

## The Season of the Year

'Your usual Bert?' said Peggy, the innkeeper's wife as she reached up to the shelf where the personal tankards of the regular customers were kept. Her muscular barmaid's arm pulled the black handle of the pump as the golden stream of best bitter surged into the glass. The brass nozzle burbled deep in the tankard as the foam spilt over the brim. She wiped the glass and set it down before him. Bert always liked a good head on his beer.

'Are you feeling all right love?' she asked. 'You look awfully tired.' Then, looking over his shoulder, she said: 'There's your mate, Fred, just coming in the door. Shall I pull you another pint?'

'Sure,' said Albert as he turned to wave Fred Perkins to an empty table in the far corner.

Peggy noted that, although it was only half an hour after the noon opening time, the pub was gratifyingly full — a sign of the times in those prosperous, early years of the 'roaring' 'twenties.

She stared wistfully at Albert Bateman's back as he strode to the corner with a pint in each hand. At twenty years old he was a strapping lad. Not for the first time her mind filled with unwifely thoughts as she took in those broad shoulders and that delectably tight little bottom. And he had the good looks to go with it. Hair black as coal, blue-grey eyes and a swarthy complexion that was popularly attributed to his mother, a beautiful gypsy girl whom his father had married when she was sixteen.

She had tragically died giving birth to Albert.

Albert's father, George, an unrivalled master poacher, had outfoxed two generations of gamekeepers on the nearby estate of the Duke of Bellington. The Duke was known as a tyrannical and heartless employer — a fact that earned George a good deal of popular support for his nefarious activities.

Albert, who still lived with his father, had been introduced to the poacher's craft at the age of twelve. Although he now had a regular job as a farm labourer, he was out with his dad on many a moonlit night checking their expertly-laid traps. Albert had recently acquired a motor bike and side car, an innovation which enabled him to extend his customer base among butchers and hoteliers farther afield.

'Cheers,' said Albert.

'Down the hatch,' said Fred. And, taking a deep draught: 'Are you all right, Bert? You look as if you've been up all night.'

'As a matter of fact, Fred, you're spot on. Pin back your ears and I'll tell you about it.

'Late yesterday afternoon I takes a drive up to Top Wood to check some traps my old man had laid. And what do I find? Two of the finest hares I ever laid eyes on. Now rabbits is one thing, and pheasants is another. But hares is something special. The nobs go crazy about them — which when you think how tough they are, is surprising. They like to 'ang 'em up until they are half rotten. The point is they fetch a pretty penny — if you can find the right customer. I needed some quick money and it was getting late. So I puts the old grey matter to work and comes up with a sharp idea: Ted Coles the timber merchant.'

'I wouldn't have thought he was the type,' said Fred.

'You're right he ain't. But think of that French wife of his, Charmaine. She'd know what to do with a hare.'

Ted Coles' divorce and his marriage to the family housemaid, a French girl twenty years his junior, had been the talk of the village some ten years before.

Albert continued: 'So, just as it is starting to get dark, I find myself at Ted Coles' front door holding a whopping great hare in each hand. His bird comes to the door, takes one look at them and says: "Mon dew, zey are beautiful" and, squeezing a hind leg, "and so plump."

'Would you like to buy them?' I says.

"Ow much you ask?"

'Half a quid,' I says.

She gives me a long look. "Won't you come inside for a moment?"

'I follows her into the house.'

"Bring them through to the kitchen."

'I lays the hares on the table.'

"Please sit down while I fetch my purse," she says. "Make yourself at 'ome Albert. Zat is your name isn't it? Wouldn't you like a little glass of wine while you are waiting?"

'Now wine is a bit on the fancy side for me. But I didn't want to be rude so I takes the large glassful she pours for me. I find it a bit sharp so I downs it in one go while she is out of the room. She seemed to take ages to find her purse and, when she comes back, I realise why. She has changed into a red silk dressing gown.

'I stand up to face her. "Albert," she says, "I 'ave a little problem. I have no money in my purse. But I 'ave an idea."

'What would that be, Miss?'

"Well," she says coming very close. "Could I not pay you in a different way?"

'How do you mean,' says I.

"Like this," she says. And, no kidding Fred, she does no more than slips her hand between my legs and gets a good grip on the old John Thomas. And then, before I know what's 'appening she's got her other arm around my neck and her tongue halfway down my throat.'

"Wouldn't you like to come upstairs, Big Boy?" she says. Then she draws back to arm's length and undoes the sash of her gown. I swear to you, Fred, all she had on underneath was a pair of stockings. And she's got a pair of knockers on her that almost had me believing in God."

'What about your husband?' I says.

"Don't worry, cherie. 'E's gone up to ze London office for a conference 'E won't be back until eleven tomorrow morning."

'I ask you, Fred, what would *you* do?'

Without waiting for an answer to this superfluous question Albert continued: 'I follows her upstairs and, before you could say Bob's your uncle, we're both starkers on the bed. And, I tell you Fred, that woman knows more tricks than a cartload of monkeys.'

Fred listened, goggle-eyed, as Albert described Charmaine's sexual repertoire in minute detail. At one point the hand lifting his drink to his open mouth froze for almost two minutes. Then, remembering his beer, he downed it in one go.

'Hold on Bert,' he said. 'This deserves another round.'

Returning with two brimming pints, he set them down, spilling some in his excitement. 'So, what happened next?'

'We falls asleep,' said Albert. 'When I wake up the full moon is shining into my eyes. I goes to the window and looks out. It's as bright as day and there, standing by the gate like a neon advert, is my bike. If anybody saw it, the story would be all round the village quicker than a ferret down a rabbit hole. I get as far as pulling on my socks and trousers when a

voice behind me says: "Where are you going Big Boy?" She pats the bed beside her. "Come 'ere, cherie," she says. "We've still got lots of time."

'Stretching out for my hand she pulls me on to the bed. Well, I must tell you Fred, apart from anything else, I was completely shagged out. "Sorry love," I tells her. "I've got to go."

She pouts all sulky like, and then smiles at me like a sly little schoolgirl. "Listen Albert," she says. "I make, 'ow you say, a deal with you. If you make love to me one more time, I will give you back your 'ares."

'Well, Fred, that was quite a proposition. I needed the money and, looking at that cracking pair of tits in the moonlight, I begins to feel the rumblings of a returning appetite.

'It must have been an hour later when the sound of a crowing cock tells me its time to scarper. Out in the street I tucks the hares into the sidecar and pushes the bike about two hundred yards up the road and round the corner before starting her up.'

'You lucky bugger,' said Fred, draining his glass. 'And, by the way it's your round.'

Albert fought his way back through the noisy throng to the bar. 'Same again, Peggy love' he said. And then, looking over her shoulder at the serving hatch to the pub's tiny bar parlour, he saw, waiting to be served, the last man in the world he wanted to encounter. Their eyes met.

'Albert,' bellowed Ted Coles over the noise. 'I want a word with you lad. Wait there, I'm coming round.'

This was bad news. Ted Coles, although over fifty, was a big bastard and had been the Royal Navy heavy-weight boxing champion in his day. Albert carried the drinks back to Fred and set them down on the table. 'Shit!' he swore.

'What's up, Bert?' said Fred. 'You've gone all pale.'

As Albert started to tell him, the door swung open to admit Ted Coles who jerked his head at Albert indicating that he wanted him outside. Shaking in his shoes, Albert followed the burly timber merchant. But, out in the street, Ted Coles merely smiled, came conspiratorially close, and said: 'Albert, lad, I hope you can help me. I'm a bit late getting home. The wife's going to chew my head off. Unless I can give her a little sweetener. I thought something nice for the table would do the trick. You wouldn't by any chance . . .'

'Say no more Mr Coles,' Albert interrupted. 'I've got just the thing in my side car — two of them in fact. And they'll only set you back half a quid.'

Not ten minutes later, Peggy noticed Albert's return. His swarthy face was creased in a broad grin. He rejoined Fred Perkins. For a few moments their heads came together and then they burst into uproarious laughter that continued for several minutes.

'That must have been a good one,' said a customer to Peggy.

She watched them clink their glasses together. Then Fred, soon to be joined by Albert, launched into the chorus from "The Lincolnshire Poacher:" *Oh, 'tis my delight on a shining night in the season of the year."*

'Cheers,' said Fred.

'Cheers,' said Albert draining his glass.

'And it's your round.'

**Anonymous**