

Counterpoise

George was an immensely likeable person, with a kind heart. But, like the proverbial emerald, he had one glaring flaw. He loved practical jokes. These were often perpetrated at the most inopportune times and places, frequently leading to a completely wrong impression of him.

His friends' weddings had provided one of the most fertile fields for his odd sense of humour.

On many occasions he, Jenny and their friends, would recount some of his more memorable escapades.

"Do you remember Sam's wedding when you and George stood firmly to attention at the church door, each with a stern look, brandishing shotguns? Old Mrs Knowles will never forgive you," Jenny giggled.

"What about the time when you set off the fire alarm in St James's chapel just as Mrs Doherty was taking Phosphorene to calm her nerves," said Paul, "It's a damn good thing Doc Jones had his bag with him at the time."

"I loved the time you bribed the drunken tramp to stagger down the aisle singing *Brandewyn laat my staan*."

"Abducting old Roger's best man was one of your more wicked pranks, I wish you could have seen Terry's face when Roger told him he had to step in as best man just minutes before the service."

"What about the time when you persuaded Father Rankin to carry out his threat that you, he, the bridegroom and the best man would pop around to the pub next door if the bride was late?" said Gina.

Gales of laughter greeted this memory.

"I'll never forget Susie's face as she explained to Father Rankin why they were late. His taciturn response was, 'No excuses. I warned you. This is the one day of your life when you may not be late.' How she glared at him. Noelle who had been bridesmaid remembered it well.

Ironically, George was just about the last one in his class to tie the knot.

He and Jenny had known each other for many years and had developed a wonderful friendship. They enjoyed the same lifestyles and were virtually inseparable. Strangely, neither of them had ever formed any serious romantic liaisons.

As often happens, at a get-together they happened to meet each other's eyes across a braai fire, and bingo, they were in love. One fine day, the Cherub of Love drew his bow and the two realized that they were head over heels in love.

Soon afterwards serious wedding preparations began.

As these progressed, George began to feel just a little uncomfortable. His conscience pricked, memories of past pranks haunted him.

It dawned on him that he might find himself in the same boat as his friends had been – his anxiety grew.

And ... then it was *the* day,
In a rare show of concern, he firmly told his buddies that if anything untoward happened on this special day, revenge would be swift and fast.

St Andrews, the family church, is a magnificent old building. Built of stone it measures fully sixty feet from floor to roof and could probably seat two thousand.

The only carpets in the church are those around the altar and as a result, the acoustics are, well, echoingly grand.

At full pitch, the organ sounds fill the church and every note reverberates throughout the building.

Conversely, the tiniest footfall of the manse cat tinkles as clear as a bell.

On the day of George and Jenny's wedding, the sun sparkled in a calm sky and the whole world seemed at peace with itself. Quiet reigned.

The guests began arriving in dribs and drabs.

George was waiting for them and chivvied them inside. He did not want anyone loitering with intent outside the church.

Certainly not with shotguns.

Just before the bridal car was due to arrive, George and Hilton, his best man, slipped in through a side door.

The wedding group of around two hundred seemed lost within the confines of St Andrews. An impression made more so by the scattered seating.

"Why is it that, especially in churches, people refuse to sit together but space themselves out as though all other members of the congregation had rabies or the plague?" whispered George.

Hilton merely shrugged his shoulders in a manner suggesting that any speech on his part might provoke the unexpected.

They settled themselves in their appointed places and listened distractedly to the organ.

George began to tremble involuntarily.

He nearly jumped out of his skin as the organist suddenly altered the gentle lilting strains of *How do you Solve a Problem like Maria* into a thunderous rendition of Mendelssohn's wedding march. The sound seemed to fill every nook and cranny of the old church, penetrating into the bones of everyone present.

He stepped out into the aisle to watch his radiant bride as she slowly walked down the aisle, acknowledging, and smiling at, everyone she passed. Her old man positively glowed like someone who had just broken the bank.

When all were in place, the ceremony began, much to the relief of many.

Father Scrimshaw began reading, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of his church, to join together this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony; . . ."

George visibly began to relax.

He breathed such a sigh that titters ran around the congregation.

Father Scrimshaw continued with The Introduction to the Solemnization of Matrimony; ". . . which is an honourable estate, instituted by God himself, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; . . ."

The tone of the reading somehow soothed George and he really began to enjoy the moment.

The words formed a sort of haze in his mind.

Suddenly he was conscious of the paragraph, ". . . Into which holy estate these two persons present now come to be joined. Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak . . ."

Father Scrimshaw raised his head, his eyes sweeping the congregation like the cautionary tail of a lion's warning. His shoulders lifted as his chest expanded and the church rang with his words, ". . . or else hereafter for ever hold his peace."

That involuntary tremble began again and Jenny gently laid her hands on George's to reassure him.

The silence seemed like an eternity.

Then it was broken by a resounding, "I do."

A shuffling and mumbling broke the silence as the congregation twisted around as one to meet this unexpected intrusion.

George and Jenny turned to see a complete stranger begin a slow, deliberate walk down the aisle.

Silence briefly reigned once more and in this hush, his measured footfalls echoed around the old stone church like gunshots.

Major-General Berkley was the first to speak. He raised himself to his full height, and with the authority of sixty years of military life, he challenged the intruder, "Sir. How dare you . . ."

His words were cut short by Father Scrimshaw, "Major-General, please hold your peace. This is God's house and the stranger is merely answering my injunction to declare what he may know."

The Major General sat down.

Whispers and quiet sobs now began to fill the air.

"Do you know him?"

"Who is he?"

"Has George a dark past?"

"Jenny's never even had another boyfriend."

The mothers of the bride and groom sobbed quietly, their husbands gently comforting them.

“Do you think someone put him up to this?” asked Aunt Emily.

“Good Lord no. He looks far too serious for this to be a joke,” sobbed Mrs Bagshaw.

The wooden footsteps slowly came closer to the altar.

The expression on the stranger’s face would have made Lucky Jim proud.

“Do you think he’s drunk?”

“Shhh. Don’t antagonise him. He looks dangerous,” said Ethel.

Samantha’s father held her arm to prevent her from hitting the stranger with her handbag.

As the stranger neared him, Paul blurted out, “Who the hell are you?”

“Stop that,” said father Scrimshaw. “May I once again remind you that you are in God’s house and in the presence of a man who may have legitimate business.”

The rustling and whispering slowly subsided to a deathly silence as the footsteps approached the minister and the bridal couple.

After what seemed like two lifetimes the stranger reached the trembling couple.

He bowed gently to Father Scrimshaw and murmured, “Forgive me, father.”

He turned to the two bewildered faces, holding each other’s hands, with tears of apprehension streaking their faces.

He leant forward slightly to look at them.

The impassive, confronting face was unknown to both George and Jenny.

The stranger looked intently into their eyes and then scanned their faces.

No trace of emotion or recognition flitted across the marble-like features.

After what seemed like an eternity, he slowly straightened.

He turned to face Father Scrimshaw.

“I’m dreadfully sorry Father. It seems I’ve been directed to the wrong church.”

Ray Hattingh