



SPOTTY HERBERT and the CUSTARD WARS

Spotty Herbert and the Custard Wars

(Volume Two)

The Week After

There was an awful thumping inside his head, or was someone banging on the front door? No, it was inside his head. His mouth felt like the bottom of a budgie's cage; he was having problems focusing his eyes. Herbert Snodgrass had the worst case of the never agains known to Man.

The Policeman's Ball had been the worst experience of his life and all of his nightmares had come true at the same time, would he ever be able to look Chesty Mullens directly in the bust again? He stumbled down the stairs and into the cold kitchen.

"Morning Herby Boy, have you had a good rest? What happened to you last week?"

"Please don't talk about it Dad, I don't ever want to think about it again."

"Morning, Herby," she purred.

What, who said that? And what was Melissa the kisser doing here at breakfast time, there weren't any old motorbikes to repair. She poured him a mug of tea and slid it across the table with her greasy fingers. Dad had a satisfied smirk on his face; it was far too early to figure out why.

"I had better go, I've got a Douglas Dragonfly clutch to repair."

Melissa slipped on her brown, oil-stained overalls over her black lace underwear. Herbert hadn't even noticed that she was sitting in their kitchen only half dressed, but it still didn't register in his fuddled brain.

"Come on Herby, get with it or you will be late."

"Err, late for what Dad?"

"Don't you know what day it is?"

"Err... err, no."

"Come on boy, its Saturday. Mr Patel will be waiting for you."

"Saturday? Have I missed a whole week?"

Then it started to come back to him. Oh no. That terrible drunken attempt to grope Chesty in the pitch dark. That unforgettable mix up. Mr Patel's transvestite tits in his hand. That's all that he could remember. He dressed as quickly as he dared and wandered out into a wet Victoria Street and down to Patel's Belly Deli.

"Good morning Herbert. You are late again, I shall have to reduce your out of sell by date allowance."

"Thank you, Mr Patel."

"Herbert, do you remember that night at the Policeman's Ball, you were working as a waiter."

"Err, err, not sure. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Herbert, I think that I was poisoned and then attacked by someone. Then I had something stolen."

"What did you have stolen Mr Patel?"

"Well, it was a pair of 44 double D personal items."

"Who stole them Mr Patel?"

"I don't know, it was dark and I don't remember much about it but I intend to sue the Police."

"Sue the Police Mr Patel, do you think that's wise?"

"Wisdom, Herbert, is like an elephant's bum. No one person can embrace it all."

"Right, Mr Patel, I will take your word for that, I won't even try."

"Alright boy, I want you to go down into the cellar, there is a strange buzzing noise going on down there."

Herbert crept slowly down the stone steps and creaked open the rusty hinges. He reached into the damp corner and groped for the shot gun. He broke the barrels and slipped in two cartridges, then he nuzzled the butt into his right shoulder and squeezed the trigger. Flash, bang, thump, crash! The buzzing stopped.

"What was it boy? Did you blast it to Hell?"

"Yes Mr Patel, it's blasted to Hell."

He switched on the dim light and looked for the body.

"Well boy, what was it?"

"Not sure Mr Patel, but it had lots of legs and there are bits of wings everywhere."

Mr Patel peeped around the cellar door. "Oh dear me Herbert, it looks like a plague of locusts."

"A plague of locusts? What are they doing in here, shouldn't they be in Africa or somewhere hot like that?"

"Oh I don't know, I expect they came in from the street to get out of the rain."

Herbert looked around the dark and dingy cellar.

"Mr Patel, I can see that your warehouse is stacked with big plastic barrels, and the one that got peppered with shot has got a mysterious yellow powder coming out of it. What's in them?"

"What's in them, Herbert, is our future, but what's in them is also a top secret and I don't want you to tell anyone about this. But I will tell you in the strictest confidence that I have had a tip off from my Chinese friend Mr Dung, so don't tell anyone about it, alright boy."

Let's have a meanwhile! Meanwhile back at the Police Station Sergeant Parker was not very happy.

"Higgins, have you seen this newspaper report?"

"Newspaper report? No Serg. What's it say?"

"Well Higgins, the headlines read: 'Policeman's Ball Explodes. Heads will roll'"

"Yes Serg, what else does it say?"

"The next bit says: *A mysterious brown fog invaded the Ball Room of the prestigious Manor House Hotel during the high profile Police Christmas party, which was organised by Sergeant Charley Parker. This party was to celebrate the retirement of the Chief Constable of the region's Police Force, the right honourable Tristan Pratt. It seems that several dubious uninvited guests became inebriated and emitted a noxious brown gas. The mysterious gas had a peculiar smell and proved to be highly flammable. When a rather voluptuous young lady lit a cigarette, there was a blinding flash which cut off the power supply. Several of the guests suffered body hair singeing and some even lost certain personal accessories. It is believed that the Chief Constable's retirement will need to be postponed while investigations into this very unusual incident are conducted.*"

"Right Serg, sorry I missed it. Oh by the way there is a letter for you, it looks official."

The Sergeant fumbled with the envelope, and then slit it open with his pen knife. His hand was shaking and a bead of sweat trickled from his furrowed brow.

"They can't do that, it's disgraceful. No, they can't do it."

"What's up, Serg?"

He read the letter out loud; "*Sergeant Charles Parker, it has been decided that following the recent fiasco at the Manor House Hotel you will be demoted to Constable with immediate effect. In the interim period Constable Higgins will take on the duties of Station Sergeant. I can't believe it, what do you have to say to that Higgins?*"

"Right Parker, you're on the front desk now. Make me a cup of tea, one sugar; bring it to my office and sharp about it Constable."

Trifle

Herbert was having a disturbed night. There were strange noises coming from Dad's bedroom and an unusual voice muttering about rare spark plugs and downdraft carburettors. Was he having another nightmare? Then someone in a suit appeared. Oh no, not Chris again.

"And now Herbert this is your final question, for one million pounds."

Chris gave him his usual steely look and hesitated...

"What is the best food in the whole world?"

Is it A: Matsutake Mushrooms?

Is it B: Sevruga Caviar?

Is it C: White Alba Truffles?

Or is it D: Trifle?

You have one minute to answer. For one million pounds, what is the best food in the world:

A...Matsutake Mushrooms,

B...Sevruga Caviar,

C...White Alba Truffles or D...Trifle

Your time starts now."

Yes how easy, he could have eaten it for breakfast, lunch, dinner and supper every day of the week.

And although he didn't know it at the time, it was going to play a big part in his ambition to become a secret agent and in the plot of this book.

"30 seconds left."

"Yes Chris. It's D, Trifle."

"Yes, that is the right answer. Herbert, you have won one million pounds..."

The audience went wild! Then he was back to the reality of Dad's squeaking bed and mumblings about clutch plates and big ends. He was confused. Then he rolled over and landed on the floor with a bump.

"Come on Herbert, you'll be late for school."

Oh no, not school, what day was it? Err, Friday. Horror of horrors, double biology with Miss Bible Belt Cuthbert.

It was one of those very unusual mornings in school. Stonker Brown had arrived several minutes early, and was wearing one of those self-satisfied smirks that he only wore when he was trying to put someone down.

He crept down the hall and into the empty classroom, then disappeared under Herbert's desk. He took two stink bombs out of his pocket and taped them to the bottom of the legs of Herbert's chair. He stuck on two bits of chewed gum to give the chair just enough support until Herbert sat on it and crushed the stink bombs.

The rest of the class wandered in, in dribs and drabs and stood around chatting, and Herbert came in last as usual. By ten past nine the whole class was in uproar when the door burst open. Standing there with a deadly stare was Mr Brewin, Games Teacher. There was immediate silence; you could hear a pin drop.

You see where Miss Bible Belt was as soft as the proverbial, Brewin was as hard as nails, as you would expect from a rugby prop forward, cauliflower ears and all. And one steely glare from his penetrating eyes sent a shiver through the whole class.

"Right you lot, sit down. No, not you Brown, or you Snodgrass, you two come to the front. I have been getting some bad reports on you boys. You have been causing Miss Cuthbert some problems. Now, what have you got to say for yourselves?"

Quivering lips were all that either of them could manage.

"Right class, Miss Cuthbert is indisposed today, so you have got a double session of me, joy of joys. Well boys, try to smile."

Herbert managed a sickly grin.

"Snodgrass, come here and sit in Brown's seat and you, Brown, go and sit where Snodgrass usually parks. I want to keep an eye on you two."

Stonker tried in vain to think of some excuse, but couldn't. He hesitated for a second until Mr Brewin barked a command.

"Sit down, Brown."

Above the silence there was an audible crunch as the chair legs broke the casings on the stink bombs. Then an awful smell percolated through the whole room and infiltrated the broad nostrils of Mr Brewin.

"Right. Everybody into the corridor. Except you, Brown, and you Snodgrass. You two stay exactly where you are, and don't you dare to move a muscle. We will all be outside in the fresh air watching through the window."

Everybody laughed from outside the classroom. Stonker was sitting right on top of the smell and trying desperately not to be sick. Herbert was away from the epicentre, and only getting the secondary wafts. Anyway, he was used to Granny Tilda's cabbage stench. It took the best part of an hour before the classroom was habitable again, but Herbert didn't waste his time, he scribbled down a poem.

*Every town has a Stonker Brown,
He makes you laugh, he makes you frown,
But I shall get the smartarse clown,
That Stonker Brown is going down.*

Herbert started to formulate a secret plan to get Stonker. Of course, after the stink bomb incident Stonker Brown became known as Stinker Brown.

After that period of light relief for the class it was double French with Mr German. Herbert wondered why a French teacher was called German. Perhaps he was German, he could be anything behind all that facial hair but Herbert was thinking ahead. At least it would guarantee him a part-time job when he retired from teaching; he could work once a year as a stand-in for Father Christmas.

Bang! Mr German's ruler hit the desk, there was a cloud of chalk dust and then silence.

"Alright class, let's conjugate the French verb 'to be': être. Come on, you should all know this by now, you've been doing it for two years."

He scribbled on the board and pointed with his ruler.

"Right everyone. Être, the verb 'to be', in the present tense."

Some of them mumbled louder than the others. Herbert just mimed:

*Je suis
Tu es
Il est
Nous sommes...*

His brain had wandered. The verb 'to be', what does it want to be? In his mind he was a secret agent. He was on a warm and sunny beach, palm trees were swaying to the rhythm of the gently lapping waves. A beautiful girl was running towards him in slow motion, she was topless, her firm breasts swaying from side to side. Herbert reached out his hands...

Someone spoke to him, penetrating his dream:

"Snodgrass, what's the English meaning of the French word *seins*?"

Herbert was still daydreaming, and answered without thinking:

"Tits."

There was uproar in the class, but a smile penetrated the forest of a beard.

"Yes, boy, I thought that's where your mind was."

The rest of double French was quite uneventful. Then it was History with Podgy Carlisle. Oh no, not another war. His mind left his body again and drifted towards the front of Chesty's sweater. It was lost there for the rest of that day. Saturday morning came around as Saturday mornings do. Herbert struggled to wake up as Herbert did. He went through his usual morning routine then wandered down Victoria Street to Patel's Belly Deli.

"Herbert, you are late again."

"Sorry Mr Patel, I had to go to school yesterday."

"To school you say, did you learn anything?"

"No, not really, Biology was all about sport, French was foreign to me and history was all about wars. Can you imagine grown men fighting with flowers?" "Flowers, Herbert? What flowers are you talking about?"

"Roses, Mr Patel. I bet they never did that in your country! I hate having to learn about wars; I don't know why we need to have them at all."

"You have completely missed the point, Herbert. Wars were invented by God to teach the Americans geography."

"I don't think the Americans were in that one, Mr Patel."

"Oh, just as well Herbert, they have been in most of them and they were usually late!"