

TWO

THE DAY THE BANKER CAME TO CALL

We did extremely well in our first month. We were lucky; all sorts of work arrived from unexpected quarters, and our friends in the business community put a considerable amount our way.

One Monday morning Wilford arrived, very excited because the manager of the local branch of the Halifax Building Society, one of the largest in Rotherham, wanted to call to see how we were getting on. Jack Bower was a very important person, in a position to provide mortgages and put a lot of conveyancing work our way – and even more importantly, at the stroke of a pen he could alter the course of our overdraft! Wilford had met him often, and enjoyed an excellent rapport with him.

Wilf arranged the appointment for noon the following Friday, having confirmed that I would be there too, as I had a very light court that day. We agreed that the office should be in pristine condition, and decided to buy a new coffee-maker and half a dozen china cups and saucers – Oscar had tipped Shergar to win the Derby, and we'd had a successful flutter. Anne was sent out to make the purchases while Wilford managed the office, answered the phone, made the tea and tackled the ballcock, which had broken again.

We had three days to prepare for the visit, but nature was against us. As the weather became very warm, the flutterings in the roof increased with the pigeon population, and we were also plagued by a small yellow beetle-like creature that was everywhere

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– in drawers, and on the ceilings, floors and desks. In the uncarpeted areas, they crunched underfoot. The problem was so marked that even Oscar commented on it.

On Wednesday afternoon, Wilford was interviewing a client whose chair was placed directly under the ceiling light when he noticed that the wire from the ceiling to the bulb appeared to be moving. Putting on his glasses, he saw a family of beetles marching down the wire to the lowest point of the bulb whence, lemming-like, they leapt to the floor.

Unfortunately, directly between the light and the floor was Mr Granville Entwhistle, discussing the purchase of his council house.

Wilford watched in agony as the first of the family landed on Granville's shoulder. Others followed; Granville was soon covered in beetles, and Wilford began to feel hot under the collar, in a quandary over what to do. Should he say, 'Please move, Mr Entwhistle, you're infested with beetles from our roof,' or usher him out and hope he'd think he'd acquired his infestation elsewhere? As a man of honour with every care for his clients, he decided to usher him out. He breathed a huge sigh of relief as, watching from the window, Wilford saw Granville disappear, scratching his head and neck frantically.

On Thursday Rentokil came to call, and identified the insects as golden spider beetles, which fed on the waste matter of pigeons. The pigeons' home in the rafters had also been their cemetery, where the infestation had started. We watched in silence as plastic sack after sack was taken away. I still shudder to think of it. The entire roof and floor were sprayed with a golden-spider-beetle deterrent, and we vowed to get the roof repaired before the pigeons returned.

On Friday, we busily prepared for Mr Bower's visit. If he were sufficiently impressed, he would see to it that we were given what was known as 'Solicitor free work', so his visit was very important.

A few seconds before noon, Jack walked into reception, his timing immaculate as always. We welcomed him enthusiastically, poured him a cup of his favourite Darjeeling tea in a brand new bone-china cup, and ushered him into our office. Given that he had a staff of over eighty and offices with all mod cons, he must have wondered what he'd got himself into when he saw our little enterprise. However, he seemed genuinely pleased for us, and was clearly impressed with our attempt to give it a go.

The interview lasted about twenty minutes, and ended with his promise of support for the future. He had no fears about the quality of our work, because Wilford was a brilliant conveyancer and Jack knew it. As we chatted at the top of the stairs, Oscar appeared for his midday visit. 'Excuse me,' he said; Jack moved out of the way, and the toilet door opened. I looked at Wilford.

It wouldn't do to go into graphic details, but suffice it to say that Oscar was on form, and the acoustics added to the agony of the moment. 'It's the VAT inspector,' I told Jack, for want of a better explanation.

'He's got a real problem, that chap,' said Jack as we walked downstairs. We both nodded in agreement.

The following Wednesday morning I set off for the office in pouring rain, the almost black sky illuminated by streaks of lightning. By the time I'd got from the house to the car, my coat was saturated. I had my briefcase and files for the morning, together with my football kit – which should have included two boots, but I realised I'd only brought one. I cursed, rushed back to the house, and found the boot in the passageway. Back in the car, having been soaked again, I found that I had only one football sock. I decided to borrow one from Lidster rather than get soaked again, and drove off.

My interest in football began at school, and continued in adulthood. Wednesday evenings were taken up with matches on

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the all-weather pitch at the Herringthorpe Leisure Centre in Rotherham. It was a 6.00 pm kick-off, and our team included some very good footballers. They weren't all lawyers, because we had to bring in outsiders to bolster the numbers, and one of them, a lad called David Lidster was not only our captain and a very good player, but also the main supplier of kit when I'd forgotten mine.

It was an eventful day, because my best client Jack Heptonstall was before the court that morning to be sentenced for theft of lead and driving whilst disqualified. I parked the car and ran to the office, getting drenched for a third time in the process. I'd just started to go through my letters when I felt water dripping onto my head from the area of the light bulb above me. I rushed to turn off the lights so I wouldn't be electrocuted, and went up to investigate the attic: water was dripping into two areas. We used all the buckets and pans we had, one of them perched rather precariously on my desk.

When Wilford came in, soaking wet and cursing the weather, he saw me peering into the bucket to check the contents. 'You must have had a good night,' he announced.

'It's for a leak, you chuff,' I said irritably.

'Why don't you leak in the toilet like everybody else?' he said. I granted him a smile and he sat down opposite me, gazing at the water dripping from the ceiling. He had been sitting only a matter of seconds before he realised that his chair was also saturated. 'Bloody marvellous. Look at this,' he said, pointing to the wet patch round his backside.

'Must have been a good night last night, then,' I said.

'Oh bugger off,' said Wilford. 'What are we going to do about this?' As I had four cases that morning and had to be at court early, we agreed to get Bodger Broom in to see if he could effect some speedy repairs.

After we'd been through the post, Wilf set about trying to persuade Bodger to get out of bed and answer the phone. He let the

phone ring and ring and ring.

‘Who the bloody hell is that?’ I heard Bodger shout.

Wilf couldn’t resist shouting ‘Wrong number,’ and putting the phone down. I then rang Bodger, pretending to be the registrar at the local crematorium.

‘Who’s booked me in then?’ he said furiously. ‘I tell thee, I’m not dead!’ he shouted, sounding like a man about to die from a stroke. I put the phone down and Wilford then rang him again. By this time, Broomy must have been frothing at the mouth, he was so angry.

He asked Wilford if we’d been messing about, but Wilford denied all knowledge of the other calls, and told him about our roof problem. Broomy said he’d call at lunchtime and bring his hammer. The hammer was probably for Wilford, but as I wouldn’t be in I didn’t really care.

I set off for court and got soaked again. In the little WRVS tearoom was a rather wet and lonely Jack, and for the first time the wide grin was missing. I ordered two teas, and he handed me a pink charge sheet. I read it and realised that Jack had been driving while disqualified again.

‘Oh, Jack,’ I said in disbelief. ‘How on earth could you get another charge while you’re on bail? You know what this means.’

Jack shrugged, and nodded acceptance of the fate that was to befall him.

‘What were you doing?’ I asked him.

‘About ninety-five miles an hour,’ he said, attempting to revitalise the grin. ‘I’d only gone to the chip shop when PC Cawley clocked me.’

PC Cawley had clocked him many times before, and on each occasion Jack had been charged with an offence. ‘He must’ve seen me go into the chip shop and the cheating bastard hid, watched me

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get into the car, and then pulled me up at the bottom of our road. What a snide git he is.'

I found it difficult to sympathise with Jack, as the policeman was only doing his job and Jack had been warned not to do anything illegal while on bail. I was also distraught, because imprisonment was the likely sentence, so all the good work we had done in preparing his case was lost. How could the court sympathise with somebody who had gone out and committed the same crime yet again?

'I'm sorry I've let thee down,' Jack said.

'You haven't, Jack,' I replied. 'It's just that I don't want you to be sent to prison.'

'Don't worry, Steve,' he said. 'Tha'll do tha' best, and if I have to go to prison, well, I reckon I'll get my old job back in the bakery. But I'm a bit worried about Madge and the kids.'

Jack was an absolute delight to act for, because he was realistic, undemanding and, above all, in a funny kind of way a gentleman – a quality sadly lacking in some of the people appearing before court today. I'm afraid the old saying 'Honour amongst thieves' no longer exists, if indeed it ever did.

I was thinking about this when the emphysemic usher called us in. I was glad to get out of the tea-room, which was like the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, with its smell of cigarette smoke and unwashed bodies.

In Court One, I found the Chairman of the Bench was Mr Norcliffe, a very experienced magistrate who wasn't given to sympathy when he believed a defendant had been mocking the system. It was the worst Bench I could have got for Jack's case. In the courts you're always dealing with different personalities, and any one Bench may take a different view of a case from another. Mr Norcliffe had always been courteous to me, but he wasn't afraid to send people down, and consequently was no favourite of defence advocates. I was cursing my luck when Jack was called into court.

‘What is your full name?’ asked Mr Cook, the Clerk to the Justices.

‘Jack Heptonstall, sir,’ said Jack, in the most respectful tone he could muster.

‘And your address and date of birth?’ added Mr Cook.

Jack answered, using the word ‘sir’ at regular intervals. I looked at him and thought how smart he looked, in his dark blue suit, green shirt, red tie and pink pocket handkerchief. I had asked him to attend court dressed up, which in Yorkshire means wearing your best clothes. Jack was dressed up all right, but what as? The tie was so bright you needed dark glasses. It had an anchor on it, and being an old Navy man, Mr Norcliffe asked me which naval squadron it represented.

I said I wasn’t sure, though I knew Jack had never been in the Navy. But Mr Norcliffe looked at his colleagues with a reassuring nod, confiding to them, ‘Yes, Navy man.’

As Mr Cook started to put the charges, Norcliffe’s eyebrows shot up his forehead and he glared piercingly at Jack. I looked at Jack to see if I could work out the object of concentration, and realised that his fly was undone.

Mr Norcliffe stopped the proceedings and had a *sotto voce* conversation with his clerk, who beckoned me over and whispered the problem in my ear. Jack remained blissfully unaware of anything untoward as I asked the court’s leave to take further instructions from my client, then leaned across and whispered in his ear, ‘Your flies are undone.’

Of course I *would* get Jack’s deaf ear, and he asked me to repeat it. I then stood to conceal him from the Bench while he rectified the situation, only to have an embarrassed Jack report that the zip had broken. I suggested he take his jacket off and hold it in a suitable position in front of him. He didn’t seem to favour the idea, but I insisted, and the general aura of the court seemed to force Jack to my will. But when he did so, I saw with horror that he had

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only one sleeve on his shirt. He looked at me, shrugged, and said, 'It got tore, tha knows, dog pulled it off t'line.... When I pulled it, dog pulled back, and t'sleeve came off. It's a big dog, tha knows, strong jaws, it's a bad bastard really.'

The court clerk had had enough, and asked if we could get on with it. He read out the charges, and Jack pleaded guilty. I then found that he was serving a year's suspended sentence he'd forgotten to tell me about. That was the kiss of death as far as Mr Norcliffe was concerned, and Jack got two months' imprisonment, which was a fairly good result taking everything into account.

As they took Jack down the steel staircase to the cells, he winked at me and gave me a thumbs-up: when I saw him afterwards, he thanked me for my efforts and said he'd expected six months. We worked out his release date, which would only be some four to six weeks away, and he said he would look me up on his release and buy me a pint.

'So long as you don't bring Albert,' I said. 'Neither I nor my fish have recovered from his last visit.'

Jack laughed, the huge grin reappearing on his face, and as I left he was talking the warder into making him a cup of tea. Walking back up the staircase, I remembered the tie.

'Jack, there's something I forgot to ask. Let me have a look at your tie.'

He approached me, and I recognised a golden anchor. On closer scrutiny I saw three words printed around it: 'Captain Bird's Eye.'

'Where did you get it, Jack?' I asked.

'Tesco, he replied proudly. 'Twenty-eight vouchers. Aw reet, i'nt it?'

My last case that day concerned a gipsy who was up for stealing electricity. Henry Fordham lived in a caravan pulled by a Transit van. He had been spotted down a dark lane by a police patrol, who

were intrigued to see this caravan amongst a row of street lights which weren't working. The caravan itself was incredibly well lit, and a stereo was working full blast in it. They parked a short distance away and looked inside. Henry was sitting in front of a portable sun-tanning machine, in a yoga position, and his three children were busy playing Space Invaders.

It was clearly impossible to fuel those contraptions with a twelve-volt car battery, and when the police got round to the other side of the caravan they saw a cable reaching from beneath it to the street light. Henry had worked out how to use the street lighting system to power just about every working part of his caravan.

Henry's statement said it was the first time he had ever tried it (although the police's alternative explanation would certainly account for various areas of Sheffield regularly losing their street lights over a lengthy period). The magistrates adjourned for probation reports to be prepared, as they have to if they decide a case is too serious for a fine or conditional discharge, and are looking at a custody or community service sentence. Henry was released on bail, and neither I nor the court has seen him since. The last I heard, Nottingham was having difficulty with its street lights...

I returned to the office with mixed feelings about my day in court, and Anne told me that a lady called Madge was waiting to see me, with a boy who was trying to electrocute the fish in our tank. Madge was Jack's wife, who had been unable to find out which prison he had been sent to and wondered if I could help.

While I phoned the Allocation Centre, Albert watched me with his disconcerting grin. I avoided mentioning Jack's name so as not to upset him: I just said 'Hull' to Madge, and left it at that. But as they left, Albert turned to me and said, 'Hull Prison, eh? Piece of cake. Tarra for now, Steve.'

I shook my head. 'What is he going to be like?' I thought, and set about my dictation.