allow his glass to remain empty though no one else was invited for last orders, gentlemen, please. Filled it and overcharged him again. No one seemed to be enjoying his playing much, either. Most looked the other way or down into their flattened bitter. Some kept glancing at him awkwardly, fingers rapping their table, as if his very presence was doing their heads in. It was as if they resented a stranger in their midst, though the landlord was being friendly enough, if a bit preoccupied. Couldn’t afford another one though and told the landlord so when he reached down a fresh glass and put it to the pump once more. “Same again?”

“Sorry, mate, ta. Bit too expensive for me.”

As he made a move to leave, the landlord levered him another half glass anyway, with a sullen look on his face as if to offer a free one went against the grain. “On the house, then. You can’t go anywhere until you’ve got that down you.” It was spoken like an order.

It wasn’t often that Lovick looked at free beer with suspicion. But that one, he did! There was something about the quiet company, supping lightly, tapping impatiently, not much to say to each other, all dressed in dark, winter clothing which they had not even bothered to unbutton against the warmth coming from a blazing fire over in the empty snug, as if they hadn’t planned on staying this long, which unnerved him. It was the strangest lock-in he’d ever got caught up in. Usually, the pints flowed as if there would be no tomorrow and the juke box would be on full blast and

Sacher Torte

jiving all on its own. There'd be all kind of stuff going on, usually stuff that never went on at home. These men made him feel nervous, watching him quietly with frowns on their faces, talking little between themselves and, when they did, in whispers. One man had even gone to lean against the bolts of the closed doors and another had lifted the hem of the curtain to take a look out to the other side of the square, his whole head hidden and staying there for a half hour or more. A punishment of some kind? On the lookout? For what? His missus?

Lovick had begun to feel even more uneasy when he was asked by the landlord, "Give us another tune then. Something Christmassy," in a tone as if to refuse would not be a wise thing to do. He had obliged by giving a stilted rendition of 'In The Deep Midwinter', Elvis style, flat and tuneless because he wasn't able to concentrate, bringing forth nothing more than a few cynical smiles and not a single clap when he finished, though the chap with his head under the curtain put his thumb up and everyone nodded in unison, as if a message had been passed. The last notes died away to silence. Lovick waited for some kind of appreciation with his lip hitched on his right incisor, his whole body wrapped around the guitar, feeling utterly foolish as he propped himself against the bar once again and then set to draining his glass, his mind working to sum up his situation. He planned to get out of the place a.s.a.p., once he'd discovered which direction to take to the Fairview Hotel, only the chap leaning against the door looked to be preventing his exit and wouldn't be about to shift until a sign was given by the landlord whose authority in this place seemed to be law. The man with his head under the curtain seemed to be pivotal to this decision and that decision seemed to depend on what he saw as he looked out onto the street. Thumb raised once more, and his time-out punishment finally done with, he brought his head out from under, resumed sipping his pint with a grin on his face and a mood of relief seemed to sweep over the place. Laughter suddenly broke out much to Lovick's consternation.

The landlord clicked his tongue against his cheek, stretched laced fingers until his knuckles cracked, and then poured himself a small brandy as if in celebration. "Last orders gentlemen. I'll shut the bar in ten minutes. Time enough, I think. Want directions to the Fairview do you, lad?"

Lovick nodded, having decided to say nothing. No point! None of his concern! He doubted he'd ever be in the Bald Pheasant Inn again, anyway, as long as there was a decent bar at the hotel where he would be working.

"Straight up the hill at the crossroads. Keep on the same road to the top of the rise. Can't miss it. It's laid back, on the left hand side, before the steep climb down into the next valley. It's signed clear enough. Just stay

With Bells on his Toes

on the main road and you'll be alright."

Something had been odd, that was for sure, as the landlord had issued a last drink to each man, excluding himself, before the bolts were drawn back and Lovick was allowed to escape with a feeling of liberation. He still felt intimidated by watchful eyes even after he'd left the establishment and made off, loaded up once more, across the bottom of the square for the road which travelled up the hill, feeling slightly inebriated due to the strength of the brew he had been given. He would not be tangling with that lot again unless he could help it and was careful to keep his head down as he turned the corner to embark on what should have been the last, shortest leg of his journey.

All he had to do was to follow the road to the top of the rise.

