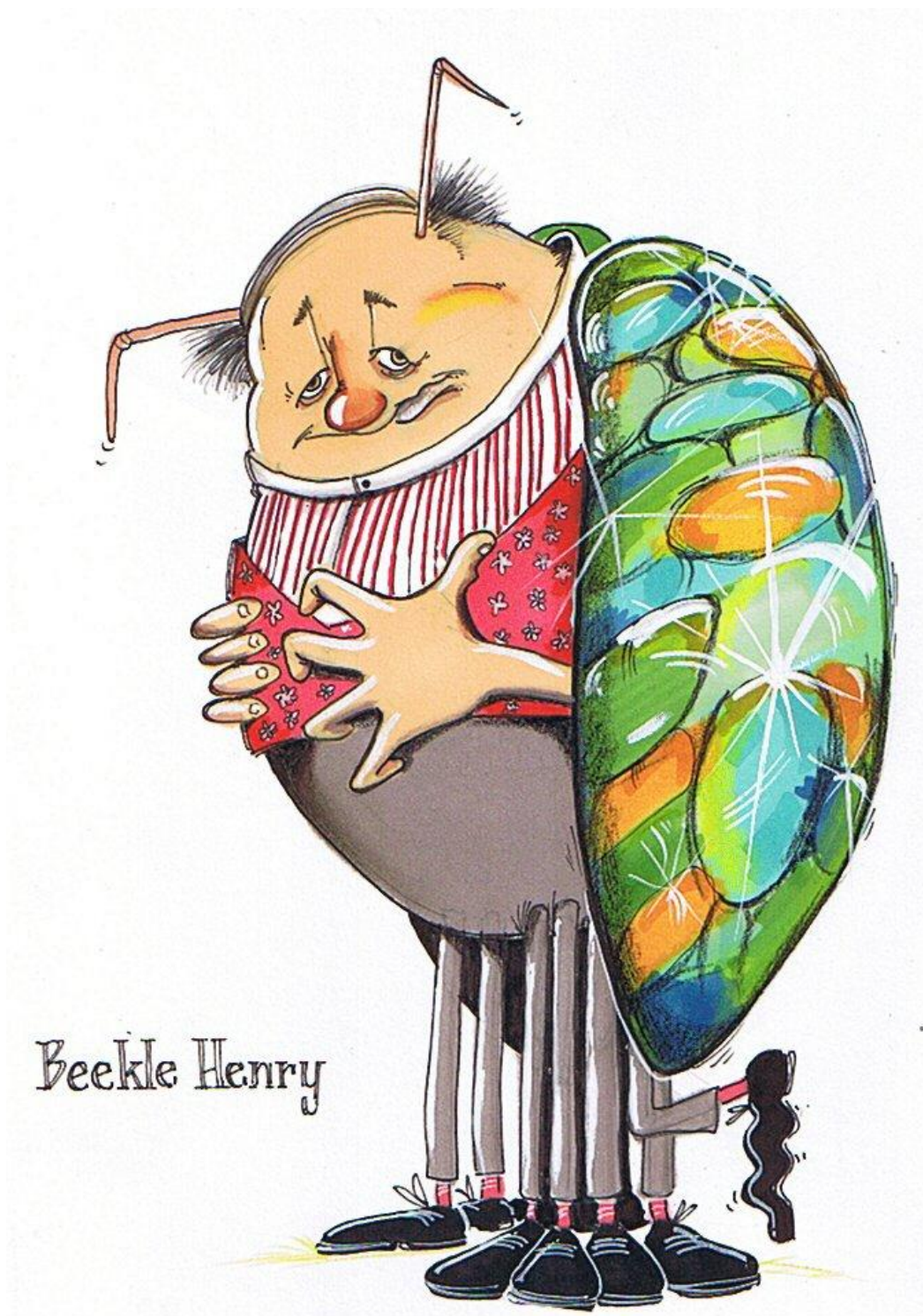


Beekle Henry

By Nick Creech



Illustrations: Eric Lobbecke

Foreword

This book was conceived in desperation. Like many parents I found the notion of telling stories and casting my children as the main characters a useful device to impart knowledge, attitude and possibly even some wisdom. Foolishly, however, I allowed these stories to become an item of barter. Vegetables would be eaten without protest if I would tell a story, baths would be taken without ruinous devastation if I would tell a story, the television would be turned off if I would tell a story. By the time I had plagiarised everyone from Enid Blyton to Herman Melville, not forgetting Shakespeare, Homer and Virgil, I was both a hunted and a haunted man.

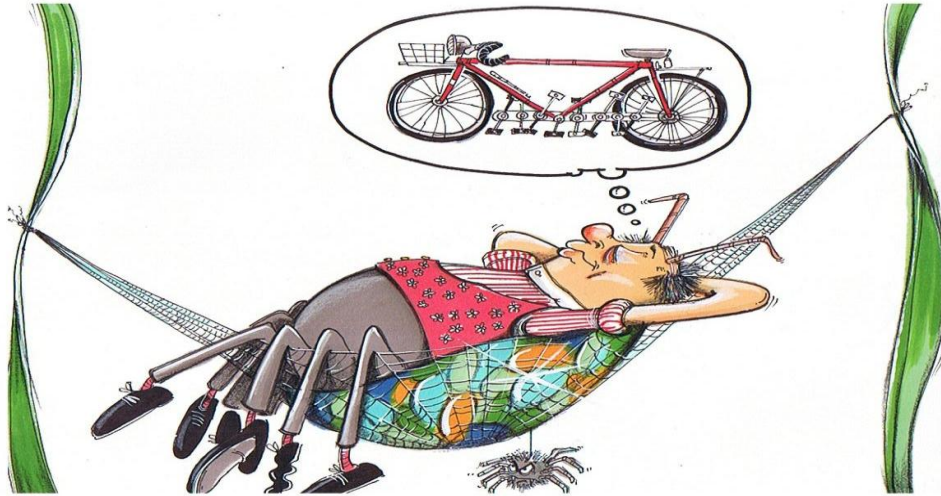
Beekle Henry was the eventual result, stories which no longer featured the boys but which were unapologetically discursive and wide ranging and which, read aloud more as a dialogue than anything, I could add to, explain or edit as I went, depending on mood and time available. They were also stories sufficiently complicated that even though endlessly repeated there was always something apparently fresh and absorbing to be considered.

I have always found that kids, like dogs, are as smart as you expect them to be, so I saw no harm in expecting my two boys to be very smart. They were, as indeed were their friends who somehow seemed to materialise magically whenever Beekle Henry was being read aloud. Later, unbeknownst to me, my younger son then aged seven nicked a copy of the manuscript and took it to school for his teacher to see.

She began to read it to his class and it turned out that the rest of the kids in his group were very smart too. They may not have understood everything I had to say but sufficient was clear for them to maintain their interest right to the end, as in due course and much to my surprise they personally assured me. Many years later, it transpired that Dan's teacher had kept on using that battered, old manuscript as class followed class until finally she left the school. I like to think that although some of the ideas and notions that appear here are indeed difficult and may be beyond the grasp of even the smartest kid, nevertheless

they will have a comfortably familiar ring when they come to be addressed in earnest. Familiarity, after all, must lead to understanding before ever it can lead to contempt.

The King of the Ungle



Beekle Henry was lazing away the morning in his hammock. It was a particularly comfortable hammock made from best spider web slung between two convenient stalks of grass, and Beekle Henry was just the sort of insect to make best use of it. It wasn't that he was lazy exactly, just that he liked to rest a lot. With his eyes closed. Snoring gently.

To Beekle Henry's way of thinking, resting was just about the only activity, with the possible exception of eating, that really befitted his...well, not to put too fine a point on it...his ellipsoid rotundity. Not that Beekle Henry knew what ellipsoid rotundity actually meant. Dear me, no. If ever he wanted to think about ellipsoid rotundity, he would have to ask Slimy to look it up. *Helix Aspersa* that is, but Slimy for short. I'll tell you about him in a minute or two.

Upside down in his hammock, you couldn't really say that Beekle Henry was anything special to look at, just a lot of legs waving in the breeze, with the middle on the left a touch squashed because it could never quite manage to keep in step and was always being walked on by the others. But right way up, Beekle Henry was definitely another matter. He was sort of like a favourite uncle, except that as well as a stripy weskit and pointy shoes and jolly, pink cheeks, Beekle Henry had two of the most splendid, bluey-greeny-

goldy wing cases you've ever seen. They shimmered and shone in the sunlight just like...well, just like magic jewels from the crystal mountain.

And the wing cases even held wings, though to tell the truth Beekle Henry most often forgot to remember that he had them. To tell the absolute strictly truth, Beekle Henry most often remembered to forget to remember, because Beekle Henry didn't much care for flying.

Now you and I might think that being able to fly would be just the most thrilling thing imaginable because we can't do it, not just by ourselves that is, not without an aeroplane or anything. Just think, we say, if only we could fly... Well, Beekle Henry would say:

"Just think, if only I could ride a bike... I say, Slimy. Why don't they make bikes with enough pedals for someone like me? It really is too decidedly aggravating."

Whereupon, Slimy would look peeved because he didn't know what decidedly meant and he would have to dive inside his shell to look it up in the big dictionary; which would make him even crosser because he would find that Beekle Henry had used decidedly all wrong. Deciduous means losing your leaves in autumn and while I dare say this is decidedly aggravating for a tree – I mean just fancy having to sit outside all winter long without any clothes on – deciduous has got nothing whatsoever to do with bicycles.

But by then it would be too late. Slimy would pop out again, terribly indignant because nothing upset him more than the misuse of words, and if Beekle Henry wasn't already asleep again, he would just say:

"Oh silly me. Did I say that? How stupid of me."

What's that? You lot don't know about snails? Oh yes, indeed. They're most frightfully intellectual and that's why they move so slowly. You see, a snail's shell is not just his house. It's something much more important than that. It's also his library. And of course, it's very hard work lugging all those books around all the time.

Now you and I might think that dragging a whole library with us everywhere we go would be the most terrible sweat, but any self-respecting snail would feel absolutely miserable without his books. Books, you see, can tell you just about anything you might want to know and you never can tell when you might want to know something. These days we, ourselves, might chose to use a computer to look up a reference, but for a

computer you need to have electricity, even if only to charge your batteries, and who ever heard of a snail with electricity? Why, if a snail had wires running up to his shell he would never be able to move, now would he?

So Slimy Snail had to rely on his library and it was most comprehensive indeed. And you can see what I mean about you never can tell when you might want to know something. If you had a dictionary, you could look up "comprehensive" in a trice, and you could look up "trice" too while you were about it. But just for now, I'll tell you. "Comprehensive" means just about as wide-ranging as you can get, but trice even though it's a much shorter word is a bit more difficult. If we use it as a noun, it means a very brief time, an instant. So "in a trice" means in a flash. But if we use trice as a verb, it means to haul up, as you would with a rope. Nouns, by the way, are thing words – people, places, objects, ideas and actions – while verbs are doing words. It's quite simple really. We use a verb to do something to a noun, as in stop pinching your brother or I'll stop reading the story.

And while we're talking about words, ellipsoid means oval and rotund in this sense, not to put to fine a point on it or to mince matters or, indeed, to beat around the bush, means round or just plain fat.

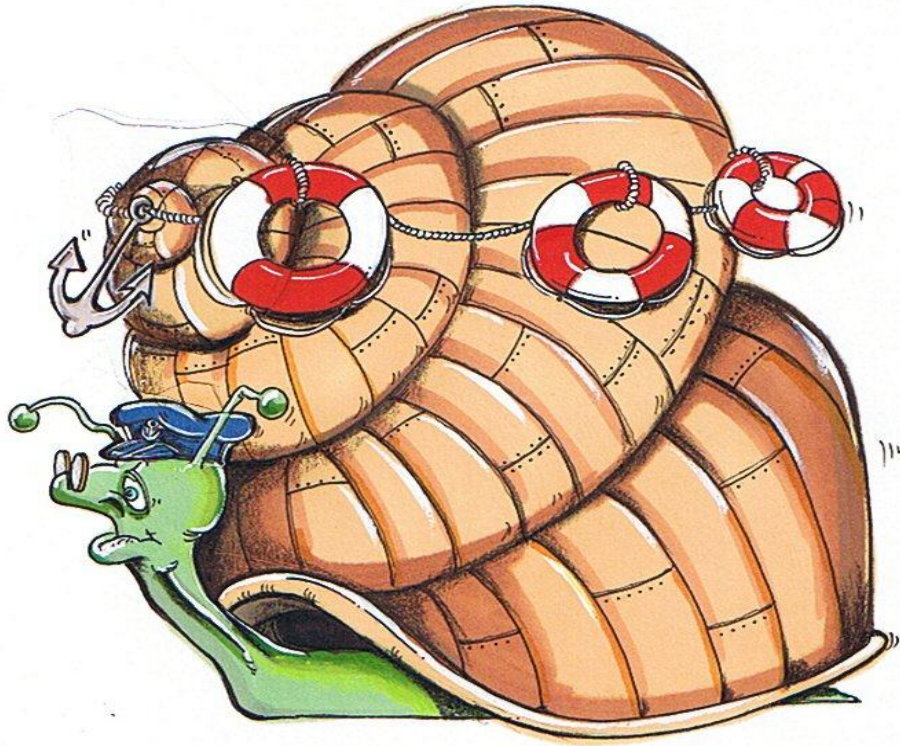
Anyway, as I started to say way back at the beginning, Beekle Henry was napping in his hammock having just fallen asleep in front of a rather interesting cloud show on the sky, when who should heave into view all a puff and a pothor but Slimy Snail.

"Ahoy, Beekle Henry," he shouted. "Beekle Henry! Ahoy there, wake up!"

That by the way is something you should know about Slimy. As well as being intellectual, he rather liked to think that he looked like a ship. Well, I mean you'd rather look like a ship than a snail, wouldn't you? And so, Slimy's conversation at times could be very nautical. As well as ahoying a lot, he was always saying things like starboard me larboard, and steady as she goes, and crack on the royals, Mr Mate. Mates are sort of like mothers on ships. They're always telling you what to do and getting furious if you don't, though I wouldn't advise you to say Mr Mother, oh dear me no.

Beekle Henry opened one eye and then closed it again in a hurry.

"I saw you," Slimy shouted. "I know you're awake. I saw you open an eye. Come on, Beekle Henry, or I'll ram you amidships and splice your mainbrace."



Helix Aspersa
(Slimy)

"I haven't got a mainbrace, whatever that is," Beekle Henry said crossly. "And if you ever ram me again, I'll...I'll...I don't know what I'll do."

Beekle Henry had tried pretending not to wake up before but Slimy had got himself up to ramming speed, ploughed straight into his hammock and upended him on the ground with a most fearful thump. Splicing the mainbrace, by the way, is something you're not supposed to be doing just yet, but as it happens I wouldn't mind splicing mine right about now. Forgive me for a minute...

Right. Where were we. Oh yes...

Slimy, however, wasn't going to be miffed and sent off in a huff by anything as transparent as Beekle Henry pretending to be bad-tempered. His news was much too important for that, though he did think to himself how exactly the right word transparent was, and he gave himself a pat of the back for using it. Transparent, you see, means clear

as glass and that means that Slimy had seen right through Beekle Henry's ploy. And a ploy is when you try to make someone do what they don't want to do by being devious, which means sneaky, which isn't nice at all, and Beekle Henry should have been ashamed of himself.

"Well come on, Slimy," Beekle Henry said. "Now that you're here and you won't go away, what's so exciting. Spit it out."

"Certainly not," Slimy said. "It's particularly rude to spit, particularly to windward. But if you care to form line astern, I have a discovery to show you."

"A what?" Beekle Henry said. "No, no, wait..." But it was too late. Slimy had dived inside his shell and Beekle Henry could hear him muttering as he ruffled through the dictionary.

"D-I...D-I-S...D-I-S-C...D-I-S-C-O...Here we are, discovery... the act of discovering. Bother..."

"Oh do come out, Slimy," Beekle Henry called.

"Just a minute. Just a keel-hauling minute...now let me see...discovery comes from discover and discover is...here. Are you listening? Discover: to be the first to find or find out about. And that's me. I'm the first to find or find out about. Are you quite clear now?"

Beekle Henry was nearly incautious enough to ask what the deuce keel-hauling might be but stopped himself just in time. So we can get on with the story, I'll just tell you quickly. Keel-hauling was a most unpleasant way the navy had of punishing mutineers back in the olden days by hauling them backwards and forwards right under the keel of the ship and probably drowning them. And mutineers are people who don't do what they're told, so if your Mr Mother ever threatens to keel-haul you I would be on my very best behaviour for a very long time, if I were you. A very long time.

After a moment to put away the dictionary, Slimy popped back outside, polishing his pince-nez and putting them carefully back in their case.

Snails find it almost impossible to get pince-nez to fit them so if ever they discover a pair they like they take extraordinarily good care of them. Pince-nez, just by the way, is spelt like this...P-I-N-C-E – N-E-Z... but is not pronounced "pince-nez", as you might think, but "pants neigh", although this doesn't mean they're really horses' trousers. Dear me, no. Pince-nez, that's French for pinch nose, are special spectacles that sit on the end

of your nose without ear-pieces or anything and which make you look terribly superior, even if you don't deserve to; which is why snails are particularly fond of them as it's very difficult to look superior at all when you're a snail.

"Yes, yes, yes," Beekle Henry said by now dancing with impatience, which didn't do the middle foot on the left any good at all. "But what is this discovery? What have you found?"

"Ah," Slimy said. "That would be telling. You'll just have to come and see. And do try to keep proper station and not go racing off like a corvette."

"What's a...?" Beekle Henry started to say and then hastily changed his mind. "No, never mind. Come on, old Slimy. Do hurry up."

Of course, Beekle Henry was going to ask about corvettes and just in case you ever need to know and don't have a dictionary handy, I'll tell you. A corvette is a fast, cheeky sort of escort ship that goes racing about all over the place like a hunting dog and just as a dog hates waiting for his humans to catch up, corvette captains always hate waiting about for the bigger, slower ships.

And so, off went Beekle Henry and Slimy Snail, Slimy moving even slower than usual because he hadn't forgotten Beekle Henry's ploy of a little while ago and was going to get his own back with a ploy of his own. Which just goes to show that it only takes one person to be a bit mean for bad feeling to start bouncing about all over the place like a cricket ball gone crazy – and if you've ever been hit by a cricket ball you'll know that it hurts like anything. It's really much better for everybody if everybody tries hard never to be mean in the first place.

"Well," Slimy Snail said at last, after they'd travelled at least a metre. "There it is. My discovery."

"My goodness," Beekle Henry said, and then: "Gracious." And then: "Strawdinery." And then: "It really is a discovery." And then: "But what it is it?"

Strawdinery, just by the way, is not as you might think short for it's extraordinary. Dear me, no. That's what comes from saying words too quickly. Strawdinery is quite different to s'traordinary. A straw dinery is where you get Beekle Henry's favourite food, that extra-special, aged-in-the-wood, southern aspect, late-picked straw, all buttery golden and quite delicious. And because when he wasn't resting or thinking about resting,

Beekle Henry much preferred to be eating or thinking about eating, it wasn't really surprising that strawdinery should pop into his mind when he really meant s'traordinary.

"What is it?" Beekle Henry said again.

Slimy Snail looked down his nose. "It's a plant," he said.

"Well, of course," Beekle Henry replied, a touch tartly. And tartly is an interesting word. A jam tart is sweet but a tart lemon is sour. Just at that moment, however, Slimy was much too busy to advise you as to which might be which so I think you'll have to work out for yourselves just what we mean here. And we do that by using what we call context. There are lots of words that have more than one meaning and the way to decide which possible meaning to use is by thinking which meaning best fits the rest of the sentence. So if you were to guess that Beekle Henry was being sweet, you would be quite wrong.

"Anyone can see it's a plant," Beekle Henry went on. "But what sort of plant?"

"Hmmm," Slimy said. "Well, actually, I haven't quite got around to looking it up. I thought we might see if it was good to eat first. Because I haven't had my lunch. And I thought you might care to join me."

There was sort of a snuffly squeak, an indignant snuffly squeak...

"Pardon. What did you say?" Beekle Henry and Slimy exclaimed together. And then they both said: "Nothing. I thought you..."

They looked at each other and then they looked all around but they couldn't see anyone else there. They looked at each other again. Then they shrugged.

"Well," Beekle Henry said. "I'm sure I don't know what all that was about, but never mind. I'll be delighted to join you for lunch, Slimy, old chap. Why don't you try this bit here. It looks jolly juicy – almost as good as buttery, golden straw."

"Ugh," Slimy said. "I don't know how you can eat that straw stuff. But yes, you're right. This does look especially succulent. However, old chap, as you're my guest, I insist. You first."

"Well, don't mind if I do," Beekle Henry said. But this time there wasn't just an indignant squeak, there was a most ferocious roar. Beekle Henry and Slimy were both stunned, so stunned that Slimy didn't even pop straight back into his shell, which is what any sensible snail would have done.

"Gracious," Beekle Henry said eventually. "What on earth did you want to make a noise like that for, Slimy?"

"But-but-but-but..." Slimy said.

"It's quite enough to put a chap off his lunch," Beekle Henry added.

Whereupon there was another great roar. Then a furious voice that somehow seemed to be floating in mid-air said:

"If I hear any more talk about juicy or succulent or lunch, if I hear one more word about eating, there's going to be real trouble. Is that clear? I mean, is that quite clear?"

There was a long silence, then Beekle Henry at last plucked up his courage.

"Who said that?" he asked in a very small voice.

"I did," came the stern reply.

"But who are you?" Beekle Henry asked. "Where are you?"

"I," said the terrible voice. "I am Dan de Lion. King of the Jungle. And I'm up here, dolt."

Beekle Henry and Slimy Snail looked at each other.

"Shall we run away?" Beekle Henry whispered. Then he remembered. "Sorry, old chap," he said. "Stupid of me. Can't exactly run, can you? Better face the music then. One, two..." And I need to interrupt just here to tell you that this was really very brave of Beekle Henry. He could have fled but he chose to stay with Slimy, who couldn't. That's when you really know who your friends are, when they chose to stay and support you, despite the risk to themselves.

"...Three," Beekle Henry said, and on three, they both looked up.

What they saw, if they hadn't been so frightened, was really quite funny: a bright yellow flower on a long green stem, frowning so ferociously that all its petals looked like sergeant-majors. And if you know anything about sergeant-majors, you'll know just how ferocious and funny that is. Think of your mother extremely cross and with bristly whiskers and you'll begin to get the idea. Or think of the expression on my face when I put my foot in my slipper and found the chewing gum you were thoughtfully keeping for later.



In the end, frightened though they were, Beekle Henry and Slimy Snail just couldn't help it. They both began to laugh. And the more they laughed, the more furious Dan de Lion became.

"When you've quite finished," he said icily. "When you've quite had your little joke, whatever that might be..." And of course, that set Beekle Henry and Slimy laughing even harder.

At last Beekle Henry wiped his eyes with his blue-spotted handkerchief (beetles never use red-spotted handkerchiefs out of respect for lady bugs) and said:

"Well I never. What on earth do you make of this, Slimy, old chap. A talking plant if ever I heard one, and whoever heard of a talking plant? And what's a jungle, anyway?"

"Hmmm," Slimy said. "Lunch, that's what I make of it, talking or no talking. And I don't much care what a jungle is until I've had it. Lunch that is."

Dan de Lion roared again, this time even louder than before, and Beekle Henry and Slimy both got such a shock that they quite flipped over backwards. And then they really were in trouble – serious trouble – just as Dan de Lion had promised.

"Oh no," Beekle Henry said after a moment of shock. "I can't get up."

"Oh double no," Slimy said. "Oh double no and discombotheration. Just look what you've done, you stupid... you stupid flower." Discombotheration, by the way, is a word Slimy made up all by himself and which he saves for moments when, like now, he is absolutely discombobulated.

"I warned you," Dan de Lion said. "Oh yes, I warned you. I told you that one more word about eating and you'd be for it. But you wouldn't listen, would you. You were going to eat me you were, and it serves you jolly well right."

And Beekle Henry and Slimy Snail truly were in dreadul strife. For you see, there was Beekle Henry flat on his back and there was Slimy flat on his side, and neither of them could get up.

Beekle Henry didn't mind being flat on his back in his hammock, snoring gently – I mean it was absolutely his favourite position in all the world – but being flat on his back on the ground was quite a different matter. You can't tippy down the side of the ground and just roll neatly over the edge and onto your feet, now can you?

And as for poor old Slimy, well... If he'd been quicker and not so comprehensively discombobulated then he might have managed to do a complete back somersault and land on his foot again. As it was, he had faltered in mid flip and after teetering first one way and then the other, he had fallen over on his left side or his right, depending on whether you were looking from the back or the front.

And that means you aren't any the wiser at all, which is why sailors invented port and starboard because port and starboard are the same whichever way you face. I suppose you should really look this up for yourselves but so that we can get on with the story quickly, I'll tell you. When you're on a boat and facing the bow, which is the sharp end at the front, the port side is on your left and the starboard side is on your right. And when you're

looking at the stern, which is the back end, the starboard side is on your left and the port side is on your right. Got it? I should have a little practice, if I were you.

And just so that you know that I know, back in the olden days port was actually called larboard but because larboard could so easily be confused with starboard when shouting over the wind and the rain and the pounding waves and because so many ships were accidentally wrecked what with the confusion and all, seamen finally agreed that it was vital they think of a different word. Then one foul night when a captain shouted to his helmsman to turn to larboard and the helmsman misheard and turned to starboard, and the ship's boy seeing the rocks now rapidly approaching whimpered, "I wish I were safe back in port," port it became and because the port side was where they always loaded the cargo in port, port it stayed.

And just so that you really know that I know, back in the days before rudders were invented ships used steering oars or boards. Over time, the steerboard side became shortened down to starboard, while fear of damaging the steering oar itself was the reason ship's always docked port-side to.

So now, when I tell you that Slimy was lying on his starboard side, everything should be absolutely and precisely clear. It was certainly clear that Beekle Henry and Slimy were in a very pretty pickle indeed. Even Dan de Lion didn't realise just how parlous their position was.

Parlous is a particularly good word and Slimy tells me that he wishes he'd thought to use it, so I really think you should look that one up for yourselves, but just quickly, parlous means perilous or dangerous.

What Dan de Lion did was to cross two of his leaves – just like your mother crosses her arms when she's telling you lot for the fourteenth time to go and brush your teeth – and then he said:

"All right, you two milksops. You can get up now."

"What's a milksop?" Beekle Henry asked, but Slimy interrupted.

"We can't get up," he said bitterly. "That's just it. We shall very probably starve to death, and all because of your big mouth, you... you... flower."

"I like that," Dan de Lion retorted. "Whose big mouth did you say? Who was going to eat me for lunch might I ask?"

"But what's a milksop?" Beekle Henry asked again.

"I don't know and what's more, I don't care," Slimy said, which just goes to show how overcome and upset he was, not caring about a new word, so I suppose I'll have to tell you myself. Milksops are pieces of bread soaked or sopped in milk, which people used to eat quite a lot. These days, however, milksop has come to mean a very weak sissy, the sort of person who would eat bread soaked in milk.

"What do you mean you can't get up?" Dan de Lion demanded. "Of course you can get up."

"We can't," Slimy said. "Everyone knows that if a beetle gets turned on his back he can't get up, he just buzzes around helpless, till he dies of instant starvation. And there's a rock just where it didn't ought to be and I can't touch ground, and I can't touch anything, and I absolutely can't move and furthermore I am also instantly starving to death." And that probably explains why Slimy had slipped into all that bad grammar. Didn't ought to be, indeed.

"Are you sure you can't get up?" Dan de Lion said to Beekle Henry.

"Well actually," Beekle Henry said politely. "I'm really quite comfortable, thank you. And I don't really want to get up anyway. This is not the same as my hammock, of course, but it's really quite adequate."

"And that means he positively, absolutely can't get up," Slimy said, getting crosser and crosser. "And what sort of a king goes roaring around like that at perfectly innocent creatures and getting them stuck so they starve to death?"

"I told you," Dan de Lion said with frosty dignity. "I am Dan de Lion and as even you should know, a lion is king of the jungle."

"Jungle!" Slimy snapped. "Jungle? What's this jungle thing anyway? I don't believe there's any such word. It sounds most peculiar to me. Most peculiar. I don't believe there's any such thing at all." Whereupon Slimy disappeared into his library, never mind that all the books had been tossed here, there and everywhere and were in a simply disgraceful state, and they could hear him muttering inside.

"Now let me see...Juncaceous. Goodness, what ever is that? Well I never... Junction... June... Jungian... Here we are, jungle... Harrumph! Just as I thought. Are

you listening out there, you imposter? Jungle: an equatorial forest with luxuriant vegetation, often almost impenetrable..."

"Goodness," Beekle Henry interrupted, opening one eye. "What's all that in plain language, Slimy old chap?"

"Not here," Slimy said. "That's what it means in plain language. Not here. This is a field, a meadow, a pasture. And if this is a field then it can't be a jungle and that means you can't be a king either," he added, popping back out of his shell and pointing an accusing antenna at Dan de Lion.

"You're an imposter," he shouted. "Just like I said. You're an imposter."

"I am not an imposter, whatever that is," Dan de Lion said angrily, all his petals looking like sergeant-majors again. "And I was going to help you up, but I certainly shan't now unless you stop calling me names."

"But you are an imposter so how can we stop calling you one?" Slimy demanded, equally angry.

"Then you'll just have to stay there and starve to death," Dan de Lion retorted. "I know I'm not an imposter and I'm not going to help you up until you stop calling me one. I am Dan de Lion, King of the Jungle, and that's that." An imposter, just in case you haven't realised, is someone pretending to be someone he isn't.

Well, now Beekle Henry and Slimy really were in the soup, or caught in a pickle as we might say. And if you've ever had to eat pickled soup, then you have my very deep sympathy. And do you lot know what this sort of situation is called? It's called an impasse, or a deadlock, or a stalemate. But I like impasse best, and an impasse is when both sides think they're right and no one is ever going to change his or her mind.

Impasses are really very difficult things and cause a fearful lot of trouble. Every impasse is different so all I can really tell you about them is this: Whenever you find yourself at an impasse you should ask yourself whether you're telling the absolute strictly truth, and if you're not then you shouldn't be at an impasse in the first place. You'll just have to be brave enough to admit that you're wrong, and the sooner the better because the longer you leave it the harder it will be.

You might ask why you should tell the absolute strictly truth when we know that lots of other people tell lies all the time. Well, the reason is very simple. If you tell lies then

sooner or later you'll be found out and then nobody will ever believe that you're telling the truth ever again and just think how enormously frustrating that would be.

Why, suppose your house was burning down and you rang the fire brigade but nobody would come. "Oh, I know him," somebody would say. "He's a liar. I bet his house isn't really on fire at all. He just wants to cause trouble."

Or just suppose a cricket ball happens to break one of the school windows and some sneak tells a teacher that you did it to shift the blame away from himself. Well, you'd be for it, wouldn't you? And most unfairly too. Except, perhaps, when you said: "But please, it really wasn't me." Then the teacher could say. "Well, as you've always told the truth in the past I'll believe you this time, too. We'll call it an accident."

And phew, what a relief! But no more than you'd earned by being honest.

Still, none of that could get Beekle Henry and Slimy out of their impasse. Absolutely frightfully difficult things they are and sometimes there is just no solution at all, because if you're sure that you're right – absolutely, positively sure – you should never give in. If you do, then people will think you've been lying all the time, even though you haven't been. Giving in, in fact, becomes the lie, if you see what I mean, and I do hope you do because it's important.

So, if you can't give in and the other person can't give in, what can you do? Well, there's only one thing really and that's called negotiation. And negotiation means that you explore possibilities to see if you can't come to what's called a satisfactory compromise. I'll show you what I mean. Suppose that you're absolutely sure that you're right, and your friend is absolutely sure that she's right. Well then, instead of you saying, "You're a silly old bag-your-head," and her saying, "Why don't you go jump in a prickly bush?" you both could say, "Just supposing that we're both right, or that we're both wrong, what would happen then?"

Anyway, back to the impasse in the meadow. There was Slimy quite sure he was right and starving to death for the principle of the thing, and there was Dan de Lion quite sure he was right and not about to give into anyone, and there was Beekle Henry, just resting, with his eyes closed, snoring gently. Slimy had actually ducked back into his library to pass the time while he was dying of starvation by reading the encyclopaedia, but at last he got so hungry that he couldn't concentrate, even on something as interesting as

protozoa. Protozoa, by the way, are tiny organisms, mostly so small that you can't see them, and an organism is a living or animate thing, as opposed to an inanimate object, which is not, living that is.

"Hey! Ahoy! Beekle Henry!" Slimy called. "What are we going to do? I really am starving to death."

"What?" Beekle Henry said, rather grumpy at being woken up from a nap for the second time that day.

"I said, what are we going to do?"

"Sensible creatures always take every opportunity to rest," Beekle Henry said, and closed his eyes again.

"I can't rest," Slimy said plaintively. "I'm starving. We haven't had any lunch and breakfast was ages and ages ago – so long I can't even remember it."

"Well, you could always give in and call him King of the Jungle," Beekle Henry said.

"But he's not," Slimy protested. "And I'm shocked at you for suggesting it, Beekle Henry. It's a matter of principle and you ought to know better."

"He might be," Beekle Henry said.

"Rubbish," Slimy snapped. "This isn't a jungle so he can't be a king."

"But he might be king of a jungle somewhere else," Beekle Henry said quietly.

"Oh!" Slimy said. "Oh!" he said again. "I hadn't thought of that."

And that just goes to show that you have to be very careful that you have thought of everything before you go and get yourself into an impasse and have to starve to death for a principle.

"Well, are you?" Slimy said at last to Dan de Lion. "Are you king of a jungle somewhere else?"

"I live here," Dan de Lion said. "I have always lived here. I will always live here. Plants aren't like snails, you know. We can't go gadding about all over the world eating anything we fancy. No. I'm not king of a jungle somewhere else. I'm King of the Jungle here."

"There you are," Slimy said to Beekle Henry. "Just as I said. This isn't a jungle so he can't be a king."

"Really Slimy," Beekle Henry said with some irritation. "You're interrupting my resting. Why don't we call him King of the Meadow?"

"But he's not that either," Slimy said.

"Well, he says he's a king," Beekle Henry said. "And I don't see why he can't be king of something. He looks the type. And he especially sounds the type, always roaring at people. That's what kings do, isn't it?"

"I don't care," Slimy said. "I know he can't be King of the Jungle, and I know he's not King of the Meadow or we would have heard about it."

"Well then, perhaps he's King of the Ungle," Beekle Henry said.

"Ungle? Ungle? What's this ungle?" Slimy said. "Just a minute. Just a leaf-munching minute. I want to look this up...?"

"But Slimy couldn't find "ungle" anywhere, not in the dictionary, nor the encyclopaedia, nor even in the Oxford Companion to English Literature, which is a very important book indeed.

"Ungles do not exist," Slimy said after a very long time during which Beekle Henry had thankfully dozed off again. "Ungles positively, absolutely, definitively do not exist."

"There you are then," Beekle Henry said. "That must be what he's king of. It stands to reason." Slimy looked doubtful but there really wasn't any arguing with that sort of logic.

"What do you think?" Beekle Henry asked Dan de Lion with careful politeness.

"Would it be all right if you were King of the Ungle?"

"Hmmm," Dan de Lion said slowly. "I don't suppose one letter makes very much difference. All right, yes, I'll be King of the Ungle."

"Is that agreed then, Slimy?" Beekled Henry asked him in turn.

"Oh, all right," Slimy said with rather bad grace for someone who was still starving to death. "It doesn't seem quite right somehow, but very well, I agree."

Whereupon Dan de Lion swooped down on his stalk and neat as you please inserted a delicate petal under Beekle Henry and flipped him right way up, and then he did the same thing for Slimy Snail.

So there you are. The impasse became what's called a compromise, and if it doesn't seem quite right to you either then just remember that most often life itself isn't quite

right or fair or even what it seems, and we can only try to do our best, and never to do less than our best.

Meanwhile, this compromise did save Beekle Henry and Slimy from starving to death and it also saved Dan de Lion, King of the Ungle, from a most severe case of hurt feelings.

And just one more thing. If you ever find a beetle buzzing around, helpless on his back or a snail tipped on his side with his foot all wavy in the breeze, then I require you, very gently, to turn them right way up. And if your feeling particularly helpful, you might offer to assist the snail put all the fallen books back on the shelves of his library.

'Umble Bumble

Beekle Henry, Slimy Snail and Dan de Lion quickly became fast friends. Now don't go putting your foot in it by asking how they could quickly become slow friends. Fast does not always mean quick, especially when you're talking about poor, old Slimy. Sailormen, and sailorsnails for that matter, like to say "make that line fast" when what they actually mean is "tie that rope up". So you can see what fast really means in this sense: friends tied firmly together like mountaineers roped up on a climb. And this is a very good way to think of being friends; if one slips the others will catch him and won't let him fall.

You might also like to ask why sailors, whether snails or men, would say "make that line fast" when it makes no sense to anyone but a sailor. And that is actually, precisely the reason they do it. You will find as you grow older that every group has its own special language, or dialect, or jargon as we say, and that if you want to be part of that group then you will have to learn the jargon. It's sort of like wearing a secret uniform. If you don't know the jargon then you're not wearing the uniform and the group will ignore you.

But back to the story which you haven't even let me begin yet. Beekle Henry, with great effort, much huffing and puffing and altogether far too many helpful directions from Slimy, actually went so far as to unsling his hammock and set it up again right next to Dan de Lion. His new address should you ever want to write to him, was The Third Tussock of Grass north-east as the crow flies from the end of the old trough in the South 40. As the crow flies, incidentally, just means in a straight line and I expect I don't need to explain why, but who knows what north-east means? Thought so.

Well, it's a way we have of giving directions. The sun, you might have noticed, always rises in more or less the same place and we call that the east. Also, it always sets in more or less the same place and we call that the west. Now, if you stand with east exactly to your right and west exactly to your left, we call the direction you're now facing north, and if you stand with west exactly to your right and east exactly to your left then you're facing south. We call these directions, north, south, east and west, the four cardinal points. So once you know that, it's not very hard to work out that north-east must be half way

between north and east and exactly the opposite of south-west, which, of course, is half way between south and west. And what do you think half way between west and north would be called? And half way between east and south? Very good, but I know that one of you smarties is going to say but what if it's a cloudy day and you can't see the sun? What then? We'd all be lost.

Well, you might be, but I have a compass and my compass always tells me where north is, which you might think is magic but actually is magnetism.

Back in the olden days if you sailed a boat out of sight of land and if it was cloudy and you couldn't see the sun or the stars, you would have no idea which way to go to get safely back to harbour. You might sail in circles, for all you could tell, until you starved to death or died of thirst, which happened to more sailors than Slimy likes to think about. Then someone in China noticed that a particular sort of rock, often called lodestone, always pointed in the same direction if it was suspended on a thread, say, and allowed to swing freely. And so the compass was invented. Nowadays, of course, compasses are much more sophisticated and we understand that the lodestone isn't really magic rock but simply magnetised rock which means it always points to the magnetic north pole, which is near enough to the real north pole not to matter. And the real north pole, just so that you know, is that point on the surface of the earth where whichever direction you choose to go, you are heading south, just as at the south pole in whichever direction you choose to go, you are heading north. Think of an orange. That dimple where the stem used to be is the north pole and so you can see that from there the only possible way to go is south until you reach the little black bit at the bottom, from where the only direction you can go is north.

You might wonder why we don't have an east pole or a west pole, and this is because our planet, Earth, is actually spinning towards the east all the time, just like a wheel on an axle. One end of that axle, or as we would say in this case, one end of that axis is the north pole and the other end the south pole. And once we understand this, I can tell you that the sun doesn't really rise or set at all. It's not moving. We are, just like we were sitting on a merry-go-round passing the fairy-floss stall every time we go around.

Slimy says that as an experiment and just to prove that we know what we're talking about you might like to make your own compass some time. It's quite easy. Ask your

mother for a needle, being most careful not to prick yourself which is what Slimy usually manages to do, and then we also need a magnet – there's one in the bottom drawer of the tool cupboard. Now, what we have to do is magnetise the needle and we do this by stroking it over and over again with one end of the magnet, it doesn't matter which, in the same direction, always the same direction. You can test when the needle is magnetised by touching it with a screw-driver or something made of iron or steel, but not stainless steel. When the needle sticks to your screwdriver like...like magic, we're ready.

We now need a dish full of water and a small piece of paper slightly bigger than the needle. What we have to do is use the paper to float the needle very carefully on the surface of the water. Then when the paper becomes saturated it will sink, leaving the needle floating by itself. And guess what will happen now? The needle will swing round until it is pointing north and however you turn the dish, the needle will always point in the same direction. So there you are. You've made a compass and congratulations because now you need never be lost at sea and starve to death again, which as you might imagine is a huge relief to Slimy at least.

While we're on the subject you might want to ask why the needle being steel doesn't sink when the paper, being paper, does. The answer is that the paper sinks when all the air has been forced out of it by the water working its way in and saturating it, leaving the needle to be held up by what's called the surface tension of the water, which is another way of saying the tendency the water has to hold together. And it is this property which allows creatures like water bugs to walk over the top of a pond without sinking or having to swim; more magic that has a perfectly simple explanation.

Anyway, enough of all that. Beekle Henry's new address was a particularly salubrious location, and if Slimy had to look up "salubrious" so that I could spell it correctly I think it only fair that you lot should look it up to see what it means, but as you've been interrupting so much and we're way behind I'll tell you quickly so that we can get on with the story. "Salubrious" means encouraging good health, wholesome or just plain nice. And indeed, the view from Beekle Henry's new home stretched all the way to the creek and the trees beyond and the vista was indeed extremely pleasant. The trees beyond, you should understand, was a very long way indeed for someone of Beekle Henry's ellipsoid

rotundity and for someone who moved as slowly as Slimy, it was just about the end of the world. Everything is relative, you see, to everything else.

You and I would think nothing of walking to the trees beyond, but we'd probably balk a bit at walking to the mountains beyond the trees. A horse, on the other hand, would gallop over the mountains without even stopping to pack some oats for lunch but when the horse came to the ocean beyond the mountains beyond the trees beyond the creek then that would be a different kettle of fish, if you see what I mean. Relatively speaking, horses are not particularly good swimmers; but then again, fish are absolutely terrible gallopers and they don't like wearing saddles one little bit, I can assure you.

Relativity is, in fact, so interesting that a very great man by the name of Albert Einstein had two of the best ideas of all time as a result of thinking very hard about it. These are the Special Theory of Relativity and the General Theory of Relativity, which are about time and gravity and light and space. Now we all know what time and light and space are, or we think we do, but who knows what gravity is? That's right. If you take a running jump what brings you crashing back to earth is the force we call gravity, or weight, and what we're actually doing when we weigh something is to measure its gravity, and gravity is the force that pulls things together. The heavier something is, or to put it another way the more mass something has, then the more it pulls other things towards it.

Think about two little specks of dust up there in space in the middle of nowhere in the middle of nothing. Know what those two little specks of dust are doing? They're pulling each other together, and when they join up they'll start pulling more specks of dust towards themselves, and then more, and then more until eventually you might end up with a planet like this one, the one we live on, which has so much mass that when we jump up in the air instead of pulling the planet up to us, it brings us crashing back down to it.

When Albert Einstein was quite a young man, much younger than me and not much older than you which just goes to show that it's never too early to start thinking, he predicted amongst other things, and it turned out to be true, that gravity actually bends light, which means that space is curved and that time is really not what we might think it is at all. And Einstein also formulated the very important equation, $E=MC^2$, by which he

meant energy equals mass multiplied by the speed of light multiplied by the speed of light. This is all probably a little difficult to explain to you right now but tuck it away in the back of your minds for when you're a bit older. It's all quite fascinating to think about and thinking, as Slimy often says, is even more fun than eating. These ideas of Einstein's are called theories incidentally because they haven't altogether been proved to be true and maybe they won't turn out to be entirely correct. However, that doesn't make them any the less valuable. Dear me, no.

You see, even if the ideas prove to be mistaken Einstein has still saved everybody else the trouble of of having to think of them, which means they can spend their time looking in different directions. Ideas, in fact, are just about the best things of all, but with certain exceptions of course. If I ever find out who had the idea of putting a squirt of shaving cream on my toothbrush all ready for me to clean my teeth ... well they'd better look out, that's all, because they'll find themselves very relatively uncomfortable about the posterior. Another new word? Well you try sitting down on it when you've just been spanked.

By the way, did you make a note of Beekle Henry's address? I should if I were you. Notes can be very useful when you're trying to remember something and I bet you've forgotten where he lives already. Dan de Lion's address was more or less the same as Beekle Henry's, so you can make a note of that too, but Slimy was another matter.

Up to now he had lived wherever he happened to find himself, which is what comes of humping your shell wherever you go. And while you might think it's a nice idea to have a warm bed-sock and a hot cup of chocolate and a good book right there whenever you might want them, lugging everything about wherever you go is an awfully tiring business, I can assure you. It tends to explain why snails prefer modest establishments.

Most of them find a simple residence – or schooner in Slimy's case – with all mod cons and, say, a sauna and a billiard room with, of course, the all-important library quite enough to cope with. Mod whats? Modern conveniences like kitchens and bathrooms. And a sauna? Oh yes, indeed. Snails regard saunas as pretty much essential for working up a good slime and they much prefer billiards to darts for obvious reasons. Well, you wouldn't play darts inside yourself, now would you?

And who can tell me what a schooner is? Well, a schooner has two or more masts, unlike a sloop which only has one, and if all the masts aren't the same height then the one nearest the stern is always the biggest. Ketches and yawls have two masts too, but the one nearest the stern is always the smallest. Slimy says I also have to tell you the difference between a yawl and a ketch but I often find it very difficult to tell myself, so I wouldn't worry about it too much. If you really want to know, you'll have to look it up for yourselves.

All this tends to explain why Slimy was now more or less content to settle down more or less permanently under one of Dan de Lion's leaves. And a very pleasant arrangement this was though Beekle Henry did get rather tired of Dan de Lion's humming which he liked to do by moving his petals just so whenever there was any breeze, rather like a conductor who is also his own orchestra. And Dan de Lion did often find himself rather put out that Beekle Henry always seemed to be asleep whenever he felt like a nice chat. And both of them got very tired indeed of Slimy forever correcting their grammar. Slimy, for his part, naturally found this a very painful duty and was usually furious with the two of them because of it. All of which just goes to show that nobody's perfect, and even if they were we would most certainly hold that against them too.

One bright morning early in summer, Beekle Henry was having a deliciously sinful nap just in case he hadn't had enough sleep the night before, Dan de Lion was humming in a key of C angry, and Slimy was busy shooting the sun with his sextant.

What's that? Dear me, no. Of course Slimy wasn't trying to knock the sun out of the sky. We say shooting the sun when someone is using a sextant to measure its altitude or angle to the horizon, and once we know that then we can calculate our position anywhere on earth. As it happened, Slimy was worried that he was about to hit a reef in the cannibal islands or, at the very least, run into a fleet of pirates.

Anyway, one bright morning as I said, they were all very busy in their various ways when suddenly a dreadful hubbuz rent the air. You might think I mean hubbub – which is lots of loud shouting and carry-on exactly the same as when your teacher is silly enough to leave the classroom for a minute – but I don't. I mean hubbuz.

"What's that racket," Slimy said indignantly. "Tell it to pipe down or I'll reef the mizzen."

"And then it will be mizzen in action," Beekle Henry said, opening one eye. And that's such a dreadul pun I don't know if I can begin to explain it. It's so bad I think I need a stiff whisky to recover. Forgive me a moment...

Right. A pun is when you make a word say something quite different to its usual meaning and Beekle Henry had made "mizzen", which is a particular sort of sail, mean "missing" and of course, he thought he was being fearfully clever. Punsters always do.

"Shhh," Dan de Lion whispered anxiously. "Don't frighten him."

"How can you frighten a noise like that?" Beekle Henry wanted to know but Dan de Lion ignored him, and very rudely too, to Beekle Henry's way of thinking. Dan de Lion, however, was totally absorbed in watching the sky and then sighed in anticipation as a large bumble bee circled overhead, landed on his face and began to search for nectar.

"Oi!" Beekle Henry shouted, and at the same moment, Slimy bellowed:

"All hands repel boarders! Pitlasses and custols, me lads, and have at him!"

Of course, what he really meant was "pistols and cutlasses" but he had got his words all muddled up in the excitement and when that happens, it's called a spoonerism after a silly old man by the name of William Archibald Spooner who used to eat his food with fives and knorks. A really good spoonerism turns two proper words into two different but equally proper words. For instance, suppose I meant to say Mum and Dad but what came out was Dumb and Mad ... Oh dear me. Just as well it was me who said that and not you. My best advice is to stay well away from Spoonerisms or you could end up talking a rot of lubbish.

Cutlasses, incidentally, are a special sort of curved sword developed for fighting on board ship.

"Oi!" Beekle Henry shouted again.

"Oh do be quiet," Dan de Lion said crossly, but it was too late. The bumble bee started with surprise and shot up into the air.

"Oh excuse me, your worship," he said. "I'm ever so sorry."

"Come back," Dan de Lion said. "Please come back."

"Don't you dare," Slimy roared. "You leave our friend alone."

"Yes sir," the bee said. "Of course, sir. Right away sir."

"Oh do shut up," Dan de Lion shouted at Beekle Henry and Slimy in an agony of frustration and then he said to the bee, speaking in a wheedling sort of voice:

"Please pay no attention to them. It's none of their business and they don't know what they're talking about. Now do come back, please."

"Just a minute here," Beekle Henry said. "Do we understand this correctly? You actually want this... this..."

"This great black-and-yellow-striped buccaneer boarding your face?" Slimy butted in.

"Of course, I do," Dan de Lion roared. "You silly great insects..."

"I am not an insect," Slimy snapped with offended dignity.

"Aren't you?" Beekle Henry said, surprised. "Then what are you?"

"P-please," the bee said. "While we're all asking questions and if you don't mind... of course, if you do, say no more... but what's a buccaneer? I've never been called anything so grand before."

"A thieving pirate, that's what," Slimy said. "A thieving pirate up to no good. And for everybody's information I am most certainly not an insect, I am a gastropod mollusc. And that means," he added importantly, "That my stomach's on my foot."

"My dear fellow," Beekle Henry said. "How most unfortunate for you. I shouldn't talk about it if I were you."

Whereupon Slimy was so insulted that he couldn't speak, only splutter. He even forgot himself so much that he actually tried to stamp his foot which for a snail is a remarkably stupid thing to do. He teetered very dangerously, fizzing like a kettle all the while, and the bee drew back in alarm.

Teetering, incidentally, is a wonderful word because the sound of it gives you a very good idea of what it means, which is: swaying and tilting in imminent danger of falling over. And when a word sounds like what it means we call that onomatopoeia. Buzz, for instance, is a very good example. And imminent, in case you don't know, means very close to happening – sort of one back from immediate.

"Now look here," Dan de Lion said, seizing the moment and speaking in his most regal voice. "This bee and I have important business to transact. Absolutely vital business. And I will thank you two to keep quiet and not to interfere. Now bee, what's your name."



Humble Bumble

"Er, Bumble, sir" the bee said. "They call me 'Umble Bumble, if it please your worship."

"Majesty," Beekle Henry said helpfully. "This is Dan de Lion, King of the Ungle, correctly addressed as Your Royal Majesty."

"Gracious," said the bee. "Please forgive me, Your Most Worshipful Royal Majesty. I 'ad no idea. I've never met a king before."

"That's all right, Bumble," Dan de Lion said grandly. "Now kindly get on about your business."

"But what is his business?" Beekle Henry said. "What on earth is he doing here?"

"I," Dan de Lion said with great satisfaction. "I am about to be pollinated."

"Polli-whated?" Beekle Henry demanded.

"Pollinated," Dan de Lion said, and Slimy who had now stopped spluttering and who was grateful for the excuse dived inside his shell and headed straight for the library.

"Well I'll be a hornswoggled pollywog," he said after a bit, his voice rather muffled.

"I thought it was pollinate, not pollywog," Beekle Henry said, a trifle wearily. "I wish everyone would stop talking Greek."

And I expect you lot knew all the time that gastropod is really Greek, gastro meaning stomach and pod meaning foot, and that you didn't begin to have to look it up. But what about mollusc, and hornswoggled pollywog, if it comes to that? Well. A mollusc is a soft-bodied creature without a skeleton but often with a shell, like a snail. A pollywog is a sailor who has never crossed the Equator, and I bet you know what the Equator is, while to be hornswoggled, which is one of Slimy's very favourite words of all time, just means to be tricked. Not sure about the Equator? Well that's very simple. It's the imaginary line we draw around the world, half way between the north pole and the south pole, right around the middle of our orange, in other words.

"Are you listening out there, Beekle Henry?" Slimy said. "Pollination is actually very interesting. It's how plants have children."

"Well I never," Beekle Henry said. "But what have bees got to do with it?"

"They carry the pollen," Slimy said. "You see, what the bee is mostly after is nectar to make honey. So the flower provides the nectar to attract the bee and while the bee's searching for nectar he brushes against the flower's pollen and carries it on to the next plant."

"Are you sure you're reading this properly?" Beekle Henry said. "I don't believe a word of it. If a plant already has pollen why does it need somebody else's? And what does the pollen do anyway?"

"The pollen," Slimy said importantly, "Combines with the plant's ovules to form seeds and the seeds grow into new plants."

"Well of course seeds grow into new plants," Beekle Henry said. "But why can't a plant use its own pollen?"

"Because," Slimy said. "If it did, its children would all be exactly the same as their father, or is it their mother? Nothing would ever change. This way, because every plant even of the same sort is a little bit different, the differences can be combined and one day you might end up with an entirely new plant."

"Well it all sounds very strange to me," Beekle Henry said suspiciously.

And I expect it all sounds very strange to you too, but it's really quite a simple idea and it's called the theory of evolution. This was first set out in a most important book called *On The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin and explains how we came to be who we are. It works like this:

Suppose you had a bowl of ice-cream – no, you may not eat it, at least until we're finished – and suppose you were to divide your bowl of ice-cream in half. What would you have? You'd have two bowls of ice-cream, only half full of course, but the ice-cream would be exactly the same in each plate. Now, suppose you add chocolate sauce to one bowl and strawberry sauce to the other, well suddenly the two bowls, even though the ice-cream stays the same are rather different aren't they? And bags me the strawberry.

Or, you might have a thistle with extra long prickles pollinated with the pollen from a thistle with short prickles, but twice as many. And the children, if we were very unlucky, might have twice as many prickles twice as long, or then again there might be half as many prickles half as short. But if the latter were the case, the thistles with not very many, very short prickles would probably all be eaten by goats and so wouldn't be able to have children in their turn. Usually, only the thistles with the best prickles – twice as many, twice as long – live to have children. Or putting it another way, if only red-haired people were sensible enough to look both ways before crossing the road, then pretty soon there would only be red-haired people. We call this survival of the fittest, or natural selection, and when you add natural selection to the changes that can be caused by such things as pollination, then you can begin to understand how life evolved from very simple bacteria, or germs, all the way to very complicated organisms like us.

Just then, Beekle Henry sneezed. And again. And again. Slimy popped his head out to see what all the noise was about and immediately his nose began to wrinkle too. And oh dear, when the sneeze came it was at least force 9 on the Snifter scale, followed straight away by a force 11.

Now, when you or I or Beekle Henry sneeze, it's mildly inconvenient. Sometimes a good sneeze can even be quite enjoyable, but when a snail sneezes, it's quite another matter. It is so serious that snails even invented the Snifter scale to describe it. They copied it, of course, from the Richter scale which we use to measure earthquakes and

truth to tell, your average snail would much prefer an earthquake to a sneeze, let alone a force 11 sneeze.

Poor old Slimy could feel the most dreadful things happening inside his shell. All the books fell off the shelves in his library. The ink bottle was shaken off the desk and broke on the floor, and so did the glue bottle, and the ink and the glue mixed themselves together. And if you think that was a mess, you should have seen the kitchen, which naturally Slimy called the galley. There was jelly and sherry trifle everywhere.

Oh yes. You might think that snails only eat plants and suchlike but they actually have a very sweet tooth and all sorts of secret cravings. It probably explains why some people, particularly the French, like to eat snails and why the only French words that snails know are very rude indeed. I wouldn't care for the taste of all those books myself – very dry and dusty I should think – but the trifle bit might be all right.

Earthquakes, incidentally, are most interesting phenomena. A phenomenon is anything you can see, hear, taste, touch or smell, which means just about anything and which makes it a very useful word indeed when you can't think of something a bit more precise. And phenomena is how we say more than one phenomenon.

Now you might think the earth – our world, our planet – is just about as solid as you can get, but you'd be quite wrong. Go outside and jump up and down on the ground as hard as you can. Doesn't move, does it? Feels absolutely rock-hard firm, doesn't it? Well, what you're really jumping on is a plate, a tectonic plate, afloat on a sea of molten rock.

Suppose you're helping with the washing up, which, of course, you always offer to do without being asked, and suppose there are two plates floating on the water. If we move them together very carefully so the edges are touching as much as possible then what we have, with a bit of imagination, are two tectonic plates afloat on a sea of flame, even if it does look like soapy water. And if you scrape the edge of one plate against the other, then what you're really doing is making an earthquake.

Of course, a real tectonic plate, tectonic in this sense just means it has been caused by forces within the earth, would be thousands of kilometres across, but big and all as a tectonic plate is, nevertheless it is still moving, even if ever so slowly, a few centimetres every year. And it is this movement, when it forces one plate to rub against another just

as with the washing up, that causes earthquakes and earthquakes, unfortunately, are often very great disasters indeed, worse, even, than what was happening to poor old Slimy.

He sneezed again and so did Beekle Henry.

"I think I've cracked my shell," Slimy gasped, and then: "Oh no. I'm going to sneeze again..." And he did. Eleven point six this time.

Beekle Henry suddenly noticed something. There was a fine drift of golden dust falling down upon them as 'Umble Bumble moved about Dan de Lion, gathering nectar.

"It must be the pollen," Beekle Henry said. "It must be the pollen making us sneeze." And he was right. Many people are indeed allergic to pollen.

"Here you, Bumble," Beekle Henry shouted. "You stop that this instant. Come over here, Slimy old chap," he added kindly. "Come here where the wind won't blow it all over you."

But he was too late. Slimy sneezed again, a force 12, just as 'Umble Bumble peered over the edge of the flower.

"Can I be of service, gents?" he asked anxiously.

"You certainly can," Beekle Henry ordered. "Stop that this instant."

"Stop what, your worship?" 'Umble Bumble said.

"Whatever it is you're doing. Slimy here is having a sneezequake."

"Don't you dare stop," Dan de Lion roared, waking up from his happy daze. Bumble flew up in alarm as the shout was right underneath him and only a hairsbreadth away.

"Look out, Slimy!" Beekle Henry shouted as a final puff of pollen swept down, but all in vain.

"Ah...ah...ah...ah...ah...cherboom," went poor old Slimy, and then: "I have. It's happened. I have cracked my shell. I knew it. I knew it. Never sneeze, my father told me. Never, ever sneeze. Now what will I do. A cracked shell, that's the worst possible thing."

"I'm terrible sorry, your worhsip," 'Umble Bumble said. "I 'ad no idea..."

"Will you stop dilly-dallying?" Dan de Lion roared. "Come back here this instant and finish your work."

"If it please your worshipful royal majesty," Bumble said. "I more or less 'ad finished. There wasn't much left of your nectar, sir."

"Oh very well," Dan de Lion said a little mollified. "Are you sure you did it properly, though?"

"Never mind that," Beekle Henry said tersely. "What about poor, old Slimy?"

"What about him?" Dan de Lion demanded.

"His shell has cracked, that's what," Beekle Henry snapped.

"And the rain will get in and ruin my library," Slimy said sadly. "If it isn't ruined already."

But it was much worse than that as they all realised when they had stopped shouting at each other. A snail with a cracked shell usually dies and Slimy, despite trying to be brave by talking about his library, was really very frightened, so frightened that he didn't even want to look up mollify which was quite the best word he'd heard for days and which means to soothe or pacify.

"What we can do?" Beekle Henry said.

"I don't know," Slimy said.

"There must be something," Dan de Lion said. He was now feeling rather guilty.

"I don't know how to fix a cracked shell," Slimy said in a very small voice. "I've never heard of any snail fixing a cracked shell. They just...they just..."

"Now come on, Slimy," Beekle Henry said briskly. "Never give up. Never. Never, ever give up. If only we had something to plaster over the crack..."

"Plaster? Did you say plaster, your worship?" 'Umble Bumble asked.

"Oh do be quiet, Bumble," Beekle Henry said. "Haven't you done enough damage?" Which was rather unfair as it was actually Dan de Lion's pollen that had caused the sneezequake.

"But begging your worship's pardon," 'Umble Bumble said. "If it's plaster you want, I believe I can 'elp..."

And indeed he could. He flew away and was back quite quickly with some wax, beeswax to be exact which was what he had been using to build his hive.

Well, it didn't take long at all for Beekle Henry to soften it in the sun and then to carefully smooth it over Slimy's shell until it was almost as good as new. Of course, Beekle Henry couldn't resist taking a peek inside as he worked and Slimy was right. Everything was in the most terrible mess. Altogether, it took Slimy a whole week to get

everything shipshape and Bristol fashion again, but for once he didn't complain too much as things might have been very much worse, very much worse indeed.

Beekle Henry and the picnic

'Umble Bumble, once it had been established that he would never bring pollen anywhere near anybody ever again, fitted right in. He was a most obliging fellow and didn't mind at all when, for instance, Dan de Lion treated him like some sort of junior chamberlain. To Dan de Lion's "Bumble get this" and "Bumble do that", 'Umble would only ever say, in most respectful tones: "Yes, your royal worshipfulness; right away your royal worshipfulness". Which would be the exact opposite of you lot, I'll be bound, when you're told to wash your disgusting necks, or to make your beds or to take the dead frog out of your brother's school lunch.

A chamberlain, just to keep everything shipshape, is an officer who helps to manage a king's household, and I bet your mother wishes she had a couple to help deal with you.

Slimy, much to his own surprise, also grew very fond of the bee if for no other reason than 'Umble Bumble, unlike everybody else, which just goes to show how silly everyone else was, was mightily impressed with Slimy's erudition. And the fact that you don't know what erudition means, precisely explains why you need a lot more of it. Erudition is learning and knowledge. Slimy was very flattered indeed that 'Umble would sit admiringly while he tracked down some obscure point of etymology. A word's etymology is its history and can often be very interesting. Words over the years change their meanings, you see, and in fact some words can end up meaning pretty much the exact opposite of how they started out.

Take facetious, for instance, which used to mean polished or agreeable or urbane. Nowadays, if someone says "I'm being facetious" we would take it to mean that he or she is joking sarcastically in not a very pleasant way at all. So if your brother says, "I just love frog sandwiches", you'd be smart to think he was being dead facetious and to keep a sharp lookout for revenge. And if I were him I would probably slip some earth worms into your breakfast cereal. The look on your face would be well worth seeing.

And as for Beekle Henry, he and 'Umble Bumble got on famously. They both had pretty much the same philosophy, that is outlook on life, neither of them liking to get fussed about anything if they could possibly avoid it. And they both loved gossip, that is

exchanging news about who was doing what to whom. 'Umble Bumble, of course, ranged widely over the fields and meadows and was a mine of information. He was also delighted to find someone who would not only listen to him but who would listen with great interest. That's to say that Beekle Henry never once fell asleep when 'Umble Bumble was talking.

"A good fellow, that Bumble," Beekle Henry, Dan de Lion and Slimy would often say to each other when the bee was off about his business.

"Very intelligent, indeed," Slimy would add. "And good with his feet. I'm going to teach him to do a Turk's head next."

"He has got a nose for news, I will say that," Beekle Henry would interrupt. "But what on earth do you mean, Slimy, when you say 'do a Turk's head'? Do you mean cut a Turk's hair?"

Whereupon Slimy would splutter out a stream of his most nautical curses – shiver me timbers, bobstays and barnacles, spinnakers and spankers, that sort of thing – and explain all over again that a Turk's head is actually a sort of knot, a particularly complicated knot. What Slimy didn't know was that the Turk's head is also a very ancient knot and very probably the most famous knot of all history, the Gordian Knot.

That's really a story or two in itself but just quickly so that you know what I'm talking about:

Long, long ago in very olden times indeed – this is a true story, by the way – there was born in Macedonia, next door to ancient Greece, a prince who grew up to become probably the greatest warrior-king the world has ever known. His name was Alexander the Great, or Iskander as many people called him. He didn't live to be very old at all, which probably serves him right, but before he died he had conquered just about all the world they knew of in those days. Personally, I have never understood why anyone should want to do that, conquer the world that is, but through the ages, a surprising number of people have tried and an awful lot of pain and trouble it causes to no good purpose.

Anyway, during one of his early campaigns against his great enemies, the Persians, things looked pretty black for Alexander. His people back in Macedonia and Greece were threatening rebellion if he persisted in continuing a war they were already thoroughly

sick of, while at the same time if he didn't continue he would probably lose everything he had already gained whereupon everyone would have said:

"Well, we knew all the time that Alexander was never going to amount to anything, never mind greatness. What a silly little man!"

So Alexander desperately needed something, anything, to convince his people that he was right, and that they were all wrong.

And then he heard about the Gordian Knot and the oracle that had prophesied that he who loosed the Gordian Knot would become lord of all Asia, which in those days meant just about the whole world. And, of course, many kings and princes had tried to loose the knot and all had failed.

Oracles, auguries and portents are all ways of trying to divine the future before it happens and people of Alexander's time more or less all believed in them though they were no more reliable then than they are now. For instance, if people saw a bird flying off to the left they might think it was a very good sign, and that they were about to get rich, and if they saw a bird flying off to the right they might think it was very bad sign and that they should have stayed home in bed, but if they saw a bird flying right overhead they'd think just the same as you and me: uh-oh, better duck.

But even though all oracles were deeply suspect, Alexander rushed off anyway to Gordium in Phrygia – which is now part of Turkey – where he found a very large and very, very tight Turk's head fastening the yoke to the pole of a sacred wagon owned by the local temple. And I have to say that Alexander's friends and courtiers didn't like the look of that knot one little bit. It seemed certain that Alexander, too, would fail to untie it and that everyone then would say that the prophecy obviously couldn't possibly come true for Alexander, that he would never be lord of all Asia and that he'd better go straight home and stop making himself a nuisance to all and sundry.

And as it happened, in front of a great crowd of people, Alexander struggled with the knot all day without making the least impression on it. The thing about a Turk's head is that if it has been properly tied it has no beginning and no end, and the more you pull at it the tighter it becomes, which makes it almost impossible to undo.

As the hours wore on, it began to look very much as though it was Alexander who would be brought undone, not the knot, and then suddenly he did a very simple thing that

nobody else had ever thought of. He pulled out his sword and with one stroke "loosed" the knot. Well, I expect there was a lot of muttering about cheats never prospering but as it turned out this is one prophecy that did come true. Alexander – very briefly – did indeed become lord of all Asia. Then he died unexpectedly just as he was starting to enjoy it, which had people muttering all over again about ill-gotten gains never doing anyone any good. And if you ever set out to conquer the world I hope your tongue turns into a slimy toad, but it's worth remembering that there's more than one way of undoing a knot, or skinning a cat, as we say. It's also worth remembering that when all else fails, do the unexpected.

Now, where was I? Oh yes, 'Umble Bumble. Well it was now the middle of summer and Beekle Henry, Dan de Lion and Slimy were busy drowsing away the heat of the day. The sun was hot, they had all had a very adequate if very early lunch, and there was really nothing that could be righter with the world ... except all of a sudden there came the hubbuz of 'Umble Bumble rapidly approaching.

"Oh, not now," Dan de Lion said crossly. "Send him away. It's nap time." But it was too late. 'Umble Bumble postively dive-bombed them, shouting as he came:

"Beekle 'Enry! Beekle 'Enry, your worship. Wake up, sir! There's no time to lose."

"What?" Beekle Henry said. "Why is there no time to lose?"

"There's a p-p-picnic, sir," 'Umble Bumble said, stuttering with excitement.

"Raspberry jam, sir. There's raspberry jam tarts, sir. I saw 'em. I saw 'em." Slimy winced at 'Umble's grammar.

"Come on, sir," 'Umble said again. "There's no time to lose. The ants 'ave 'eard about it already. And the hornets will find out any second."

"What?" Beekle Henry repeated. "What's all this?" Beekle Henry wasn't at all sure what a picnic might be and hadn't the least idea about tarts but much against his better judgment, he found 'Umble Bumble's excitement infectious and was almost prepared to believe, as Bumble said, that raspberry jam might indeed be the most delicious food ever invented, possibly even better than buttery, golden straw.

"And just where is this picnic, whatever that is?" Beekle Henry asked after a bit.

"Down by the stream, your worship," 'Umble Bumble said. "They always 'ave picnics down by the stream."

"But that means I'd have to fly," Beekle Henry said. "Out of the question. No thank you, Bumble. You go on without me, but thank you very much for thinking of me..."

Well, we all know how Beekle Henry hated the thought of flying but after a long argument the persuasiveness of 'Umble Bumble and the lure of definitely, positively, absolutely the most delicious food ever invented proved too much. Beekle Henry went looking for his goggles and his flying helmet and his silk scarf and his sheepskin boots, and when he was finally all kitted up he found himself facing into the wind trying to remember how to do a take-off and even more importantly, how to do a landing if ever he got airborne.

"Come on, sir," 'Umble said impatiently. "Do come on or there won't be any left by the time we get there. Come on, sir," he said again. "Contact! Chocks away! Tally 'o..."

And on command, Beekle Henry began to vibrate his wings very rapidly. Slimy and Dan de Lion watched with great interest but nothing happened. Beekle Henry whirred harder but still nothing happened.

"It's no good, Bumble," Beekle Henry said, puffing hard. "It's no good. I've forgotten how."

"Come on, sir," 'Umble Bumble said. "Keep going. Faster, sir. That's the way. 'Ere, I'll give you a push..." And suddenly, much against his will, Beekle Henry found himself up, up and away, flying very erratically at an altitude of at least 10 centimetres, which he found very frightening indeed.

"This way, sir," 'Umble shouted over the noise of the wings and headed off for the stream, Beekle Henry doing his best to follow in something like a straight line but zigging and zagging all over the place.

"Bumble," Beekle Henry shouted anxiously. "I can't steer properly."

"Just lean your weight a bit," Bumble called back. "Do hurry up, sir, or it'll all be gone. And do try to get a bit 'igher, sir."

Because, of course, Beekle Henry was still down amongst the grass which was whipping against his face most uncomfortably. In fact, Beekle Henry had already decided that things were decidedly unpleasant, that he hated flying even more than the last time he had been foolish enough to agree to try and that he just wanted to go home immediately, if not sooner, and bother raspberry jam. He would have gone home too except that he was

already lost and had no idea where home might be. Beetles, you see, are worse navigators than they are fliers, if that's possible. They're so busy just trying to stay up that they never have time to look where they're going or, more importantly, where they've been.

The secret of never getting lost, on land anyway, is to look behind you as often as you look forward. That way, even if you can't find where you want to go at least you'll always be able to find your way back to where you started. You may think this sounds silly but remember it anyway as one day it just might save your life.

Well, as it was 'Umble Bumble had to keep waiting for Beekle Henry and flying back to hurry him up, and then, at last, they were there. Beekle Henry actually bumped right into 'Umble Bumble as he was hovering, surveying the scene. There was nearly the most terrible accident and 'Umble Bumble, most unassuming of bees, quite forgot himself and said something extremely rude about beetles who couldn't fly for toffee. Somehow, however, they managed to avoid crashing to the ground and when they had sorted themselves out, 'Umble Bumble said:

"There. Do you see, sir? Just like I said. Tarts. Jam tarts. Raspberry jam tarts." And indeed, he was right.

There before the two little creatures was a group of boisterous people, adults and children all of whom seemed absolutely enormous to Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble, and in front of the people spread on large table-clothes was a veritable feast, sandwiches, pies, sausage rolls, everything you could think of topped off, right in the centre, by a large tray of tarts.

Slimy is going to interrupt here and make me tell you that boisterous, in this sense, means noisy and jolly, while veritable means true and that it derives from the Latin word veritas, which means truth. And I'm going to interrupt and tell you that when I was at school and about your age and having to learn Latin, we used to joke:

Latin is a language
As dead as dead can be,
It killed the ancient Romans
And now it's killing me.

Which was lots of fun until the day the teacher turned round suddenly and caught me. She made me translate the verse into Latin and then write it out 100 times, which very

nearly did kill me. However, I survived and I did learn that even though Latin is what we call a dead language because nobody much actually speaks it any more, nevertheless a lot of our language, English, is still based on it.

Meanwhile 'Umble Bumble was carefully reconnoitering the situation. And reconnoiter is a word we've borrowed from the French and it means to examine or inspect so that you don't go blindly rushing into a trap. Soldiers do a lot of reconnoitering and they will always tell you that time spent in reconnaissance is rarely wasted.

"All right, sir," 'Umble Bumble said at last, when he was satisfied that things were indeed as they appeared to be. "'Ere's the plan..."

But all of a sudden, Beekle Henry decided he wasn't waiting for any plan. He didn't see the need for one. He was here. The tarts were there. And he was very tired of flying. Without more ado, he took aim and let fly, so to speak, crash landing slap, bang on top of the pile of tarts. The jam was quite soft to splash into but it made a terrible mess. It got up Beekle Henry's nose and into his ears and all over his weskit so that Beekle Henry, being a fastidious beetle, conceived an instant, total and abiding dislike for this, the most delicious food ever invented. And the real trouble became apparent a second later when he tried to move. He couldn't. He was stuck fast. And that gives a whole new meaning to the phrase, caught in a jam.

I expect the first person who said that was actually jammed in a crevasse at the time, feeling the sides of the glacier slowly squeezing in on him. A glacier is formed when so much snow has fallen that it crushes itself into ice and then begins to flow down the mountain just like a river except much more slowly. And as it flows, the ice cracks and fissures and closes up again, and if a mountaineer is not very careful it's easy to fall in and never be heard of again.

Or maybe "caught in a jam" was first said by someone who had accidentally wound his thumb into a vise. You can laugh but I've done that and very painful it is too. Or maybe it was said by an explorer deep inside an Egyptian pyramid, searching for the pharaoh's hidden gold, when suddenly the tons and tons of rock began to slide remorselessly down on top of him because had tripped a secret trigger and was about to be squashed to death by a terrible booby trap. The ancient Egyptians – who flourished even before Iskander and who were ruled by kings called pharaohs – were very tricky

people, you see, and when they built a pyramid in which to bury a pharaoh after his death they would include all sorts of false passages and pitfalls and traps to prevent robbers getting to the dead king's gold.

Why they should bother to bury a king with all that treasure going to waste is quite another matter, all to do with death, and death is something about which a lot of different people believe a lot of different and often very complicated things. The only really certain thing about death is that nobody who is already dead can tell you what it's truly like, and nor can anyone who is still living, all of which will make it very interesting to find out exactly what happens when we do die, as we all shall in due course.

Fastidious, in case you thought I'd forgotten, means being very particular about things like cleanliness, abiding means enduring or continuing, remorseless means merciless or relentless, and weskit, I should have told you way back at the beginning, is what lazy people like me say when they really mean waistcoat..

Now, about Beekle Henry caught in his jam ...

"Oh no," Beekle Henry groaned. "I knew I should have stayed home. Anything that involves me and flying invariably ends in disaster."

But worse was still to come. One of the children, a small boy naturally, spotted Beekle Henry and swooped. And before poor, old Beekle Henry had begun to work out what was happening, he found himself locked tight in what seemed to be a dark, foul-smelling dungeon. It was actually an empty matchbox.

And you, too, might put a beetle in a matchbox, saying it's only a beetle, or a snail in a bucket or a bee in a jar, saying it's only a snail or it's only a bee, but what if it were Beekle Henry or Slimy or 'Umble Bumble? The best way to think in situations like this, or indeed all the time, is really very simple: Do unto other people or other creatures as you would have them do unto you. So if you don't mind the thought of being terrified out of your wits by some cruel-minded giant, you go right on ahead being horrible with matchboxes...

The small boy at the picnic who was just as nasty and mean as every other small boy I've ever met – and yes, I am looking at you – was very pleased with his capture, particularly Beekle Henry's splendid, bluey-greeny-goldy wing cases, and announced in a loud voice – that's another thing wrong with small boys, they only ever have loud voices

– that he was going to take Beekle Henry home, wait till he died of starvation and then dissect him. Well, without Slimy to help, Beekle Henry had no idea what dissect might mean, but the dying of starvation bit was entirely enough to be going on with. Dying! Of starvation! A beetle of Beekle Henry's ellipsoid rotundity! It was too horrible to contemplate.

"Oh dear," 'Umble Bumble said. "Oh double dear and dying daffodils. Poor Beekle 'Enry. And it's all my fault. What will Slimy and Dan de Lion say? It don't bear thinkin' about. Oh triple tripe and giddy gumboots, I'll 'ave to rescue 'im. But 'ow?"

When you have lots of words starting with the same letter, by the way, it's called alliteration and poets, particularly, think it's perfectly priceless.

Well, a rescue seemed absolutely impossible. The small boy whose name was Abercrombie Ramsbottom – and I couldn't possibly tell you his nickname at school – had put the matchbox dungeon beside his plate and was keeping a very careful eye on it. Every now and then he would pick it up and shake it just to make sure Beekle Henry was still in there, which, of course, was the most horrible experience for Beekle Henry. He had a splitting headache, he was bruised black and blue all over and he was beginning to wish that he already was dissected. Whatever dissection might mean, it surely couldn't be worse than this. The only thing Beekle Henry could do was to keep saying to himself very grimly, over and over again:

"Never give up. Never, ever give up."

Meanwhile, 'Umble Bumble just about had given up and was on the point of flying sadly away to tell the others about Beekle Henry's disastrous capture by the enemy, and to confirm his worst fears about dissection, when ever so faintly he caught the slightest of hums drifting down on the breeze.

"The hornets," he whispered to himself. "The hornets are coming." And that made things even worse for if the hornets caught him, they would sting him to death without a second thought. Hornets are like that. Hornets are thugs and will attack anything that moves just for the fun of it. Even their mothers don't love them. But though shaking with terror and much against his better judgment, 'Umble Bumble found himself being very brave. He didn't turn tail and run for it, or more accurately, fly for it, instead he hid under a blade of grass to see what would happen.

And that's what real bravery is, overcoming fear. Everybody – I don't care who they are – is afraid from time to time. Everybody. Me, you, even heroes and champions. But brave people are the ones who don't give in to the fear. They're the ones who never give up and who keep going no matter how frightened they are. For instance, suppose a group of you are down at the swimming pool and you all decide to dive off the high board. One by one you take your turn and then it's Oscar's go.

Well Oscar is really frightened. He hates heights and he doesn't like swimming all that much, not in deep water, because he's not very good at it and he would rather be anywhere but up on that high board. He goes to the edge and looks down and then quickly backs away. It's too far and he knows that if he dives he'll do it badly, because he's so afraid, and then he really will hurt himself. He decides that he doesn't care if everybody does think he's a coward; it would be better than having to dive off the high board, infinitely better. But then a small voice inside Oscar says:

"But I care if I'm a coward. I do. I do care."

And finally Oscar makes himself inch back out to the edge, never mind that his legs are jelly and his teeth are chattering with fear, and he does it. He dives off the board, just as badly as he had thought he would, badly enough that he does hurt himself. But for all that, he's done it and he feels a glow of pride. He has conquered his fear, fear that almost paralysed him, and he's done it. You lot, I'm sorry to say, give him a hard time because he took so long about it and was so obviously afraid. Oh yes, I know what you're like. But do you know? Oscar is the only really brave one of all of you. You see, you can't be brave, not properly brave, unless you are afraid, so being afraid is nothing to be ashamed of. Giving into fear is the problem.

I'll tell you something else about Oscar. When no one was looking he went back and dived off the board again – even though it had hurt like anything the first time – and he went on doing it until he wasn't afraid of it any more. Oscar, the name, means spear of the gods and it turned out that our Oscar really was a courageous fighter.

Meanwhile, under his blade of grass 'Umble Bumble tuned his antennae until he could pick up the hornets' frequency and hear what they were saying to each other.

"Hornet leader to all units," he heard. "Hornet leader to all units. Execute Plan Battleaxe. Repeat, Plan Battleaxe. Blue squadron swing right. Red squadron swing left.

Intelligence reports no anti-insect defences. Thirty seconds to strike point, thirty seconds and counting... Ravage and plunder... Ravage and plunder..."

And shrieking their blood-curdling war cry, the Vikings of the insect world went swooping into action.

Do you know about the Vikings? Hmm. Well Vikings were sea raiders and robbers who emerged in a period of history called the Dark Ages and who pillaged their way through a great deal of England and Europe. Slimy wishes me to mention that they were splendid seamen who even got to America long before Christopher Columbus, but that doesn't change the fact that they were also fearsome fighters, bullies really, who went around thinking it much easier and much more fun to steal other people's land and belongings rather than to make an honest living themselves. But while punching a bully square on the nose very seldom fails to send him packing, I wouldn't suggest you punch a Viking on the nose, dear me, no, not unless you have an axe and a sword and a shield and a helmet, just like his. And you'd better know how to use them, too. No. With Vikings and the like you have to be smarter rather than stronger.

Well, just as there's nothing like a swarm of sea-raiders to ruin a happy country, there's nothing like a swarm of wasps to break up a picnic. Within seconds, people were running frantically in all directions pursued by deadly little buzz-bombs, flapping their hands in the air and shrieking with anger. 'Umble Bumble, without stopping to think how frightened he was, seized his chance and flew as fast as he could, straight for the matchbox dungeon which Abercrombie Ramsbottom had abandoned in the panic.

Of course, 'Umble Bumble had never seen a matchbox before so it was lucky that it didn't matter which end he pushed at.

"Beekle 'Enry," he called breathlessly as he heaved and shoved. "Are you in there? I've come to rescue you..."

"What? Who's there?" Beekle Henry shouted, sounding hollow and already half-starved, which is certainly how he felt.

"I've got to get you out before the hornets come back," Bumble said desperately. "Hurry. Oh hurry! They'll be here soon..."

At last, with all Bumble's shoving, the matchbox opened a crack, enough so that Beekle Henry could help to push too.

Then 'Umble Bumble's antennae picked up the hornet commander again:

"Hornet leader to all hornets," he heard. "Hornet leader to all hornets. Red alert. Red alert. Counter-attack proceeding from car with insect sprays. Repeat insecticide. Break off combat and head for the jam. ETA of enemy advance units 60 seconds. Load jam, disperse and head for the trees. Good luck all hornets."

"Oh no," Bumble said, still shoving. "They're coming back. They're all coming back. And insect sprays..."

They both redoubled their efforts, suddenly the match box shot open and Beekle Henry couldn't help it. He fell flat on his back. Well, it was 'Umble Bumble's day to be a hero, there was no doubt about that, and he rose to the occasion nobly. Again, without the slightest hesitation, he climbed into the box to help Beekle Henry back to his feet even though he could hear hornets and people and, even worse, the ssst, ssst of insect sprays fast descending upon them.

At last Beekle Henry was out of the box and somehow 'Umble Bumble got him launched and flying in approximately the right direction.

"Look out," came a shout. "My beetle's escaped. Don't let him get away. Hit him with the spray..."

At the same moment, the hornets spotted them..."

"All hornets, this is hornet leader," 'Umble Bumble heard. "Bandits ten o'clock low. Intercept and destroy. Intercept and destroy."

"Faster," 'Umble Bumble shouted desperately. "Oh faster, sir, faster. For your life. They're all after us now."

And indeed, things were looking very black for 'Umble Bumble and Beekle Henry, neither of whom by any stretch of the imagination could be considered fast or even high fliers. There was the hornet interceptor squadron bearing down on the one hand and a small boy with a can of insect spray on the other and it seemed only a matter of seconds before the two would-be jam thieves would come to a very sticky end indeed.

Well, and it was probably more than they deserved, what happened was that the hornets and Abercrombie Ramsbottom ran into each other just as they were all about to catch 'Umble Bumble and Beekle Henry, and then there took place the most monumental battle. The interceptor squadron was shot down to the last hornet but they fought

ferociously and Abercrombie Ramsbottom was so badly stung in the process that he had to be taken straight to hospital and missed all the jam tarts – which probably served him right too.

Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble managed to slip away under cover of the confusion and didn't stop going hell for leather until they had finally reached home and safety.

When he had recovered somewhat from his ordeal and the others had heard the whole story, Beekle Henry said:

"Just one question, Slimy, old chap. What does dissect actually mean?"

Well Slimy was very pleased to have such a good word to look up and dived inside. "Here it is," he said after a bit. "Dissect is to cut open and examine the structure of an animal or an insect. Why do you want to know?"

But there was no answer. Both 'Umble Bumble and Beekle Henry had fainted clean away.

The drought, Part I

The summer wore on, one lovely, hot, sunny day after another without even a hint of rain as though it would stay just like this until the end of time.

Beekle Henry, 'Umble Bumble and Slimy were blissfully content. Good weather, good food, good company – what more could an insect want? Sorry Slimy. Or a gastropod mollusc? I said I'm sorry Slimy... No, I won't do it again... Now look here, Slimy, I can only say sorry so many times... I am not a hairy primate... Well, yes, all right, I am a hairy primate but don't you dare call me one and put the dictionary away this instant...

Honestly, some snails. And you lot are all hairy primates, too, whether you know it or not. A primate is a mammal with flexible hands and feet and an opposable thumb, and an opposable thumb means you can pick things up and fiddle with them endlessly. A mammal, by the way is a warm-blooded vertebrate, born alive and who feeds on his mother's milk when a baby, while vertebrate just means having a backbone unlike that rotten snail over there.

Now as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted... While gastropod molluscs and insects might have been having a delightful time, if they had been a little less selfish and a little more observant they would have noticed that Dan de Lion was looking more and more down in the mouth the longer they went without rain.

And when I say down in the mouth, I don't just mean he was looking distressed I mean he was really down in the mouth. His face was getting closer and closer to the ground as he had less and less sap to stiffen his stalk. And then, at last, there came a morning when Beekle Henry woke up, wondered whether he'd had quite enough sleep, stretched elaborately, rolled over and opened an eye to find himself looking straight at Dan de Lion, only millimetres away.

"Now look here, old chap," Beekle Henry said a touch crisply. "I do think you might knock before you come into my bedroom."

"I would," Dan de Lion whispered hoarsely. "If I could."

"My dear fellow," Beekle Henry said, instantly contrite, which means sorry. "Are you not well?"

And when Beekle Henry had got to the bottom of what was wrong with Dan de Lion, that is that he was literally dying of thirst, he was, being a beetle with a heart of gold, inordinately cross with himself for having been so blind for so long. And if you ever become inordinately angry with yourself, I should watch out, inordinate meaning extreme with knobs on.

Straight away Beekle Henry marched up Slimy's gangplank and pounded on the hatch.

"Wake up," he roared. "Wake up you nautical nightmare and get your snivelling apology for a brain out here." Which, of course, was most unlike Beekle Henry, ordinarily the mildest and most pleasant of beetles, and it just shows how upset he was at poor, old Dan de Lion's plight. As, indeed, was Slimy when he and Beekle Henry had finished having a good shout at each other and Slimy had finally grasped the nature of the crisis. As, indeed, was Bumble when he ambled up, or should that be 'umbled up, to say good morning.

"Well," Beekle Henry said at last. "There's only one thing for it. We'll have to get Dan de Lion some water..."

"But how," Slimy said.

"I don't know," Beekle Henry said. "But we have to find a way."

"Please, your worship," 'Umble Bumble said. "There's still a little water in the creek, sir."

"There you are then," Beekle Henry said. "It's all quite simple..."

"Simple!" Slimy said with a deal of exasperation. "You might just as well say there's plenty of water in the ocean, or on the moon for that matter. How are we ever going to get the water from the creek to here, might I ask?" And I expect that when I tell you Slimy was exasperated you can guess exactly what I mean. That's right, annoyed and impatient.

"You might," Beekle Henry said. "Ask that is. But it would be much more useful if you just thought of an answer."

Slimy was about to start shouting again but was forestalled by 'Umble Bumble .

"Gumnuts," 'Umble Bumble said.

"Gumnuts?" Slimy hissed, growing even more agitated. "Why you worm-riddled, barnacle-cruste d, lump of dry-rot..." Which was really very rude of him, but fortunately

'Umble Bumble wasn't listening. Slimy, of course, was talking about the toredo worm that bores through the bottom of wooden ships, and the barnacles that grow below the waterline if you give them half a chance, and the rot caused by rain water if it is allowed to lie about, all things that sailors absolutely hate.

"Gumnuts?" Beekle Henry said with a glint in his eye.

"Empty gumnuts," 'Umble Bumble said.

"You don't mean...?" Beekle Henry said.

And they both looked at Slimy who spluttered into silence.

"Oh no," he said on a rising note. "I know what you're thinking. Oh no. I can't do it. I can't possibly do it."

"You can," Beekle Henry said.

"I can't," Slimy moaned.

"For 'is royal worshipful 'ighness..." 'Umble Bumble said.

"I tell you, I can't," Slimy shouted.

"Come on," Beekle Henry said. "Never give up. And you haven't even started yet. Besides, we'll help..."

"That's what really worries me," Slimy said, but he was already pulling in his gang plank and slipping his mooring lines before getting underway. When you moor a boat, by the way, it's the same thing as parking a car but don't ever let Slimy hear you say that you're going to park your ship. He would have apoplexy which would probably mean that he would burst his shell with rage, and we wouldn't want that to happen. Mooring lines are the ropes that you use to tie a ship up at the dock, and slipping them just means to let them go.

Well, the journey to the creek was an adventure in itself and only confirmed Slimy in a long-held view that adventure is something a snail should never ever countenance, which is a very good word and Slimy would have liked to stop and look it up and maybe be make a cup of hot chocolate and put his foot up for a while. However, Beekle Henry, for his part, wouldn't countenance any delay.

"Come on," he kept saying. "Quick. Quick. Dan de Lion's dying." And Slimy would have to keep gamely plugging on, never knowing that as well as "to approve" or "to

consent", countenance could also mean "face", "composure", or "self-control". And you'll have to think for yourselves which meaning is the most appropriate here.

At last Beekle Henry allowed Slimy a meal break and Slimy was very put out to find that there was, in fact, very little for him to eat, in fact, nothing at all in the area they were presently crossing. The grass and the bushes were all withered and dried out, and now that he was forced to think about it food everywhere had been getting harder and harder to find for some time.

It was all right for Beekle Henry, he supposed. Beekle Henry liked straw and bark and such, but Slimy was suddenly conscious of the fact that what with all the unaccustomed exercise he had just had, his shell didn't seem to fit properly anymore.

"Things will be better down at the creek, your worship," 'Umble Bumble said. He had been watching Slimy's look of increasing dismay.

"It's still a bit green, down there," he added. "In spots, anyway. Here and there. If you look really hard and you're really lucky..."

"How much further," Slimy asked faintly.

"Well sir," 'Umble Bumble said encouragingly. "We might be nearly 'alf way..."

"At least half way," Beekle Henry interrupted firmly. "Probably three-quarters." And Beekle Henry trod heavily on one of 'Umble Bumble's feet, and the bee, who had been about to speak, quickly shut his mouth.

Slimy looked narrowly at Beekle Henry, quite sure that Beekle Henry was exaggerating shamelessly, but Slimy was also wise enough to know that there are times when it's better not to know precisely everything.

"Come on then," Slimy said. "I'll just have to starve till we get there." And on he trudged.

"Pretty soon," he added. "I'll have to throw the horses overboard."

"Horses!" Beekle Henry exclaimed. "What on earth are you talking about, Slimy, old thing?"

"The horse latitudes," Slimy said importantly. "Areas of the ocean dominated by light and variable winds, often no wind at all. Sometimes the old square-rigged sailing ships would be becalmed there so long that they would run out of water for the horses and have to throw them overboard."

"Really," said Beekle Henry . "How horrible. I don't care for horses much myself, but I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

And Beekle Henry was right. It was horrible but life even not very long ago was much harder than it is now. You may not think so when you're told to clear up that pigsty you laughingly call your bedroom or when you nearly die of fright because your brother has taken to fighting fire with fire and slipped a lizard under your pillow, but you really are very lucky. Not so long ago – and in a lot of countries even now – most children had to work for their living and there was no time for play or school, and usually not much in the way of food either.

Latitudes, by the way, and longitudes are an interesting idea. If we go back to our orange with the North and South poles and the Equator, and we all remember what they are I hope, we use lines of latitude, like steps on a stair case, to divide up the space between the Equator and the poles, and we use lines of longitude to divide it up the other way. The lines of latitude and the lines of longitude now form a grid, you see, and by numbering the lines we can tell someone else exactly where we want them to start peeling our orange. Or, if we say please go to latitude 33degrees 43minutes south, longitude 152degrees 16minutes east, everybody by looking at a map would immediately discover that we were talking about Sydney in Australia.

And if I were you, I would instantly abandon the idea of getting revenge for the lizard by filling your brother's hairbrush with glue. Do that and you'll probably end up at Point Nemo which is at latitude 48 degrees 52.6 minutes south, longitude 123 degree 23.6' minutes west, 40 fathoms down and being used for a tooth-pick by the sharks. A fathom, so that you'll be able to think about it on your way down, is 6ft or a little less than 2metres and if you look at the atlas you'll find that the map reference I've just given you is in the middle of the Southern Ocean just about as far from land as it's possible to get, and you should understand that the Southern Ocean, which runs right round the bottom of the world, is the roughest, stormiest, most dangerous ocean of all. Sailors who have rounded Cape Horn, which is the most dangerous place in the most dangerous ocean, have Slimy's great respect, his very great respect.

And talking of Slimy, much to his relief he had at last arrived at the creek, even though Beekle Henry had insisted that they take a short detour to revisit that inglorious

battlefield where he and 'Umble Bumble had so narrowly escaped the clutches of Abercrombie Ramsbottom, whose nickname I still can't possibly repeat. Oh all right. Everybody called him Crumb-bum, but you didn't hear that from me.

To Slimy, even though it was now all dry and dusty, it looked a pleasant enough spot but Beekle Henry was again reduced to dreadful fear and trembling, particularly now that he knew what dissection meant, and he had to be helped away.

Speaking of inglorious battles, that reminds me of the Spanish Armada, which depending on your point of view was either one of the great victories or one of the great defeats of history. You see, a rather unpleasant man by the name of King Phillip II of Spain grew exceedingly cross with another monarch, Queen Elizabeth I of England, mainly because she wouldn't do what she was told and kept letting her sailors raid the Spanish treasure ships, or galleons. If you think of how you feel when your brother doesn't do what he's told and when he keeps nicking your best bits of apple pie, then you'll know just how angry Phillip was.

One day he decided that he was so fed up with Elizabeth that he would send a fleet, an armada, to invade England, depose Elizabeth from her throne and teach the English once and for all how to behave like decent Spaniards, instead of uncouth, uncivilised and unrepentant louts. Uncouth, uncivilised and unrepentant, incidentally, is a very good description of you lot.

Anyway, Phillip gathered together all the ships he could find and also cut down a lot of the forests in Spain to build more until he had an invasion force of some 130 ships, which is a pretty big fleet even by today's standards, and he concocted a complicated plan which called for the Armada to sail from Lisbon, in what is now Portugal, to Calais in France where an army would be embarked to be ferried across the English Channel, then to smash the English and teach them such a lesson that they would never forget it.

However, the Armada was an ill-fated venture right from the start. The first time the fleet set out it was forced back to port by bad weather and by the time it could set sail again, the English had received plenty of warning and were ready and waiting. As it happened, they only had about 55 ships, but the British ships were much smaller and better designed which meant they were faster and could sail closer to the wind.

Slimy says I should explain that because only sailors understand what sailing close to the wind means. So, suppose it's a windy day down at the beach or anywhere else if it comes to that and suppose that you and your brother each take two corners of a towel and stretch it out longways across the direction from which the wind is blowing. What happens? Well, the wind fills the towel like a sail and if you try to walk forward into the wind, it tries very hard to blow you backwards, and that's what happens to a yacht or a sailing ship that tries to go straight into the wind. It just gets blown backwards. Now suppose you let your brother take a couple of steps in front of you and that instead of trying to go straight into the wind you slant across it. Then what happens? That's right. You can go forwards. And that's how sailing vessels go to windward, as Slimy would say. They zig-zag across the wind and the more they can slant up into the wind, that is the closer they can "point", when they're zigging or zagging then the less distance they have to sail and the faster they can get where they're going, because, remember, this was all long before engines had been invented.

Back to the Armada. As well as having more manoeuvrable ships the English also had some very daring captains such as Sir Francis Drake already famous for capturing Spanish galleons and stealing their treasure. He was, so the story goes, busy playing bowls when the word came that the Armada had been sighted but instead of rushing off to fight, he said calmly: "There's time to finish the game and beat the Spaniards too." Now just between you and me, this was a fearful fib as the English fleet was trapped in Plymouth Harbour by the rising tide and couldn't get out till the ebb even if they wanted to, but Sir Francis thought it better to put the best possible face on things even though everyone really knew that the situation was quite grim.

Indeed, at a council of war some of the more adventurous Spanish captains suggested they should attack the English fleet while it was still bottled up but the Spanish commander, Medina Sidonia, thought it was too risky and kept the Armada ponderously ploughing up the English Channel, letting the English ships escape from Plymouth and race in pursuit, swarming all about like angry hornets. There were several running battles until the Armada eventually came to anchor at Calais. Once there, the Spanish thought they were safe for the moment and prepared to take on the army. However, the cunning English waited till nightfall and then sent in fire ships.

Well, there was nothing the Spanish could do then but cut their cables and anchor lines and flee for the lives with the English in hot pursuit. Next day, the English closed in for the final battle, the Battle of Gravelines, and it was here that the English strategy proved decisive. At the time, the Spanish method of naval warfare depended on boarding an enemy ship and fighting hand to hand with pistols and cutlasses. They would only fire their big cannon once and wouldn't even bother to reload. The English, on the other hand, would sail in close and batter away with their cannon, broadside after broadside, until the enemy was reduced to a floating wreck, and then they would board. So, by the end of the battle even though the Spanish outnumbered the English by more than two to one, the Spanish fleet was so reduced that Medina Sidonia was forced to accept that he would never be able to embark his army and that the only thing left to do was to order his ships to sail home as best they could, right round the top of the British Isles, where bad weather and bad navigation meant that many of the fleet were wrecked. In the end, only 67 ships from that huge fleet managed to get home safely.

Now, where was I? I beg your pardon, Slimy? You know what fire ships are, but you think everybody else should know too? Oh. Well in the olden days when ships were always built of wood and pitch and, of course, canvas, they would, if ever given the chance, burn like anything. Pitch, by the way, is similar to the sort of tar that we use for roads and while it happens to be very useful for making things waterproof it is also highly inflammable, which means never put flame anywhere near it. And if I catch any of you playing with fire at all, ever, there'll be so much trouble you'll wish you'd never been born. I hope that's very clear, because it's very important. Do not play with fire. Never. Ever.

Anyway, some nasty person who the rest of us wish had never been born came up with the idea of the fire ship: an old vessel, no longer much use and soaked in oil so that if ever it were set alight, nothing short of sinking it would ever put the flames out.

Well, I expect you can guess the rest. On a night when the wind was just so and with three or four brave men on board to steer and handle the sails, the fire ships would be set loose to creep in amongst the anchored enemy. Then, at just the right moment, their crews would set fire to them and with the ships blazing away would try to ram as many of the enemy as possible, setting them on fire, too.

Just imagine the panic and confusion that would result. In the dark, ships frantically trying to cut their anchor cables and escape would be colliding with each other and running on to the rocks. Masts and sails would be crashing down on to the deck and men would be dashing this way and that, cannoning into each other and falling overboard. And there would be shouting and screaming with muskets and cannon going off and the bullets hitting the wrong people. And all this before anything had even caught fire.

So you can see, it was rotten bad luck for the Spanish and better luck than the English probably deserved that the wind that night near Calais was just right for fire ships. Many men died and many ships were sunk all because a silly king, who thought himself terribly important, and a silly queen, who thought she was terribly important, couldn't decide how to settle their quarrels without going to war. And, as it happens, it also explains why you and I speak English today, and not Spanish.

Do you know? History is probably the most important of all the subjects you'll study at school. A wise man once remarked that those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it. And it's true. Unfortunately, we have proved that to be absolutely correct, over and over again.

Oh, Slimy's just asked a very important question that I expect you want to ask too. How did the volunteer crews on fire ships escape? Well, they would tow a dinghy or a skiff and when they finally collided with the enemy they would hope to scramble over the side and slip away in the confusion of smoke and flame, because, of course, if they were caught things were likely to go very hard with them.

And while we're tidying up loose ends, do you lot know what the tide is? That's right. It's the way the sea rises and falls. But do you know what causes it? Well, it's our old friend gravity, the gravity of the sun and the moon pulling at the oceans of the world as the earth spins and we orbit around each other and this causes what you can think of as two giant waves flowing round and round the globe, the tide flooding and ebbing as they come and go.

Anyway, back to the drought, and I wish everyone would stop interrupting...

Beekle Henry, 'Umble Bumble and Slimy Snail came at last to the banks of the creek and set about looking for gumnuts under a large eucalyptus tree.

"Over here," Beekle Henry said after a bit. "These are just the job. They should fit perfectly."

"You must be joking," Slimy said. "If you think I'm going to carry one of those... full of water..."

"And one on the other side to balance it," Beekle Henry said cheerfully.

"Oh no," Slimy said. "Oh no you don't..."

"Come on, old Slimy," Beekle Henry said. "No point coming all this way just for one nut full."

"Besides, your worship," Umble Bumble said. "With just one nut you really will overbalance."

And protest as he might in language a great deal too salty for me to repeat here, Slimy found himself being guided into position and then first one gumnut and then the other was lashed to his shell with ropes of twisted grass. And, of course, he soon quite forgot all about the weight he was going to have to carry in the frustration of trying to get Beekle Henry and Umble Bumble to use proper seaman's knots and lashings. No one gets an amateur sailor-snail quite as exercised as a landlubber, which is the very rude term seamen use to describe someone who knows absolutely nothing about ships or boats. A lubber, incidentally, means a big clumsy oaf. Big brothers in my experience are usually lubbers, especially when they knock over the tadpole jar you carefully left for safe-keeping in the middle of the hall floor where anyone should have been able to see it. Mothers, distinctly cross about water and weed and mud and slime and tadpoles all squashed into the carpet, also tend to be rather lubberly in the way they use wooden spoons and hairbrushes on certain tender parts of the anatomy. Taken all together, lubbers are very upsetting people and landlubbers are even worse.

Well eventually, after much pulling and puffing, heaving and huffing, the nuts were lashed firmly in position and Slimy eased himself down into the muddy puddle of water that was all that was left of the creek. He couldn't actually submerge the gumnuts to fill them without drowning himself so Beekle Henry had to get in alongside him and splash them full with his wings.

"I hope there aren't any sharks in this creek," Beekle Henry said.

"Of course there aren't," Slimy snorted. "Don't talk bilge."

"But your worships I should be quick if I was you," 'Umble Bumble said. "There are other sorts of fish, you know, that likes beetles and snails..."

There wasn't any more talking after that until both of them were safely back on the bank, Slimy already groaning at all the weight he had to carry. Bilge, by the way, refers to a ship's bilges – that is the very bottom part of the hull – and what tends to come out of them in the way of oily, smelly water, rubbish, rats and cockroaches. And you should know that Beekle Henry would be mortally offended if you were to suggest that cockroaches, which are sometimes called black beetles, had anything to do with real beetles, which they don't. They are different sorts of insects altogether, beetles being of the order Coleoptera and cockroaches of the order Blattodea.

The journey back to Dan de Lion was a nightmare. Slimy could only just manage to move with all that weight and Beekle Henry had to harness himself up in front with more grass rope to help pull Slimy along and 'Umble Bumble acted as a reconnaissance helicopter, searching out the easiest, possible route. Even so, Slimy and Beekle Henry grew more and more fatigued. Beekle Henry only managed to keep himself going by chanting as a sort of mantra:

"Never-give-up-never-give-up-never-give-up-never-give-up-never-give-up..."

And Slimy managed to keep at it only out of irritation at Beekle Henry's chanting and by conjuring up visions of all the juicy, green delights he would treat himself to if ever he were allowed to stop hauling those blessed gumnuts full of water that weighed at least 122 tonnes, each. Indeed, Slimy didn't like to think how famished he was becoming. He was sure he could feel himself rattling inside his shell and was secretly afraid that if he became any thinner it might fall off altogether.

A mantra, just so that you know, is a psalm or a special phrase often used as an aid to meditation, and meditation is a powerful form of deep thought where you can sometimes sink right down into your own mind. You can try meditating for yourselves. Empty your minds of everything you might be thinking about, and now concentrate on your breathing. Think only of your breathing. Breathe in, breathe out. If other thoughts pop into your head, just ignore them and go back to thinking about your breathing. Breathe in, breathe out. It takes practice but after a while you'll start to feel calm and strong. Many

people set aside time to meditate every day because they like the way meditation improves their disposition, which means how they're feeling.

Anyway, after what seemed like years of torment, 'Umble Bumble came back from yet another scouting mission to tell Beekle Henry and Slimy that they only had a little way left to go, but he also had some grave news.

"'Urry," he said. "Please 'urry. 'Is worshipful 'ighness is very bad. 'E's much worse. I think 'e's dying..."

By this time, Beekle Henry and Slimy were so exhausted they could hardly speak, but from somewhere they found one last spark of energy and they actually managed to increase their speed a fraction.

'Umble Bumble flew straight back to Dan de Lion.

"'Ang on, your royal worshipfulness," he said anxiously. "They're coming. They're coming. They've got water for you. They're coming. Don't die. Please don't die... Come on Slimy ... Come on Beekle 'Enry... They're 'ere, sir... Quick... Quick... Over 'ere. In close to the stem. 'Ere you are, sir, water..."

And 'Umble Bumble and Beekle Henry carefully bailed out the nuts, pouring the water around Dan de Lion's main stem.

"There," Beekle Henry said. "That's the last of it. Do you feel any better, Dan?"

"Give 'im some time," 'Umble Bumble said. "'Is majesty is very sick."

"Well, he should perk up now, all right," Slimy said.

"Shhh!" 'Umble Bumble said, very rudely for him. "I think 'e's trying to speak..."

"Maybe he is dead," Beekle Henry said sadly. "He looks terrible; all shrivelled up and dried out."

"Do be quiet, can't yez," 'Umble Bumble shouted, dancing with impatience and quite forgetting himself. "Look! Look! 'E's still alive..."

And Dan de Lion somehow managed to raise his head a fraction and in a hoarse, cracked whisper he said:

"My friends. My dear, dear friends..." His head wavered a little and then slumped back to the ground.

Beekle Henry, 'Umble Bumble and Slimy looked at each other.

Then the awful truth dawned. Despite Slimy's heroic hauling, despited Beekle Henry's determination, despite 'Umble Bumble's love and faith, the water they had managed to bring to Dan de Lion with such effort was not nearly enough to save him.

There was a long, long silence. And then Beekle Henry said in a very small voice:
"Never give up. Never give up."

The drought, Part II

Sooner or later, for no good reason, life will hit you in the face with a shovel. Bang! And down you'll crash. And then the only question is: do you have the courage to get up again, and to keep on going? Or don't you? We all have to face disaster at some time, some people more often than others, and when it's your turn perhaps it will help you to recall the story I'm going to tell you now.

Dan de Lion, as you will remember, was very close to death. He was so shrivelled and dried up it was hard to remember that he'd ever been bright green and the yellowest yellow, strong and proud and full of life.

For their part Beekle Henry, 'Umble Bumble and Slimy Snail were absolutely exhausted, totally demoralised and in Slimy's case, famished to middling starved. Things could not have been much grimmer.

"It's not fair," 'Umble Bumble said eventually. "It's just not fair. What 'arm has 'is Royal Worshipfulness ever done to anyone?"

Well, it was a good question but the absolute strictly truth is that life very seldom is fair. Oh, we do our best to make it fair but even without floods, fires, earthquakes, cyclones, droughts and famines and all the other things that can happen, not to mention wars – all of which are beyond our control – it's an impossible job. You see, just about everyone has a different idea of "fair" to everyone else and that makes it extraordinarily difficult to decide what "fair" really is. And if ever you should get a consensus, it's another problem entirely to make people stick to it.

For instance, supposing there is one piece of lemon meringue pie left and both you and your brother have got your eye on it. Well, your mother would probably say:

"You can each have half."

But you might say: "That's not fair. He had two biscuits yesterday and I only had one."

And he might say: "But he didn't help with the washing-up and anyway, he got all the ice-cream last week."

And you might say: "But he hasn't tidied up his room, and he sneaked the orange out of my school lunch on Monday..."

And so on, and so on, and so on. And all I can say is that neither of you is being fair and that my sympathies are entirely with your mother.

In my opinion, just so you know, things tend to work out more or less fairly if everyone does rather more giving than taking. And this is because when we give we always think we give more than we really do, and when we take we always think we take less than we really do. And this is because one of the hardest things of all is to be scrupulously honest with ourselves.

Has anyone looked up consensus? I thought not. It means general or widespread agreement. Often people will say "consensus of opinion" but that is quite unnecessary and what we call a tautology, which is using two words to say the same thing, when one word will do perfectly well. You see, consensus already contains the idea of opinion. Before you can agree with someone, or disagree if it comes to that, you both have to have an opinion on the subject.

Can you think of other tautologies? I'll tell you my favourite which keeps popping up all over the place: "forward planning". I just can't imagine what backward planning might be.

Scrupulous, by the way, means very careful or precise. It can also mean morally correct. So when I say "scrupulously honest", I mean absolutely squeaky clean and no fibbing allowed.

"It's just not fair," Umble Bumble mumbled again.

"If only it would rain," Beekle Henry said, but the sun kept on burning down from a cloudless sky and they all knew that when it finally did rain again, as sooner or later rain it must, it would be too late to save Dan de Lion.

"Why don't you two blithering barnacles just shut up?" Slimy snapped angrily. "I'm trying to think."

As we all know, there's nothing like being hungry to make you snappy, and there's nothing like being famished to make you angry, and there's nothing like starving to make you both at once.

"Steady on there, Slimy," Beekle Henry said. "Shouting at us isn't going to help Dan de Lion." However, instead of calming Slimy down, good sense – as sometimes happens – simply made him more furious.

"You poltroons!" Slimy roared. "Dan de Lion is dying and all you can be is fatuous!"

"Fatuous?" Beekle Henry said before he could stop himself. "You've been complaining all day how thin you is."

Well, personally I agree with Beekle Henry. No matter how bad things are, they can only be improved by making a joke of them, even if it was one of Beekle Henry's terrible puns, but for poor, old Slimy this was the last straw, especially as he couldn't eat straw. He exploded in a lather of nautical curses and stormed off, leaving Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble looking at each other with very raised eyebrows.

Poltroon, I expect you've guessed, was a word that Slimy had been saving up for ages. It means a coward, an abject or contemptible coward. And fatuous is a very rude way of saying silly or foolish. So you can tell from this just how upset Slimy was, though that wasn't any excuse for being so unpleasant to his friends. He was very lucky, in fact, that both Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble understood him rather better than he did himself and were quite prepared to make large allowances for his bad behaviour.

Making allowances for people, incidentally, is a wise thing to do. You never can tell when you might need a few allowances yourself. For instance, if I should happen to find out who it was who salted my coffee this morning and sugared my eggs then he will be fresh out of allowances, in this case pocket money, for the next month.

When I say Slimy stormed off I'm being less than precise. After all, storming is not really something that a snail is equipped to do, but he did set every stitch of canvas he had (that means every sail) and he certainly wasn't looking where he was going. Indeed, in the end he positively ship-wrecked himself, crashing headlong into a great piece of wood sticking up out of the ground. Poor old snail. It was a terrible thump and knocked half the books in his library out of their shelves. I keep telling Slimy that he should fit fiddles, which are bars to stop the books being shaken free by heavy weather, but he won't listen.

Anyway, running aground so hard left him quite dazed and shocked, and his mind, forgetting to be angry, set free as it were by the collision, began to wander about or wonder about, it doesn't matter which, all by itself.

Actually, minds are very interesting things and there's an awful lot we don't understand about them, and even what we think we know might be quite wrong. However, as it

stands at the moment, it seems our minds work in two ways, consciously and sub-consciously. Things like breathing that happen automatically and that we rarely have to think about except when we want to hold our breath we call part of the sub-conscious mind. Things that we do have to think about like the flour-bomb ambush I accidentally overheard someone plotting last night – and if that ever happens, forget about sitting down for at least a week – are part of the conscious mind.

All that is straight forward enough, but where did the idea for the flour-bomb ambush come from? Just popped into your head, right? Well, it seems more likely that the whole notion was carefully worked out by your sub-conscious mind, which seems to do all your really hard thinking without you even knowing about it. So, learning to use your sub-conscious mind – feeding it the right information and then leaving it alone to get on with the job – and learning to trust it is a fairly important part of growing up.

For a while, the bump to Slimy's head jumbled up both his conscious and his sub-conscious so that they had a conversation that went something like this:

"What sort of nincompoop navigator are you?"

"Never mind that, what's this thing we've run aground on?"

"How should I know? And who cares anyway?"

"But what's a great lump of wood doing sticking up out of the ground?"

"Are you always this boring?"

"I know. It must be one of the legs for that thing..."

"What thing?"

"I'm trying to think. It's right on the tip of my tongue... trough. That's it. It's a trough."

"A what-th?"

"A trough. Humans use it to hold water for animals."

"Water...?"

"Water!"

"Do you think there's any still there?"

"I don't know..."

"And even if there is, how would we get it down?"

"I don't know... Wait. Here's an idea."

"Well? Don't keep me in suspense."

"A siphon."

"A what? What's that?"

"Never mind that now. Let's find out if there's water there first."

By this time Slimy had more or less recovered his senses.

"Beekle Henry!" he called in great excitement. "Beekle Henry! 'Umble Bumble! Come quickly! Come quickly!"

Well, those two good-hearted insects who might justifiably have been a bit peeved with Slimy didn't think twice and rushed over just as fast as they could.

"What is it, your 'onour?" 'Umble Bumble asked anxiously. Having flown, he had got there much sooner than Beekle Henry.

"Yes, what is it?" Beekle Henry demanded, arriving at last, puffing like a steam train and wishing desperately for a bicycle.

"That's a trough," Slimy said, pointing with one of his antennae.

"A what-th?" Beekle Henry panted.

"Troughs hold water," Slimy said. "Quick, 'Umble. Up you go and see if there's any left."

"Right you are, sir," 'Umble said, catching Slimy's excitement, and he zoomed off.

"But even if there is water up there," Beekle Henry said doubtfully. "It might as well be on the moon."

"Never you mind about that," Slimy said, and just then 'Umble Bumble called down to them.

"You're right, sir, your 'onour. There is water. There's a sort of lid thing. It's got 'oles and I can see water underneath."

Well actually, it wasn't a lid. It was a sheet of rusting corrugated iron that somebody had put there and forgotten, why I have no idea. But whatever the reason it had had much the same effect as a proper lid. Rain had drained in through the holes and collected in the bottom of the trough and the iron had protected it enough so that there was still some left, even in the drought.

'Umble Bumble came zooming back down.

"How deep's the water, 'Umble?" Slimy asked. You might think he would be incoherent with excitement, stuttering and stammering and unable to get his words out,

but he wasn't. He was suddenly very calm and composed. His sub-conscious mind had been working away and had now supplied him with a detailed plan of action so that he knew exactly what they had to do.

'Umble Bumble thought for a second and then said:

"It's about five bees deep, sir." He was even more respectful than usual and for once, Beekle Henry, sensing that Slimy knew what he was about, was happy not to argue.

"How are you planning to get the water down?" he asked.

"With a siphon," Slimy said. "But don't ask me what that is. There isn't time to explain."

"All right," Beekle Henry said. "But will this save Dan de Lion?"

"I don't know," Slimy said honestly. "I don't know if my idea will work, I've only ever read about it. And I don't know if there's enough water up there to keep him going till it rains, but we have to try. It's the only chance he's got."

Beekle Henry looked at him for a long moment.

"Yes," he said at last. "We have to try. All right, Slimy, old snail. We're yours to command."

"Aye-aye," Slimy said. "Then avast swinging the lead you lubbers. We need hollow reeds and we need rope."

Avast is nautical talk for stop or cease, which was a bit unfair of Slimy as nobody at all had been swinging the lead, which means loafing. Back in the days before electronics, you see, the only way a ship could tell how deep the water might be was to drop a line over the side and actually measure how far it was to the bottom. To make the line sink they would tie a lump of lead to the end and as an extra refinement they would "arm" the lead with a coating of tallow, which is sticky fat, so that it would bring back a sample of whatever might be down there on the bottom. If the depth was ten fathoms and the tallow brought up mud, you would be in one place, but if the depth was ten fathoms and the tallow brought up sand and broken shell, or gravel, or weed, you would be in quite another which was important to know if, say, you were trying to find your way into port in thick fog. The mud might mean that you were well off course and heading for disaster while the gravel might mean that you were right in the middle of the fairway, just where you hoped to be and quite safe.

The thing was, however, that to get an accurate measure of the depth from a moving ship, the leadsman would have to swing the lead in a big circle and let it go so that it would land well out in front and have time to sink to the bottom before the ship caught up with it. Otherwise, the leadline would never be straight up and down and the measurement would never be correct. If you try it out with a piece of string while walking along, you'll instantly see what I mean and, as sailor's know, wrong information can often be worse than no information at all. All of which is long way of coming to understand that if a leadsman was swinging the lead then he wasn't doing any measuring and that he was, in fact, loafing.

"But where on earth are we ever going to get hollow reeds..." Beekle Henry started to say.

"Where the soggy ground used to be," Slimy interrupted.

"Of course," Beekle Henry said, vastly relieved. He had been having visions of another nightmare trek to the creek and back.

"But what about rope?" Beekle Henry asked after a moment. "How much rope?"

"Enough to get up to the top there," Slimy said. "And back down again. Plus a bit more."

"But we'll never be able to make a grass rope long enough to do that," Beekle Henry said. "Or strong enough."

However, Slimy – or at least his sub-conscious – was equal to this too. Without even realising that he'd done it or why it might be important, Slimy, while Beekle Henry had been filling his gumnuts in the creek, had noticed a bit of old fishing line tangled around a root on the opposite bank. Someone had been fishing there, snagged his hook and then had been forced to break the line, as I expect happens to you all the time. No? Well it certainly does to me. If there's a snag or an old boot anywhere in the vicinity, I catch it every time, I can assure you, though to be perfectly honest I'd much rather catch an old boot than a fish. People will tell you that fish are cold-blooded and don't feel pain but this is absolutely incorrect. Fish feel just as much pain as any other animal, as much pain, in fact, as you do and how would you like to be dragged around by a hook through your mouth?

Anyway, now that the water in the creek was so low because of the drought, the fishing line was plain to see. Slimy explained exactly where it was and sent 'Umble Bumble off to get a good, long length of it. Meanwhile, Slimy and Beekle Henry set off for the soak.

This, as it happened, was only just past the trough, which was just as well. What amounts to a hop, step and a couple of jumps for you or me is a long, wearisome walk for a snail or a beetle, and you have to remember that they were still pretty much exhausted from their first attempt to save Dan de Lion.

The soak, usually fed by a little underground spring, had long since dried up in the heat but the reeds that Slimy was counting on were still there, all dried out, but so much the better.

"Now what?" Beekle Henry said, but Slimy was too busy to talk. He dived inside, brought out his sextant and began to make some careful calculations.

"We will need five of these reeds," he said at last. "Six to be sure."

And that just goes to show that nothing is ever wasted. All that time Slimy had spent practising his navigation with the others laughing at him and telling him that it was just the silliest thing they'd ever seen and completely and utterly useless because who had ever heard of a snail needing to fix his position, was turning out to be extremely valuable after all. A sextant, you see, measures angles, and once you know an angle, with a little simple geometry you can calculate height or length. You won't have started geometry yet, I expect, but it's the branch of mathematics that deals with shapes, squares, triangles, circles and angles and all that sort of thing.

At last, Slimy put his sextant away. "Come on," he said. "And we'll need to make sure our reeds are all the same diameter without any leaks."

"What on earth is diameter?" Beekle Henry demanded.

"Never mind now," Slimy said. "There's no time to explain."

But while our two friends are busy choosing and chewing their way through the reeds to cut them down, I might take the chance to tell you because it's important to the story.

A circle, and I hope we all know what a circle is, has two main dimensions, that is measurements. One is the circumference which is the distance right around the outside, and the other is the radius which is the distance from the centre of the circle to the

circumference. Now the diameter is twice the radius, or putting it another way the diameter is the distance from one side of the circumference to the other but passing through the centre. If a line from side to side of the circle doesn't go through the centre, then it's not the diameter at all, but something else called a chord.

So now, if you break off a hollow reed and look at the end, what have you got? A circle. And if you have two reeds that have the same diameter, what does that mean? It means that the circles at the end are the same size, or that the reeds themselves are the same thickness.

While all this was going on, poor, old 'Umble Bumble was having a dreadful time. Fishing line, as I'm sure you know, is the most tanglesome stuff ever invented with the possible exception of children's hair. 'Umble Bumble found the fishing line right where the captain said it would be but then the trouble started. The water in the stream, before it dropped away, had so swirled the line about that it had tangled itself up in quite the tightest and most aggravating knots. Captain, incidentally, had just occurred to 'Umble Bumble as absolutely the correct title for a nautical snail with a fine air of command.

He sighed deeply, bit through what looked like a promising loop and set about trying to free enough line for the captain's purposes, and hours later, he was still at it. One of the other things I hate about fishing, apart from catching and hurting fish, is that I spend all my time untangling the lines that certain people of the small fidgety variety spend all their time tangling up. In fact, let's never go fishing again, let's go swimming instead. But even so, I can truly sympathise with 'Umble Bumble. He probably had the worst job of all.

When, eventually, he thought he might have enough he flew back to the others and arrived just in time to find Beekle Henry and Slimy towing the last of the reeds across to the trough, and very hot and tired they were. They looked like they were almost exhausted, especially poor, old Slimy who, as you will remember, really was starving to death. The only thing that kept him going was a story he had once read about a mountaineer who had set out to climb Mount Everest, or Chomolungma, which I dare say you know is the very highest mountain in the world. An interesting thing to know about Mount Everest is that we think it's actually still growing at about 6 millimetres a year, all because of plate tectonics. But the mountain is already so high that the air up there gets

very thin and hard to breath, which makes it very dangerous indeed and more than 200 people have died trying to reach the top. But Slimy's mountaineer, a brave and resolute man, had managed to get all the way up by repeating over and over to himself:

"One more step. One more step. One more step."

Slimy tried it himself and found it was true. You can always take one more step, no matter how hungry you are, no matter how tired you are, no matter how doubtful you might be that your plan will work. And Slimy was very doubtful indeed, though like all good leaders he kept his worries to himself. Burdening the others with his fears would have disheartened them and might have made them abandon the plan altogether.

"Captain, your 'onour," 'Umble Bumble said, roaring down in a power dive. "I've got the fishing line. What next?"

"Good man, Bumble, er, bee..." Slimy said. "What we need now is some of your best wax."

"Aye-aye captain, your 'onour," 'Umble Bumble said crisply and raced off.

"All right, Beekle Henry " Slimy said. "Now we need to lay these pipes, these reeds, in a line from Dan de Lion to the trough and join them up."

"Yes Slimy ," Beekle Henry said wearily. "But can't we have a rest first?"

"We can rest when it's finished," Slimy said sternly. "There's not a minute to lose." Besides which, Slimy was pretty sure that if he stopped he would never be able to get himself going again. So the two little creatures set to and pushed and pulled and struggled with the pipes until they were all laid out to Slimy's satisfaction.

'Umble Bumble arrived back with the wax and the three of them went to work, joining the pipes together and making them waterproof. This was probably the easiest part of the whole project. Reeds have a natural taper, that is one end is thinner than the other. So by fitting a thin end into a thick end and sealing the joint with wax they eventually produced a continuous length of pipe that would easily reach from the trough to Dan de Lion. The next task was to hoist one end of the pipe up to the trough and into the water, which, of course, was why Slimy had sent 'Umble Bumble for the fishing line.

"Right," Slimy said when at last the pipe was finished. He took the fishing line and made one end fast to the reed, using a timber hitch. And it was just as well that Slimy was so nautical because unless you know the right knots, nylon fishing line will never stay

done up. Next, Slimy carefully flaked out the line so that it would run free without a snag and then he beckoned 'Umble Bumble.

"Now Bumble," he said. "See that nail up there in the edge of the trough...?"

"No sir, captain your 'onour. Can't say that I do."

"Wait," Slimy said and dived below to fish out his telescope. "Now Bumble. Do you see it now?"

It took a while for 'Umble Bumble to get the hang of focusing the glass but at last he said:

"Aye-aye sir. I can see it now, captain, sir."

"Good. Now Bumble," Slimy said. "I want you to fly up there with the line, pass it round the nail and bring it back down. Got that?"

"Aye-aye captain, your 'onour."

"Off you go then..."

'Umble Bumble took the end of the line that Slimy gave him and flew off. He was back in a flash. Slimy hauled in the slack on the line – there was rather a lot as 'Umble Bumble had been very anxious to get sufficient – and then he said:

"All right, Bumble. You go back up there and guide the pipe over the edge while Beekle Henry and I haul it up."

Well that was the plan, but when Slimy and Beekle Henry started hauling away I'm afraid absolutely nothing happened. You see, the pipe was too heavy for them to lift now that it was all joined together and even when 'Umble Bumble came back down and added his weight, all they could manage to do was to raise it only a fraction.

"Well that's that," Beekle Henry said glumly. "It's a fine idea, Slimy, old chap – at least I'm pretty sure it is – but we're just not strong enough to do it."

"We've got to do it," Slimy said. Beekle Henry just shrugged.

"We've got to do it," Slimy repeated. "There must be a way."

"Slimy, we're beaten," Beekle Henry said. "I'm going to go and have a good long sleep. For a week. At least a week, and I may never wake up again." And he was about to take his poor over-worked ellipsoid rotundity off to his hammock when 'Umble Bumble stopped him.

"You can't," he said, and it was a measure of his distress that for the only for the second time anybody could remember he neglected to give Beekle Henry any sort of title. "You're always the one who says: 'never give up'. And here you are, giving up. You can't. You just can't."

"But there's nothing more we can do, you silly old bee," Beekle Henry said.

"But yes there is!" It was Slimy and he was shouting with excitement.

"There you are," Umble Bumble said, equally excited. "I knew the captain would think of something."

"Purchase," Slimy said. "We need purchase."

"Purchase?" Beekle Henry said, mystified. "There's nothing to buy around here, old chap."

"Don't be ridiculous," Slimy said. "I mean purchase as in a block and tackle." Or purchase as in mechanical advantage which is a very interesting process because you can use it to increase your strength enormously.

You can gain mechanical advantage using a block and tackle like Slimy, or gear wheels as on your bicycle or in a car, or by using a lever like a see-saw. Yes, absolutely, a see-saw. If you sit on one end of a see-saw and your big brother sits on the other end, what happens? Well, because he's much heavier than you, he hits the ground with a thump and you go shooting up in the air. But if your brother moves right in along the plank to the middle then you'll hit the ground and he'll be the one to go up, which is not magic, just mechanical advantage. You see, the distance between you and the middle of the see-saw, or the length of your lever, is now much longer than the distance between your brother and the middle of the see-saw, or the length of his lever. And because your lever is longer you can now lift more weight than he can.

It took Slimy quite some time to rig up his block and tackle system because he didn't have any proper blocks, which are pulleys, but he managed to jury rig it by using loops of fishing line instead. Sailors say that they jury rig something when they have to improvise or make repairs without the proper fittings, and in the end Slimy's system worked like this:

One end of the line was tied to the nail, and the other end ran down to the ground, through a loop tied to the pipe, back up to the nail and through another loop, and then

finally back down to the ground. It's a bit difficult to explain in words but I'm sure you lot could work it out for yourselves with a bit of string.

Beekle Henry had watched Slimy and 'Umble Bumble rigging this up with weary puzzlement and when it was finally finished he said:

"But what good is all that tangle." He spoke rather more crossly than he meant to but he really was very tired indeed.

"This tangle," Slimy snapped. "This tangle means we can lift twice as much as we could before. Come on..."

And do you know? He was right. Slimy struck up his favourite sea-shanty – What shall we do with the drunken snail, O! – and this time the pipe went swaying up at the first attempt. It was quite tricky for 'Umble Bumble to guide it over the edge of the trough, but in the end he managed and then he set about carefully bending the reed down and into the water.

"Careful you don't kink it," Slimy called. "Or we'll have to start all over again."

"Oh no," Beekle Henry said. He didn't think he could bear the thought, but luckily for everybody 'Umble Bumble found that he could pass the pipe through a handy hole in the tin lid and that the edge of the hole would bend the reed down in a curve until the end was well and truly submerged.

"It's done, captain sir, your 'onour," 'Umble Bumble called at last, but Beekle Henry was most disappointed. He was bending down, peering at the other end of the pipe just by Dan de Lion.

"What does he mean that it's done?" he said. "There's nothing happening. There's no water. Not a drop."

"Of course not," Slimy said. "To get the water flowing, we have to suck it up and over the edge of the trough."

"Oh," Beekle Henry said, none the wiser. However, a siphon really is a very simple thing though it will take me a little while to explain how it works.

You may not think it, but the air around us is actually very heavy. We never really notice it or think about it because we're so used to it, but all that air is pressing down on us all the time. I bet you never realised how strong you are, carrying all that air around, but that's exactly what we do. We call that weight air pressure and you can see how it

works very easily. Put an empty glass into a sink full of water until it's right under the surface and then turn it so that it's upside down. Now carefully lift it up and as the bottom of the glass comes up out of the water you'll see that the water inside the glass will rise up with it.

So what keeps it there? The answer is air pressure. The weight of the air pressing on the water around the outside of the glass stops the water inside the glass from falling back down. If you lift the glass right up until the rim is clear of the water in the sink, then the water inside the glass will fall out because the seal has been broken and the pressure of the air no longer exerts the right sort of force to keep it in.

Well, a siphon works in exactly the same way. Suppose you hang a hose or a tube over the edge of the sink, one end in the water and the other on the outside, just like Slimy's pipe. Now to make this a siphon you have to do two things. The first is to make sure the end of the tube on the outside is lower to the ground than the end of the tube in the water. The second thing is to suck all the air out of the tube.

See what happens? Once you remove the air from the tube, the water starts to flow all by itself. Well, not really all by itself because air pressure is what is forcing the water up through the tube and over the edge of the sink so that it flows down the other side. And oh dear me. Are you in trouble now. Just look at that water all over the floor. And I don't think it will do any good to tell your mother that it was all air pressure's fault. In my experience, mothers tend to be extremely unsympathetic towards scientific experiment.

Anyway, you can see now why Slimy Snail was sucking away at his irrigation pipe with all his might and main. To irrigate, by the way, means to supply water, usually to plants. Slimy sucked and sucked and sucked but nothing happened. 'Umble Bumble flew down and cheered him on but still nothing happened, and at last Slimy stopped.

"I can't do it," he said when he had recovered his breath, and the others were shocked to see that he was about to burst into tears. To have overcome so many difficulties, to have worked so hard for so long and to be so close to saving Dan de Lion, and yet still so far, was more than Slimy in his weakened condition could bear.

Beekle Henry looked at the poor, old snail for a long moment, then squared his shoulders and strode forward manfully, sorry, beetlefully. Perhaps for the first time in his life Beekle Henry's ellipsoid rotundity instead of providing endless amusement to his

friends might actually come in useful. He breathed all the way out, put his mouth to the pipe and began to suck. He sucked until he thought his weskit would pop. He sucked until he thought his bluey-greeny-goldy wing cases would fall off. He sucked until he thought his head would split. And just as he was sure he would pop, a great gush of water filled his mouth and splashed all over him.

They had done it. The three of them had done it. The three of them together, working as a team, had done it. And that's important. A team of three all working together is much stronger than three people all working separately. We have a saying: that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. And this means that if you add up three people, you get three people, but if you add up three people all working together and helping each other then you get about six and a half.

But Slimy, Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble were far too tired to cheer or even to congratulate each other. They stood there watching the water flowing out of the pipe and around Dan de Lion, and then suddenly without a word 'Umble Bumble flew off to his hive, Beekle Henry crawled into his hammock, all wet as he was, and Slimy went below decks and fell into an exhausted stupor, which is the sort of sleep you have when nothing short of an earthquake will wake you up. Meanwhile, the water kept flowing and flowing and flowing.

Next morning it was as though a miracle had occurred. Dan de Lion was standing up straight and strong again, and his leaves looked as fresh and green as ever they had.

"Well," Beekle Henry said when he finally roused himself, quite sure that he had not had nearly enough sleep. "You look quite your old self again."

"And I feel it," Dan de Lion said. "I feel marvellous... Now tell me. However did you do it. The last I remember is Slimy with a drop or two of water in a gumnut."

So Beekle Henry set to and told him the story of the siphon. 'Umble Bumble arrived half way through and sat listening contentedly.

"...And so you see," Beekle Henry finished, at last. "It was all Slimy really. It was his idea, and he told us how to do it. And he wouldn't hear of us giving up, no matter how difficult it was."

"Well I never," Dan de Lion said. "What an epic. Where is Slimy. I must think of some appropriate way to thank him."

"Well actually," Beekle Henry said. "He's still asleep and it wouldn't be kind to wake him. He's starving and because of the drought there's nothing for him to eat. Let him sleep as long as he can."

"Nothing for him to eat?" Dan de Lion said. "Why, of course there is. I've got plenty to spare now, thanks to him."

Beekle Henry nodded slowly. Then he tore a piece from one of Dan de Lion's leaves and knocked on Slimy's shell.

"Ahoy," he called. "Show a leg. All hands on deck. Breakfast's ready."

Beekle Henry and the thrush

"In consideration of the powers rightwise and eternally invested in me as sovereign overlord, King of the Ungle, I, Dan de Lion, dub thee Slimy Snail, Sir Helix Aspersa of the Order Gastropod Mollusc, for services to the crown of outstanding ingenuity, merit and courage.

"Furthermore, I, Dan de Lion, sovereign overlord, king etc, appoint thee, Sir Helix Aspersa, Admiral of the Fleet in perpetuity and forever."

And then swooping down, Dan de Lion touched Slimy on each shoulder with a petal held like a sword and proclaimed: "Arise, Sir Knight."

"Three cheers for Sir Slimy," Beekle Henry called and was just drawing breath for the first roar when Slimy interrupted.

"You mean Sir Helix," he said crisply. "My correct title is Sir Helix. Now carry on."

Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble looked at each other and each little creature was thinking exactly the same thing:

"Uh-oh."

"Three cheers for Sir Helix," Beekle Henry called again but in a much more subdued voice and he and 'Umble Bumble came out with a rather feeble chorus of:

"Hip-ray, hip-ray, hip-ray."

Of course, the proper way to give three cheers is: hip-hip-hooray, hip-hip-hooray, hip-hip-hooray but Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble suddenly found that they preferred the shortened-down, modern version. They had both realised at the same moment that the more fuss they made of Slimy the more grief there was likely to be. They didn't want to spoil what Slimy would doubtless regard as the most important day of his life – after all, who had ever heard of a snail being knighted before – but nor did they wish to add fuel to what they both suspected might be a fire already raging out of control.

E-T-C, by the way, is the abbreviation or shortened form for et cetera which is Latin for "et" and, "cetera" the rest and which we use as a quick way of saying: and so forth and so on. It would be quite wrong, incidentally, to say "and etc" as that would mean

"and and the rest", a tautology every bit as bad as in perpetuity and forever, in perpetuity and forever meaning exactly the same thing.

And knighthood, I should explain, is a very ancient institution which in one form dates back to the early Roman empire. However, the form in which we know it came into being almost 2,000 years ago in what is now Iran and which used to be Persia. Remember Iskander and his battles with the Persians? Well centuries after that had all settled down and things had gone back to normal and everyone had more or less forgotten about pesky, little Alexander causing trouble for no very good reason here, there and everywhere, the Persians found themselves being invaded every summer by marauding tribes from central Asia who would sweep down through the Hindu Kush mountains on their tough, steppe ponies and help themselves to whatever they fancied.

You can think of them as Vikings on horseback which is a pretty good analogy as the steppes are vast stretches of grassland, oceans really, almost as boundless as the sea. And an analogy is when we compare something to something else quite different to paint a word picture. Anyway, as you might imagine, the Persians got pretty sick of these raiders pretty quickly.

The raiders' main weapon was the bow and the Persians, to counter the clouds of arrows that came flying at their faces, developed heavy armour for both themselves and their horses, so inventing the knight-warrior. The idea was such a good one, knights in those days were pretty much as impregnable as army tanks are now, that it spread north and then west until the whole of Europe was more or less infested with knights carrying on like pork chops. Because the only person who could stop a knight behaving badly was another knight, who was probably behaving even worse, ordinary people cordially detested them. Even when there happened to be a war going on, which was most of the time, and the knights were supposed to be off battling each other, they still managed to make things miserable for everyone who wasn't a knight. Something had to be done, and the sooner the better.

I wonder if you lot have heard of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table? And Merlin the magician, and Sir Lancelot, and Guinevere, Arthur's queen? Well, it's a wonderful story which I won't spoil for you. You should read it for yourselves, but I will tell you this.

We're not sure whether King Arthur really existed and whether, if he did, that it was actually he who invented the idea of chivalry, but we do know that this very important notion, or philosophy as we would call it, came into being about the time Arthur might have lived. Chivalry, you see, is a code of conduct, that taught knights how to stop behaving like pork chops and to become useful members of society. For instance, chivalry meant that instead of riding round the countryside distressing every damsel, or young lady, they happened to meet, knights would now go out of their way to help damsels in distress. Chivalry is all about honour and honesty and loyalty and many of us who like to call ourselves gentlemen still do our best to uphold these ideals.

As time passed and with the arrival of gunpowder, cannon and muskets, knights in armour became what we call obsolete. A man with a sword and a lance mounted on a destrier, even if he was dressed in sardine tins, was no match for a man with a musket. A destrier, by the way, was a knight's warhorse and they were bred to be particularly strong to carry all that weight, though not as everyone thinks, particularly big. Some knights were so heavy in their armour that they had to be lifted into the saddle by a small crane and if ever they were knocked down, they could never manage to get up again without help.

However, although knights in armour faded into history, chivalry survived and so did some of the orders of knighthood, such as the order of the Garter, or where you lot are concerned, the order of Put A Sock In It, and to this day in some countries some people are still knighted by their monarchs for exceptional service and as a mark of great distinction. It is something to be proud of.

And Sir Helix Aspersa, Admiral of the Fleet, was indeed very, very proud, so proud that even if he had heard the ominous tock, tock, tock away off in the distance I dare say he would have ignored it completely anyway. Sir Helix, Beekle Henry said glumly to himself, was so proud that anyone would think he'd just discovered America instead of Columbus, and instantly Beekle Henry was ashamed of himself for making such a mean observation.

Beekle Henry should also have been ashamed of himself for thinking that Christopher Columbus discovered America. The indigenous or native Americans were there long before anybody else, just like the indigenous Australians discovered Australia long before

white men did, and as we know, the Vikings, led by Leif Ericson, were the first Europeans to find America, anyway. If he thought to mention it, Beekle Henry would probably tell you that other great myth about Columbus, that everybody but him thought the world was flat, not round like our orange, and that they all believed that if he sailed too far out into the ocean he would fall off the edge. A myth is an historical story that people may still believe even though it has been proved to be nonsense, and even in Columbus's day most educated people had long stopped believing the myth that the world was flat. Columbus was actually looking for a new way to China and the Spice Islands and bumped into America by accident because he was an even worse navigator than Slimy.

Beekle Henry took a deep breath, told himself to forget all about Columbus and to do the right thing.

"Well, Slimy, old chap," he said, determined to be happy for him. "May I offer you my heartiest congratulations?"

"Er, thank you," Sir Slimy said. "But I must insist that from now on you address me as Sir Helix. And salute."

"Quite right," Dan de Lion said. Beekle Henry looked from one to the other in amazement.

"And while we're on the subject of proper conduct," Sir Slimy went on. "Now that I am Admiral of the Fleet I shall expect a much higher standard of discipline from my officers."

"Such as?" Beekle Henry said, beginning to tap one of his feet.

As we know, Beekle Henry was quite the nicest of beetles and almost impossible to rouse to anger, but it was happening now. My word it was. And very quickly.

"No more lolling about in your hammock, all hours of the day and night," Sir Slimy said. "And you can get rid of that silly weskit, it's nothing like proper uniform. There will be calisthenics at dawn every morning, and ..."

"Caliswhatnics?" Beekle Henry interrupted. He was now tapping two of his feet."

"Exercises, dolt! Physical conditioning. And then you will scrub my decks, if you please, and polish the cannon..."

"You haven't got any cannon, you silly old snail," Beekle Henry snapped but Sir Slimy roared back at him:

"Hold your tongue. You speak when I give you permission."

"A snail with cannon..." Beekle Henry went on. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"One more word," Sir Slimy shouted. "And I'll have you flogged. I demand unquestioning obedience."

"You can demand all you like, old chap," Beekle Henry said, now tapping three of his feet which meant that he was very angry indeed.

"But," he continued. "You're not a real admiral, you don't have a fleet, I'm not one of your officers and even if I were, nobody gives me orders, least of all a demented snail and a flower with delusions of grandeur. And I wish you both a very good afternoon." Beekle Henry turned sharp on his heel and headed off to his hammock and I have to say that I never dreamed that Beekle Henry had such a fine, independent spirit under his easy-going nature.

"Halt," Sir Slimy bellowed. "This is mutiny, black, bloody mutiny. Halt or I fire."

"Fire?" Beekle Henry retorted and very mildly too considering the circumstances. "You couldn't set yourself on fire with a boxes of matches and a barbecue."

"Bumble," Sir Slimy squeaked, having got way past shouting, roaring and bellowing. "Arrest that insect."

But 'Umble Bumble, as it turned out, had very much a mind of his own too and while he was more than happy to give respect where respect was due, he suddenly found it wasn't. Due that is.

"Arrest 'im yourself," he said bluntly, speaking for the third time in anyone's memory, including his own, without using at least one honorific.

Sir Slimy was taken flat aback.

"Double mutiny," he whispered and turned to Dan de Lion for help. However, Dan de Lion like all kings who are still kings was very good at sniffing out which way the wind was blowing. He had turned his face to the sun and was ignoring everything, including Sir Slimy, with regal indifference.

Who's looked up honorific? Lazy lot. Flat aback? Hopeless. An honorific is a title and can range from your Exalted, Exquisite, Supreme, Serene, Sublime, Magnificent Majesty Most Mighty on High, right down to plain Mister, Missus, Miz, Master or Miss, not that I'm suggesting that any of you lot deserve anything, even just master.

Which reminds me.

Would anyone care to say who it was who put the three white mice in my briefcase. The white mice which escaped when I opened my briefcase. On the train to work. In peak hour. Causing mayhem and riot?

Hmmm. I thought not. We shall pursue this later...

Flat aback, in the meantime, is a seaman's term from the days of the square-riggers. Being caught flat aback is what happens when bad steering or a sudden wind shift sets the sails pushing instead of pulling. This was always a very nasty surprise and could be dangerous too. If the wind was strong enough, it might happen that all your masts would fall down on top of you.

And if the truth be known, that's exactly how Sir Slimy felt, as though three large masts complete with rigging and yardarms (those are the cross bits) had all landed on his head. From fame and glory he had suddenly plunged to the depths of indignity.

"Bumble," he said, the desperation plain in his voice. "I'll give you one last chance..."

But 'Umble Bumble didn't even wait for him to finish. He made a very rude noise – no, we do not require a demonstration, thank you – and flew off about rather better business than listening to a snail with a head more swollen than a hot-air balloon. And whilst we're on the subject, demented means crazy or insane, delusion means a mistaken belief, and grandeur means magnificence.

Sir Slimy, however, like most of us in a similar situation, couldn't see that it was in any way his fault and instead of blaming himself, as he should have done and which would have been the first step to repairing the damage, he blamed everybody else. He ranted a bit. He raved a bit. And then he settled down to a long, hot, fuming sulk, fussing away to himself like a tea-kettle on the boil. And still he failed to hear the ominous tock, tock, tock in the now, not so distance.

Beekle Henry lying in his hammock heard it, however, and knew what it was. He hoped Slimy was taking proper precautions and wondered if he ought to go and check,

good friend that he was, but he decided that he would get no thanks for it – undoubtedly quite the reverse in the circumstances – and so he settled himself down for a nice nap. Even so his conscience nagged at him. Most uncomfortable things, consciences, particularly those afflicted with white mice...

One thing not bothering Beekle Henry's conscience was the thought of being a mutineer. In the first place, he knew that Slimy, sir or not, had no right to give him orders and that therefore he was under no obligation to obey them and that therefore he couldn't be accused of mutiny if he didn't. And in the second place, Beekle Henry had no idea how serious a crime real mutiny is.

In the army, the navy or the airforce it's just about the worst possible and carries very severe penalties indeed, often death. Even so, people have mutinied in the past and probably will again in the future. Occasionally it might even be the only right, the only honourable, the only decent thing to do. You see, you should never obey orders unthinkingly just because they're orders. Obey them only if they're right.

Here's an example of what I mean. If I were to order you to slap your brother's face just because I felt like being mean, then you would be absolutely right to refuse. But if I were to order you to slap your brother's face because he was hysterical and that were the only way of snapping him out of it, then you would be right to obey. Hysterics are what happens when someone gets so upset that they are shouting and screaming and carrying on so much that they can't think, never mind think straight. And when people get into that state, a short, sharp shock is often the best way to calm them down.

I should also tell you that when things go wrong, it is not considered any sort of defence to say: "But I was just obeying orders." Like Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble you must always think for yourselves.

Mutinies, however, are rarely as simple and clear-cut as to whether or not you should slap your brother. For example, take one of the most famous, or should I say notorious, mutinies of all: the mutiny on the *Bounty*, which happened in 1789 over 200 years ago.

The *Bounty*, a small ship-rigged vessel, was purchased by Britain's Royal Navy and then modified for a special expedition. The idea was to sail all the way from England to Tahiti, one of the Pacific Islands, load breadfruit plants and transport the plants, still living, to the Caribbean with the aim of growing them in plantations and increasing the

food supply for the people in the West Indies. When breadfruit are cooked they taste like fresh bread, hence the name, and they are a staple food in many parts of the world, staple in this sense meaning main or principal.

In those days, the voyage involved was very long and dangerous, and Slimy and I think you should get out the atlas so that you can see for yourselves just what a difficult undertaking it was. Slimy says that I should also tell you that ship-rigged means the Bounty had three masts, all square-rigged with yardarms. There are some other technicalities but we won't bother with them just now. No, Slimy. I have no intention of trying to explain what a gaff-rigged mizzen might be. If you want to try, you go right ahead, but do it on your own time please.

To get to Tahiti, the Bounty sailed down the Atlantic oceans, north and south, with the intention of rounding Cape Horn, which we have mentioned before. Cape Horn is at the very tip of South America (can you find that?) and sticks down towards Antarctica forming a narrow strait called Drake passage after that same Sir Francis Drake we met fighting the Spanish Armada. In those days, this was pretty much the only way to get from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. There was no Panama Canal, which is the way most ships go now, and the only other route was through the Straits of Magellan, which most seamen think on balance is even more difficult than Drake Passage.

Now Cape Horn is one of the most dangerous places on earth, for two reasons. If you look at the atlas again you'll see that what we now tend to call the Southern Ocean runs through Drake Passage and right round the bottom of the world all the way back to Drake Passage. The Southern Ocean is an ocean of storms, more storms and often bigger storms than anywhere else and the waves the storms create, which seaman call greybeards, can grow much bigger and more ferocious than anywhere else because there is no land to interrupt their progress, or fetch. But at the same time these huge waves have to squeeze through Drake Passage and because the water also gets shallower there they can start to break like surf on a beach. Cape Horn is indeed a fearsome place where ships without number have been lost with all hands. A seaman who doesn't fear Cape Horn is a fool.

And you can bet that the men of the Bounty certainly did. They tried to round the Horn against westerly gales for a full month, pounding into the freezing seas backwards and forwards without ever making any progress until at last Lieutenant Bligh, the captain,

decided that the only thing to do was to turn about and sail right round the world the other way to eventually get to Tahiti.

Well, after such a terrible voyage a tropical island inhabited by friendly people and where the living was delightful was paradise indeed. Captain Bligh allowed his crew to stay ashore while they gathered the breadfruit plants and naturally enough when time came to leave, bound again for the dreaded Cape Horn, nobody but nobody wanted to go.

Even without Cape Horn and even with a captain who was only stern and not cruel, life on board a Royal Naval ship in those days was unbelievably hard. A man could be flogged with the cat o' nine tails to within an inch of his life for what we would regard as very minor offences. All you lot would be in very serious trouble, I can tell you. The food was terrible, salt pork, salt beef and dried peas with hard biscuit full of weevils, and the water was worse. And although, from all accounts, Lieutenant Bligh was not a particularly bad captain for the time, it was not surprising in the circumstances that not long after the Bounty left Tahiti, some of the crew, led by one of the officers, Fletcher Christian, decided to mutiny.

Captain Bligh was surprised, asleep in his bunk, and taken prisoner and then he and 18 of the crew, who had remained loyal to him, were set adrift in one of the ship's boats with a few supplies and a little water. No doubt, the mutineers expected Bligh and his men to drown. The boat was so over-loaded that it barely floated and even a small storm must surely sink it. Failing that, the men must die of thirst and hunger.

But the mutineers had misjudged their man. William Bligh might not have been a particularly good captain but he was a brilliant seaman and an even better navigator. At that time, the Pacific Ocean was largely unexplored and uncharted but first Captain Bligh found the island of Tofua, in the Tongan group, where his men gathered some more supplies, although one of them was killed by unfriendly natives. And then Bligh sailed his fragile little boat across 3,600 miles of open ocean until they reached safety in Timor. When I say miles, by the way, I mean nautical miles which are different to land miles, and one nautical mile is equal to very nearly two kilometres.

And that goes to show that Beekle Henry is absolutely right when he says: "Never give up." Captain Bligh certainly did not and in the process he completed one of the most remarkable voyages of all time.

You might want to know what happened to the mutineers. Well, some of them were caught in due course by the navy and taken back to England for trial. Christian and the rest, however, with some of their Tahitian friends sailed the *Bounty* to a desert island – now called Pitcairn Island – where they sank the ship and started a new life. And do you know, some of their great-great-umpty-great grand-children still live there.

But while I've been telling you all this, Beekle Henry still had not managed to drop off to sleep. Every time he felt his eyelids growing heavy there would come that ominous tock-tock-tock, now quite close, and Beekle Henry's conscience would nag at him again. At last he could stand it no longer and rolled out of his hammock.

Sir Slimy, unfortunately for him was still where Beekle Henry had left him and still buried deep in his shell, from which there was coming a sort of hubble-bubble noise.

"Oh no," Beekle Henry said to himself. "The stupendous, great idiot. Now he's in trouble."

Again came the sound, tock-tock-tock.

"Oi, Slimy," Beekle Henry shouted with his mouth right up against Sir Slimy's shell. "Do you want to be eaten alive, you addle-pated nincompoop?"

"What?!" Sir Slimy shouted, instantly popping out of his shell. "What did you call me? How dare you? How dare you, sir?"

"Shut up," Beekle Henry bellowed, dancing with impatience. "Shut up and listen! For your life!"

"What?" Sir Slimy said again, but already he was cocking his head. Tock-tock-tock came the sound and suddenly Sir Slimy was shivering with fright. Suddenly he forgot that he was furious with Beekle Henry.

"It's too late," he whimpered. "I'll never find a hiding place in time. I'm too slow. I'm far too slow."

"Quick," Beekle Henry said. "Paint. Give me all the paint you've got."

"What?" Sir Slimy said. "Have you gone mad?"

"Don't argue," Beekle Henry yelled. "Just do it. Hurry! Hurry!"

Sir Slimy finally did as he was told, dived inside and searched his workshop. The only paint he could find was a pot of pink and pot of purple left over from the last time he had redecorated his library. Tock-tock-tock-tock came the sound.

"Here," he said to Beekle Henry. "This is all I've got."

"Perfect," Beekle Henry said and quickly began to paint Sir Slimy with pink spots and purple stripes. Tock-tock-tock came the sound, now very close.

"Now listen, Slimy," Beekle Henry said, working as fast as ever he could. "Listen very carefully. You stay quiet. Whatever happens, not a word, not a sound. Nothing. Understand?"

"What are you going to do?" Sir Slimy said, trembling again as he heard the threatening tock-tock-tock.

"No time to explain," Beekle Henry said. "But remember, not a word. And he was just hiding the paint pots under a blade of grass when a large, plump thrush, brown on top and speckly underneath with a very sharp beak and a most unpleasant look in his beady eye descended upon them.

"What's this thing, then?" the thrush said, walking all round Sir Slimy.

"What thing?" Beekle Henry asked innocently.

"This thing here that looks like a snail, except it's pink and purple."

"I don't see anything," Beekle Henry said, sounding very puzzled.

"Are you blind?" demanded the thrush.

"Not the last time I looked," Beekle Henry said.

Sir Slimy smiled to himself despite himself and then remembered that he was terrified.

Thrushes, you see, eat snails. They tap them on a stone, tock-tock-tock, until the shell cracks and then gobble up the poor old snail with great relish, leaving behind a dreadful mess. You can sometimes find a thrush's stone and if you look carefully in amongst the broken bits of shell you'll find all sorts of torn books and broken billiard tables and comfy furniture ruined by the rain. A thrush, not to mince matters, is a snail's worst nightmare.

"Now look here," Sir Slimy's nightmare said to Beekle Henry in an ugly tone of voice. "If you're not blind then you must be able to see this thing here."

"What thing?" Beekle Henry said again. "I can see an ugly great bird up to no good, but apart from that..."

"Now I'm starting to get really annoyed," the thrush said. "Perhaps I should eat you."

"I'd give you dreadful indigestion," Beekle Henry said calmly. "And serve you jolly well right."

"Hmmm," the thrush said. "Maybe you would, and maybe you wouldn't. So hurry up and tell me what this is."

"What *what* is?" Beekle Henry said, sounding very bored.

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm seeing things?" the thrush demanded.

"It doesn't bother me," Beekle Henry said. "See what you like. See if I care."

"Hmmm," the thrush said. "Maybe I've had too many snails today. This thing is certainly strange enough to be an illusion."

And that, Sir Slimy couldn't help himself. He had been growing angrier and angrier at the notion that he didn't exist and was just a figment of some bird's fevered imagination. Beekle Henry's plan was working perfectly and all Slimy had to do was stay quiet just a little bit longer, but he just couldn't. Being ignored on top of all the other aggravation that day was just too much, never mind that it was to save his life.

"I am not an illusion," he roared, emerging from his garish shell. "I am Sir Helix Aspersa of the order Gastropod Mollusc and Admiral of the Fleet..."

Sir Slimy's voice tailed off as he finally realised that for the sake of his silly pride he would very probably be eaten alive. And I bet each one of you lot knows exactly how he felt. Hmmm? I bet each one of you has let your pride get you into the same sort of situation at least once.

"Uh-oh," Beekle Henry said to himself. "Why can't he ever shut up? That's all he had to do..."

"So, I suppose," the thrush said sarcastically to Beekle Henry. "I suppose that now you're going to tell me that I'm hearing things as well as seeing things."

"Well, you said yourself that you'd eaten too much," Beekle Henry said valiantly.

"I said I might have eaten too much," the thrush replied. "And now I'm pretty sure that I haven't. Now I'm pretty sure that I should eat a bit more. If it sounds like snail, and smells like snail then the best thing to do is to see if it tastes like snail."

"Garlic," Beekle Henry exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon," the thrush said.

"I should use lots of garlic if I were you."

"And just why would you use garlic if you were me?" the thrush asked.

"It purifies the blood," Beekle Henry said solemnly.

"My blood is quite pure, thank you very much," the thrush said, suddenly very snooty.

"It won't be if you eat that," Beekle Henry said.

"Ah, so you can see it now, can you?"

"Been trying to avoid it most of the day," Beekle Henry said truthfully. "It must have a really dreadful disease to make it look like that."

"Disease?" the thrush said.

"Mumps, measles, chicken pox, who knows? And that's why you need the garlic," Beekle Henry said. "Or you'll catch it. And whoever heard of a thrush with pink spots and purple stripes?"

"But I don't like garlic," the thrush said.

"No," Beekle Henry said. "I've never heard of a thrush who did. But it's that or pink spots and purple stripes. You mark my words and don't say I didn't warn you."

The thrush stood there thinking and Beekle Henry held his breath. Sir Slimy, himself, hadn't dared to breathe at all since his horrible gaffe and was turning purple under the pink and purple which made him look even more peculiar. And it was this that finally made up the thrush's mind.

"My mother always told me never to pass up a snail," the thrush remarked. "But taking everything into account and all things considered, in this case discretion probably is the better part of valour." And without more ado, he flew off.

And phew!

Discretion, by the way, is something you lot could do with a lot more of, discretion in this sense meaning prudence, meaning caution, and valour is a synonym for courage, which should also tell you what synonym means. That's right. Synonyms are different words that mean more or less the same thing. A gaffe, just to keep everything tidy, is a social blunder or saying something in company, as Slimy did, which is absolutely stupid.

Beekle Henry waited a minute to make sure the thrush really had gone and then he turned without a word and set off back to his hammock.

"Beekle Henry," Sir Slimy said in a very small voice.

"Yes?" Beekle Henry said, without turning round.

"I want to thank you for saving my life. Twice. I was being a blockhead and before that I was behaving abominably. I can see that now, and I apologise. I hope you can forgive me."

"That's all right, Sir Helix," Beekle Henry said stiffly.

"And I think," Sir Slimy said, "That even though I'm very honoured and very grateful to have been made a knight and admiral of the fleet, I think I would rather not use my titles. If you don't mind, Dan de Lion, I'll be just plain Slimy again."

"Not at all," Dan de Lion said grandly.

"Well done, old Slimy," Beekle Henry said. And off in the distance they could hear the hub-buzz of 'Umble Bumble coming back to see if things had been sorted out yet. He was delighted when he found that everything was all right again.

That's really the end of this story but there are a couple of things I want you to think about. I expect you have already heard the proverb: Pride goeth before a fall. And I expect, like Slimy that you've already found out for yourselves that it's true. But have you, like Slimy, realised what you have to do when that happens? Well, when you've been stupid or made a mistake, the only way of putting things right is to admit it honestly, openly and fully. I know it's not easy to do – oh yes, I've had to do my share – but you'll find that if you do have the courage to admit your faults then people will respect you for it and that any trouble you may have caused will evaporate a lot sooner than if you try to wiggle your way out of it.

And now you'd better go and look up evaporate. I'll give you a hint. It's what the water left in Slimy's trough didn't do.

The Butterflies' ball

"What's wrong with 'Umble Bumble?" Slimy Snail demanded of the world at large. "Gasping and sighing all the time, mooning about looking sappy. Anyone would think he was writing poetry."

"Or had a stomach ache," Dan de Lion said.

Beekle Henry opened an eye. "He's in love," he said.

"He's what?" the other two exclaimed simultaneously.

"He's in love," Beekle Henry said again.

And before you lot start saying "yeuch!" and making other choice noises, let me tell you that I confidently predict it will happen to all of you, too. If you're lucky. And if you stop sticking labels on people's backs saying "Hit me". Honestly. So juvenile.

"What do you mean, he's in love?" Slimy demanded.

"With whom? With what?" Dan de Lion said.

"With Letitia Lepidoptera," Beekle Henry said. 'Umble Bumble had confided in him, aware that Beekle Henry with his nose for gossip would pretty soon have found out for himself anyway.

"Who?" both the others said, sounding like a Greek chorus. And a Greek chorus was not a choir, as you might think, but a device used in the ancient Greek theatre. The members of the chorus would stand around the back of the stage and apart from moaning, groaning and generally carrying on, would help to explain the story of the play to the audience and sometimes to the actors as well.

"Letitia Lepidoptera," Beekle Henry said patiently. "She's a painted lady."

"Oh dear," Slimy said. His nautical knowledge included rather too much of the seamy side of life, which you lot are not supposed to know anything about at all, ever.

"Not that sort of painted lady," Beekle Henry said. "A painted lady butterfly. You should know what lepidoptera means Slimy..."

"In love with a butterfly...?" Dan de Lion said wonderingly.

"A bumble bee in love with a butterfly... that's ridiculous," Slimy snorted.

"Well ridiculous or not, it's true," Beekle Henry said with some irritation. "And you leave him alone. Shhh, here he comes."

Dan de Lion looked at Slimy, and Slimy looked at Dan de Lion, and they both sniggered.

"I said leave him alone," Beekle Henry repeated crossly. And I wouldn't think I should have to explain sniggering to you lot. Look at you. You're sniggering now, yourselves.

Normally, when 'Umble Bumble hove into view he would make a bee-line straight for them, but not today. From lightness of heart he launched into a very flashy sequence of looping the loop, then barrel rolls and finally, as pilots say, he boomed and zoomed before coming into land with a long sweeping glide.

"Morning your worshipful majesty," he beamed. "Morning gents. Wonderful day. Top notch, spiffin'."

"Well, Bumble," Dan de Lion remarked with a sideways look at Slimy. "You seem in excellent spirits, I must say."

Slimy sniggered again and Beekle Henry glared at him.

"Absolutely, your 'igness," 'Umble Bumble bubbled. "Couldn't be better."

"So what are you up to, then?" Slimy inquired archly and with a stifled giggle.

"Well, funny you should ask, sir," 'Umble Bumble said. "But I've come to a decision, and I rather 'oped you all would wish me luck first."

"Luck to do what?" Dan de Lion asked.

"Not at liberty to say, your majesty," 'Umble Bumble said coyly. "But I was sort of 'oping that if Beekle 'Enry wasn't too busy he might come with me. For support like..."

By the way, archly used in this sense does not mean curved like a bridge, dear me, no. It means roguish or mischievous, and please, please, never let me hear any of you say, as so many do these days, mischeevous. This is such a complete mangling of a perfectly good word that Slimy and I think that people guilty of it ought to be whipped. It is perfectly true that today's good English is only ever yesterday's bad English, but that's no excuse for using bad English yourselves. There are far too many other people in the world who will do that for you. And while we're on the subject, coyly is another little word that appears to be harmlessly simple but which is quite complicated. It means playfully shy rather than properly shy. So if your brother coyly asks whether you'd like a

bite of his apple, you're probably reasonably safe, but if he asks you archly, I'd watch out. I would think you're sure to get the worm.

To go along with 'Umble Bumble, Beekle Henry was going to have to fly and it says something about what a loyal friend he was that it took only a few minor threats to make him agree. He got dressed up in all his flying kit and then with only a medium degree of fuss he was away aloft and anxiously following 'Umble Bumble's lead.

It was a long flight, far too long for Beekle Henry's liking, all the way down to the creek and across to the other side. The stream was full of water again since rain had at last broken the drought and the pasture on the other side was thick with buttercups, while the buttercups themselves were thick with butterflies competing for the nectar.

'Umble Bumble stopped on a handy twig and Beekle Henry crashed landed beside him a moment later, nearly dislodging them both.

"There she is," 'Umble Bumble said in a strange, yearning sort of voice.

"But which one is she?" Beekle Henry said, breathing heavily.

"The beautiful one, of course," 'Umble Bumble said impatiently but as they all looked much the same Beekle Henry found he wasn't much the wiser.

"Oh yes," he said anyway, to be polite. "Charming. Charming."

'Umble Bumble sighed deeply.

"So what is this decision you've come to?" Beekle Henry said at last, when it became apparent that 'Umble Bumble was quite prepared to sit there, mooning, indefinitely. Indefinite, by the way, means not defined or unspecified or not spelt out, and used in this sense, we would take it to mean for an unlimited length of time.

'Umble Bumble sighed again.

"I'm going to ask her to the butterflies' ball, your worship," he said.

"Never!" Beekle Henry exclaimed. "You wouldn't dare."

"I would," 'Umble Bumble said. "I'm going to..."

"Really?" Beekle Henry said.

"Really," 'Umble Bumble said.

"Go on, then," Beekle Henry said.

"In...in a minute," 'Umble Bumble said.

Now Beekle Henry could have had lots of fun making fun of poor, old 'Umble Bumble, but being a beetle with a heart of gold he resisted the temptation which is something you lot would never dream of, resisting temptation that is. You lot are all like Oscar Wilde, a very clever writer who lived around a hundred years ago. He was famous for all sorts of aphorisms, an aphorism being a pithy saying and pithy meaning brief, forceful and full of vigour. One of his most famous aphorisms was his remark that he could resist anything but temptation.

Seriously, we all tease our friends but there comes a point when teasing is no longer fun and starts to be hurtful, and that's when you must stop it. If you go on, you cease to be a friend and you start to be a bully, and if you do behave like a bully then I hope your victim will haul off and punch you in the nose just as hard as he or she can. And if you do stop teasing, when you can see it's no longer a game, but others around you continue right on doing it, then I hope you will try to make them stop too. Bullies are a blight on the world and it's up to all of us to let them know that we won't tolerate that sort of behaviour.

The two little creatures sat there on their twig for what seemed like hours until eventually Beekle Henry, kind as he was, ran out of patience.

"Well..." he said meaningly.

'Umble Bumble sighed.

"It's very 'ard, sir," he said. "To get her alone, I mean. It was all right to start with but whenever I try to get close now, all the other butterflies point at me and laugh. And the boys want to fight me."

"Boy painted ladies?" Beekle Henry said, astonished. "I've never heard of anything so silly."

"They call themselves painted lads," 'Umble Bumble said gloomily. "And they're real bovver boys, your worship. They all mob me and 'it me with their wings. And it 'urts. It really 'urts."

"Why 'Umble Bumble," Beekle Henry said. "I am surprised at you. Haven't you heard: 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee'?"

"It's no good," 'Umble Bumble said. "They don't stay still long enough to sting. And even if I could, Letitia would probably hate me for ever."

'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee', incidentally, was the war-cry of probably the most famous boxer of all time, Muhammad Ali, who was not only one of the greatest fighters in history but also a man who stood up for his principles come what may and when nearly everybody else was very much against him. Ali, you see, was a black man at a time when white men thought that the colour of their skins automatically made them superior. How wrong they were. How wrong they are, those people who still believe that skin of different colour means anything at all. Boxing is a brutal, dirty business and I would wish you all to stay well away from it, but even so there is no denying that Ali, who had little choice when he was young but to become a fighter, was a great warrior and a great man. He should be remembered for his courage both physical and moral.

Moral courage by the way is much rarer than physical courage, strange to say. I'll give you an example. Janice is the new girl at school and she's shy and not very pretty. She's sure that nobody will like her and she's understandably nervous of you lot, which makes her an easy target, and so you can't help yourselves, you start to pick on her. Oh yes. I know. So which one of you would be brave enough to stand up against all your friends and tell them to stop it, that it isn't fair, that they're being bullies? And would you be brave enough when all your friends start to pick on you for sticking up for the new girl to go on doing it? Well that's moral courage and it's something we should all try to show.

"Umble Bumble," Beekle Henry said sternly. "Faint heart never won a fair lady, or even a painted lady. You go over there right now and you ask her to the ball, and don't take no for an answer. Are you a man or a mouse? I mean a bee or a mouse?"

"Yes, your worship," Umble Bumble said doubtfully.

"Go on, then." Beekle Henry actually gave him a push, and before he had time to realise what was happening Umble Bumble found himself flying towards the butterflies. Instantly the painted lads rose up to meet him, ten or twelve of them, and there was a very ugly scene, a riot in fact. Beekle Henry was just nerving himself to go to the rescue when Umble Bumble was ejected from the mêlée the way you might spit out a cherry pip.

"And don't come back," the biggest of the painted lads yelled after him. Mêlée, by the way is a French word meaning confused, hand-to-hand fighting or brawl, and is pronounced "mel" as in tell and "ee" as in hay.

Well poor old Bumble had taken a fearful beating and when he returned to Beekle Henry on the branch he was very sore and totally dejected.

"See what I mean, sir?" he said in a low, tremulous voice.

"Now Bumble," Beekle Henry said, more positively than he felt. "Never give up. Never, ever give up. We'll think of something."

"Yes sir," Umble Bumble said, but Beekle Henry could tell that his friend was all but defeated.

Do you know, one of the best examples of never ever giving up that I know of is the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton, one of the great Antarctic explorers. Antarctica is the huge, frozen land at the bottom of the world where the south pole is. Nobody lives there except for seals and penguins and other cold weather animals, and it is usually only ever visited by scientists and explorers. It is the coldest place on earth, all ice and snow and glaciers, and if ever you were careless enough to fall in the water you would only live for about three minutes before you froze to death. It is a fearsome place, particularly in winter when the temperature is unimaginably cold and the winds ferocious. Even now, much of the continent is still unexplored.

About 100 years ago, there was quite a race to see who could be first to reach the South Pole (do you remember our orange?). A number of doughty explorers made the attempt, some more than once, and eventually a Norwegian expedition led by Roald Amundsen was successful in 1911. Shackleton, who also had tried for the pole but who had just failed to make it, then decided to attempt the last great journey, to sledge right across the continent from one side to the other, which is a distance of about 1800 miles or 3,000 km and a very long way to walk of itself, never mind the appalling weather and the moutains, the glaciers, the ice and the crevasses.

Shackleton and the other members of his expedition arrived in Antarctica in 1915 on board the expedition ship, Endurance, but things did not go well more or less from the start. The pack ice, the frozen surface of the sea, was particularly thick that year, even though it was summer, and before long the Endurance, trying to find a way through the cracks and channels to land, was stuck fast and there she remained all through the rest of that summer and then the following winter until at last after 281 days the pressure of the ice so crushed and destroyed her that she finally sank. Shackleton and his men saved the

ship's boats and as much of the stores as they could, but their situation was becoming increasingly desperate. There they were, camped on the ice with no hope of rescue. Even worse, with summer coming on again the ice was starting to melt and grow rotten, until eventually the men were forced to take to the boats. They found refuge in the end on the solid land of Elephant Island which is at the southern end of our old friend, Drake Passage.

Shackleton then decided that the only hope was for him and five of his men to take one of the boats, the James Caird, and attempt to reach the island of South Georgia where there was a whaling station and where they would be able to find help. Sounds simple but this meant a voyage of 800 nautical miles through, as we know, some of the worst storms and the worst seas in the world just as winter had set in again. And I do hope you remember what a nautical mile is.

The James Caird was tiny, only 22ft or just under 7m long, and completely open. To make her as seaworthy as possible, Shackleton and his men decked her in as much as they could with timber and canvas, added sand ballast in bags made from blankets, loaded some supplies and set off, leaving the rest of the party to survive the winter as best they could on Elephant Island. Ballast, by which we mean weight, helps a boat to stay upright in rough conditions.

The voyage to South Georgia was every bit as tough, hard and dangerous as you might imagine. It was so cold that the salt spray would freeze on the boat and the crew would have to keep chipping off the ice to stop her from becoming top heavy, capsizing, that is turning turtle, and sinking. For several days they weathered a howling storm, with horrendous seas that would have made life extremely difficult for a ship, never mind a little whale-boat like the James Caird, and then at another point they were hit by a huge rogue wave that all but rolled the boat right over and which did swamp it, nearly putting an end to things on the spot. The men had to bail for their lives. Sailors have an old saying: the best pump in the world is a frightened man with a bucket and by now Shackleton and his men were very frightened indeed. But again, they didn't give up. Somehow they saved the boat, and somehow they themselves survived despite being soaking wet and freezing cold, hungry and most of all, thirsty. You might ask why if they had ice they couldn't get water but the fact is, when sea ice first freezes it is very salty.

Finally, 14 days after leaving Elephant Island the James Caird reached South Georgia and with great difficulty the crew managed to find a spot among the reefs and cliffs where they could get the boat in through the heavy surf. They had, at last, made it to land but their troubles were not nearly over, oh dear me, no. They were absolutely on the wrong side of the island, an island of treacherous mountains and glaciers that no one had ever managed to cross before.

By now, two of his men were too weak to go on, but Shackleton, leaving another man to look after them, set out with his two remaining crew determined never to give up, determined to get through, determined to save all his men, somehow, and do you know what? He did. He and his two friends climbed mountains, crossed glaciers, forded freezing streams and even lowered themselves down a plunging waterfall right in the torrent until they finally reached the whaling station and help. Well, after that Shackleton saw to it that his men were rescued from the other side of South Georgia and then the rest of the crew from Elephant Island and in the end, he could say that he had brought every member of his expedition back to safety. It is one of the greatest feats of survival that we know of and all because Shackleton refused to give up, and just like Sir Slimy he was also made a knight, Sir Ernest, in recognition of his courage and perserverance

Meanwhile, 'Umble Bumble was becoming gloomier and gloomier. He had started off bright as a button with the day full of promise but now he was calling himself all sorts of names: weak, hopeless, a coward, futile, useless... Futile, by the way, is actually a synonym for both useless and hopeless so I guess 'Umble Bumble was feeling trebly ineffectual, treble in this sense meaning three and not a very high musical note. And there's that word, synonym, again.

Beekle Henry regarded his friend anxiously and realised that if ever there was a time that 'Umble Bumble needed his help it was now, and he racked his brains for an idea. Rack is an innocuous little word that has about a zillion different meanings but most of them involve the idea of a frame one way or another, and when we talk about racking our brains we're talking about the rack that was used in the bad old days of torture chambers when the victim was stretched out on the rack by his hands and feet until the pain was unbearable. I expect you sometimes feel the pain of thinking unbearable, too, especially when you're desperate for an excuse for not doing your homework. Serves you right, I

say. Innocuous, by the way, means inoffensive or harmless, not that the rack we have just been discussing was harmless, oh dear me, no.

The way it usually works is that the more you rack your brains, the less likely you are to come up with the idea you need. Beekle Henry thought and thought and thought but quite failed to think of even the beginnings of a plan. He stared up at the sky. He stared down at the ground. He stared at the butterflies. He stared at 'Umble Bumble, sitting there with his wings drooping dejectedly, and finally he stared off into the distance.

"I wonder what that big brown thing over there is," he said at last, breaking his non-existent train of thought.

"It's a cow," 'Umble Bumble said listlessly. "That's Blossom Dearie."

"Blossom Dearie," Beekle Henry repeated slowly, and then again: "Blossom Dearie." He began to feel a glow of excitement. At last his sub-conscious had done its duty. At last he was beginning to see the hint of an plan.

"Wait here," he said to 'Umble Bumble. "I'll be back in a minute." And without even thinking about it, which meant he actually did it quite well for once, he flew off.

Blossom Dearie, was lying down as cows do, chewing her cud. Cows are actually very interesting animals because quite apart from all the milk they give us, they're really quite smart, smarter than horses for instance. A horse has a big brain but has to use most of it to guide him when he's galloping, which doesn't leave much for anything else. You see, horses have very big bodies that weigh a lot but also they only have relatively very small feet, or hooves. Controlling all that weight moving very fast on very small feet over very rough ground takes a lot of computing power because all the decisions about how to balance and where to put four different hooves, instant by instant, have to be made in a flash. A cow, on the other hand, generally moves at a much more sensible pace and can devote a great deal of her attention to a beetle bowing before her.

"Good morning, ma'am," Beekle Henry said in his politest voice. "I trust I find you well, and may I introduce myself?"

"If you must," Blossom Dearie said.

"Beekle Henry, ma'am," he said. "Beekle Henry at your service."

"And just what service do you think you might be able to render me?" Blossom Dearie inquired tartly. Chewing your cud, you have to understand, is a fairly boring business and Blossom Dearie tended to be a touch challenging with visitors, just for the fun of it.

"Well actually," Beekle Henry said nervously. "I was rather hoping... That is, it's more a case of... That is, I would be ever so grateful... That is, could I possibly ask..."

"What?" Blossom Dearie said with a flicker of interest.

"A favour," Beekle Henry managed to say at last. "Not for me," he added hurriedly. "For a friend of mine..."

"Oh, a friend..." Blossom Dearie said sceptically, and sceptical means disbelieving or doubting.

"Not for me," Beekle Henry said. "Truly not for me. It's for my friend 'Umble Bumble. You see, he's in love..."

Well for Blossom Dearie, love was the magic word. Nothing passes the time so quickly when you're chewing the cud as a good chat about love. You might wonder, incidentally, how it is that a large animal like a cow, which eats only grass, could make all that milk. If you and I had to live on grass, well I think we'd very probably starve to death. We certainly would never be able to grow as big as a cow and make milk in large quantities. And the secret to how a cow gets enough nourishment out of just grass lies in chewing the cud. You see, what a cow does is this. She fills her stomach with grass and finds a nice shady place or, if it's winter, a nice warm place to lie down and then she regurgitates the grass from her stomach and chews it up all over again, and again, and again until it's so thoroughly masticated, that is chewed, that her stomach, which, unlike ours, is divided into four compartments can then begin to extract every last little bit of goodness, enough, indeed, for the cow to grow fat and glossy and make more milk than even you lot could ever drink.

When Beekle Henry had finished the story of 'Umble Bumble and Letitia Lepidoptera, Blossom Dearie sighed and a tear ran down her cheek.

"Such star-cross'd lovers," she said. "Why it's just like Romeo and Juliet."

"I do hope not," Beekle Henry said.

Romeo and who? Ah. Romeo and Juliet is a play written some 400 years ago by the greatest writer English has ever known, William Shakespeare, a man who not only wrote

the greatest works in the language but who actually invented much of the language itself as we know it today. When we set out to write something, a thank-you letter, a school essay, Beekle Henry, we all walk in Shakespeare's shadow and often enough, you'll come to find, we're actually quoting him, just like Blossom Dearie when she said 'star-cross'd lovers'.

Romeo and Juliet, themselves, were a young man and a young woman, not very much older than you lot, who fell in love in a place called Verona in Italy back in the olden days, even though their feuding families hated each other and were more or less at war. Young men on both sides had been killed and it was impossible that Romeo and Juliet could ever find happiness together. They tried, however, as lovers will, and paid the price. Sadly, they both died, which is why Beekle Henry was hoping 'Umble Bumble and Letitia Lepidoptera might be a little less star-cross'd, that is unfortunate.

Blossom Dearie sighed again.

"How sad," she said and another tear rolled down her cheek.

"Well," Beekle Henry said. "I was hoping we might be able to do something about it."

Blossom Dearie looked at him questioningly and Beekle Henry climbed up her shoulder and began to whisper in her ear. At last she nodded, which sent Beekle Henry tumbling back down to the ground.

"Oh dear. I am sorry," she said. "Are you all right?"

Beekle Henry stood up a little shakily and brushed himself down.

"I like your plan," Blossom Dearie said. "It should be fun and it probably won't hurt much as I have pretty thick skin. There's just one thing. Ranunculus, buttercups, are poisonous to cows."

"Could you just pretend to eat, do you think?" Beekle Henry asked.

"Hmmm. I suppose so," Blossom Dearie said. "Are you going to tell your friend the plan?"

"Oh no, I don't think so," Beekle Henry said. "That would spoil it."

"All right," Blossom Dearie said. "Then, I'll give you time to get back there..."

Beekle Henry found poor, old 'Umble Bumble still sitting exactly where he had left him and more dispirited than ever, if that were possible. He didn't even look up when

Beekle Henry came in for his usual perilous landing, perilous meaning dangerous, nor did he ask what Beekle Henry had been up to.

"Cheer up, old Bumble," Beekle Henry said. "Never give up." And that, at least, got a reaction.

"Oh shut up!" 'Umble Bumble snapped. "That twaddle just makes it worse." It was such a complete departure from 'Umble Bumble's normal sweet nature that Beekle Henry found himself staring open-mouthed. If the truth be known, he was rather offended too, even though he understood just how miserable 'Umble Bumble must be feeling to say something so absolutely rude.

Beekle Henry shut his mouth and put some violence on himself not to shout back. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a large brown shape ambling towards them and he smiled, forgetting his irritation. He waited for a minute or two.

"Uh-oh," he said at last.

"Uh-oh what?" 'Umble Bumble muttered. He was staring moodily at the ground.

"Looks like trouble," Beekle Henry said.

"What trouble?" 'Umble Bumble said. He looked up and was instantly galvanised by what he saw. Taking a pretend munch here and a pretend munch there, Blossom Dearie was wading into the bank of buttercups, much to the anger and distress of the painted lads and the painted ladies. They were fluttering about Blossom Dearie's head in a great taking at all their food being threatened but, naturally, they had not the least effect.

'Umble Bumble hesitated for not one second. He seemed to swell to twice his size and then launched himself to the rescue, hub-buzzing like some miniature guided missile. He barrelled straight through the cloud of butterflies, scattering them in all directions, landed on Blossom Dearie's rump and plunged in his sting. The cow chuckled to herself as she felt a little tingle, kicked up her heels and went bucking and cavorting away down the pasture, 'Umble Bumble sticking grimly to his task.

If you know anything about bee stings you might be worried that by attacking Blossom Dearie so bravely, 'Umble Bumble had sentenced himself to death. You see, when an ordinary honey bee of the genus *Apis* stings someone it often means that the bee himself must die. A honey bee's sting has a barb, just like a fish hook, and once the bee has rammed it in, it's often impossible for him ever to get it out. A bumble bee of the

genus *Bombus*, on the other hand, has a smooth sting and can use it as many times as he likes without danger to himself, which means that it behoves you to be particularly polite to 'Umble Bumble and his confreres. Confrere means a member of a fraternity, and fraternity means brotherhood, which makes you and I confreres of the brotherhood of man, while genus is one of the ways we use to describe different creatures. We, for instance, are of the genus *Homo*, which is Latin for man, and our species is *sapiens sapiens*, which is Latin for wise wise. It has to be said, however, that on balance *homo* tends not to be very *sapiens* at all, and we all need to try a great deal harder.

Letitia Lepidoptera was certainly terrified for 'Umble Bumble not being quite aware, as we are, of the difference between *Apis* and *Bombus*. She hovered with the other painted ladies, covering her mouth with horror as she watched Blossom Dearie rapidly disappearing down the pasture with 'Umble Bumble fixed fast to her rump. At last, Blossom Dearie considered that she had done all that was reasonable and gave one last terrific buck. 'Umble Bumble was finally dislodged and went spinning up into the air, a small black speck in the distance.

"Life is full of interest," Blossom Dearie said to herself and then chortling recited out loud:

"Big fleas have lesser fleas
 Upon their backs to bite 'em,
 And lesser fleas have smaller fleas
 And so ad infinitum."

Ad infinitum is more Latin, by the way, and means to infinity, or endlessly. Here is another example of something endless, or infinite:

This is a song that never ends,
 On and on it goes, my friends.
 Some children started singing it not knowing what it was,
 And they'll have to go on singing it forever just because
 This is a song that never ends,
 On and on it goes my friends.
 Some children started singing it not knowing what it was,
 And they'll have to go on singing it forever just because

This is a song... and so ad infinitum.

And I wonder if you lot can make up a tune for it.

No. I shouldn't have said that. Stop! Stop! I said, stop! No more! Cease! Desist!...
Help! Help!...

Can we go on now? You're quite sure? All right then...

There was our noble 'Umble Bumble who just like a knight in shining armour had unhesitatingly charged into battle against huge odds to defend his lady fair, his damsel in distress, except he didn't feel noble or courageous. When he stopped spinning, the glum weight settled back on his heart and slowly he turned about and headed for Beekle Henry, more trudging than flying. Trudging is what you lot do down the passage when you're sent to bed without any supper for unhead of mischief and disobedience.

'Umble Bumble's head was down and he was paying very little attention to where he was going or what was happening around him, so when he found himself flying in the midst of an honour guard of butterflies, it came as a complete shock. The rest of the painted lads and painted ladies began to cheer and applaud with wild enthusiasm, and at last here was Letitia Lepidoptera waiting to greet him.

"My hero," she said in her sweetest voice. "My conquering hero." And then she added anxiously and contrary to all etiquette:

"You are planning to ask me to the ball, aren't you?" Etiquette just means good manners and it's considered good manners for boys to ask girls to balls and not the other way about, though personally I've always thought this quite ridiculous – which, now I come to think of it, may explain why I've never been to a ball.

Beekle Henry from afar saw 'Umble Bumble's triumphal welcome and watched as 'Umble Bumble listened to Letitia for a moment and then did a little tap dance with all six feet.

"So that's all right," he said to himself. And of course, Beekle Henry knew that he would never, ever be able to tell anyone the story of how 'Umble Bumble came to be awarded the Lepidoptera Order of Valour, first class, during a glittering ceremony at the annual Butterflies' Ball. He and Letitia then led the dancing to an orchestra of stridulating crickets with cicadas playing counterpoint before a thronging multitude of admiring

insects, a throng far greater than anyone could ever remember attending the ball ever before. 'Umble Bumble was the happiest he had ever been in his life, but if the truth were ever to come out, Beekle Henry knew that 'Umble Bumble would instantly become a laughing stock, which would be most unfair. After all, he had quite genuinely and quite fearlessly charged to the rescue of his beloved, believing absolutely that she was in gravest peril, and nothing should ever be allowed to spoil that.

You see, what we each call the truth is usually only what we happen to believe, while what we believe is not necessarily the truth. And it has to be said that beliefs, different beliefs, conflicting beliefs, have caused most of the trouble between the different races and religions of humankind. And that means we need to be most particular about what it is that we decide to believe ourselves. We may end up having to fight for our beliefs, and personally I would hate to find myself fighting for something that turned out to be wrong or untrue. I would hate to make a bad decision about what I believe. So, my best advice to you lot is this: think for yourselves, don't be too quick to accept what other people tell you, and never be afraid to change your mind if you find that what you first believed to be true turns out to be false.

Anyway, however 'Umble Bumble came to be a hero, all's fair in love and war as Beekle Henry knew very well. And I have to tell you that this is a phrase you will probably hear a great deal as you grow older. Stridulating, by the way, is the noise some insects make when they rub parts of their bodies together, such as their legs. Cicadas, on the other hand, make their noise by vibrating special membranes, sort of like rubbing the skin of a drum, and counterpoint is a style of music that cleverly interleaves different melodies or tunes to make a much more interesting whole.

Next day while 'Umble Bumble was still fast asleep recovering from the pleasures of the night before, Beekle Henry once more donned his flying gear and greatly daring flew himself all the way to Blossom Dearie's pasture. He bowed deeply, thanked her gravely for all her help, and then the two of them settled down for a jolly good gossip about bumble bees and butterflies and balls and true love. And, of course, the Great Battle of Buttercup Bottom.

The Royal Crown

For a beetle of equable disposition, Beekle Henry was extraordinarily cross. He was possibly almost as cross as I was when that drawing pin magically appeared on my chair just before I happened to sit down. And whoever it was that did that should be possessed of fear and trembling, and I'm still so cross that I'm not going to tell you what equable disposition means, or anything else either if it comes to that. No more Mr Nice Guy. You'll have to look it up for yourselves.

The cause of Beekle Henry's displeasure was his hammock, which, during the night, had burst, depositing Beekle Henry on the cold, hard ground with a most fearful thump. Well, you can just imagine the commotion. There was Beekle Henry lying helpless, flat on his back, borrowing all Slimy's most nautical language, while the others – once they realised what had happened and that no one was actually injured – just laughed and laughed and laughed.

It's a sad fact that there's nothing like someone else's misfortune to give the rest of us hysterics, but in this case I can't say that I blame them. The sight of Beekle Henry in his pyjamas and night cap, flat on his back, covered in cobweb and kicking his legs angrily in the moonlight was truly hilarious. And just as they were finally beginning to calm down, snorting and squeaking and wiping the tears from their eyes, Slimy said:

"Poor, old Beekle Henry. He's finally grown too ellipsoid for his own rotundity." And that set them all off on another bout of uncontrollable giggling.

Dan de Lion eventually rescued him, flipping him back right side up as he had done once before, but Beekle Henry was forced to spend the rest of the night tossing and turning in great discomfort, dreading the morning. You see, while having a hammock burst is a disaster in itself, getting a new one made is an enterprise fraught with gravest peril.

The only creatures who make spider webs are spiders, and spiders, not to put too fine a point on it, eat insects. Beekle Henry had originally inherited his hammock from his great-uncle Theodosius. Theodosius, himself, had inherited the hammock from his father, Artemodorus, who, brave soul, had not survived the experience of procuring it, which

just goes to show how much beetles really do value their comfort. One could, of course, just pick up any old bit of second-hand spider web, but any true beetle, any really self-respecting beetle requires a custom-made, tailored-to-measure, orthopedically designed, automatically self-adjusting, heavy-duty, industrial-strength, billows-of-heaven hammock with a life-time guarantee. And the only way of getting one of these is from a spider. And the only way of getting one of these from a spider is to pay for it. And the only way of paying a spider for a hammock is with food. And if you want to live long enough to enjoy the hammock it has to be food that a spider finds tastier than you, which is where Artemodorus had made his big mistake. Commissioning and purchasing a hammock is thus a business not to be entered upon lightly.

In fact, Beekle Henry having inherited a fine example from Theodosius was rather hoping he would never have to do it himself but, unfortunately, even hammocks wear out, especially when subjected to too much ellipsoid rotundity, and unless Beekle Henry was prepared to spend the rest of his life sleeping on the ground, something would have to be done.

In the morning having had their laugh-out, Beekle Henry's friends were much more sympathetic and, indeed, rather alarmed when he resolutely announced that he would have to get himself a new hammock.

"But Beekle Henry," Slimy said. "That's very dangerous. Think of Artemodorus." Slimy knew the story, you see.

"Ida the Spider is not at all trustworthy," Dan de Lion added. Dan de Lion, incidentally, was starting to look rather scruffy and very un-royal. He was missing several of his petals and resembled a five-year-old determined to bankrupt the tooth fairy. Slimy had actually been thinking that perhaps he ought to make severe mention about kings letting the side down and setting a very bad example but something, he didn't know quite what, held him back. Privately, however, he had started referring to Dan de Lion as 'Your Messiness'.

And while we're on incidentallies, Ida the Spider was thought up by my son, Dan, aged six-and-a-half, and I'm greatly indebted to him.

"Beekle 'Enry, sir," 'Umble Bumble added. "Whatever can you offer Ida the Spider to eat that's tastier than you? You look a particularly tasty morsel, beggin' your pardon, sir."

"Bee," Beekle Henry said crossly.

"Be what, sir?" 'Umble Bumble said, puzzled.

"Oh, never mind," Beekle Henry snapped.

"Well what?" Slimy insisted.

"I don't know," Beekle Henry said.

"What did Artemodorus try?" Slimy asked.

"Straw," Beekle Henry said glumly. "He spent three weeks sampling straw until he found a piece he thought was so delicious, no one would be able to resist it..."

"What dedication," Dan de Lion interrupted sarcastically. "Three weeks of solid eating..."

"But spiders don't like straw," Beekle Henry went on.

"What a surprise," Slimy said.

"And before you could say 'buttery golden' he was trussed up in a sticky web and hanging in the larder," Beekle Henry finished sadly.

"Sticky, eh?" 'Umble Bumble said. "Honey's sticky. Very sticky."

"So what?" Slimy said.

"Oh, nothin'," 'Umble Bumble said. "Just an idea. Probably not a very good one."

"I don't have any ideas at all," Beekle Henry said. "Let's hear it."

"Well, sir," 'Umble Bumble said hesitantly. "Suppose you took some of my honey and smeared it over something, a berry maybe, a big one, then even if Ida the Spider didn't like it, she'd be stuck to it and you'd have time to get away, sir, wouldn't you?"

"Preposterous!" Slimy exclaimed

"Perfectly ridiculous," Dan de Lion said.

"Poetic justice," Beekle Henry said. "Let's do it."

"But Beekle Henry, you can't possibly be serious," Slimy said. "It's much too dangerous. I've never heard such a flagrantly silly idea in all my life."

"Absolutely," Dan de Lion said. "Whatever flagrantly means. What does it mean? Flappingly like a flag, I suppose, but that doesn't make any sense, Slimy ..." And of course, Slimy dived inside to get his dictionary and while he and Dan de Lion were busy arguing, Beekle Henry tipped 'Umble Bumble the wink and the two of them slipped quietly away.

As they did so, another couple of Dan de Lion's petals fluttered to the ground. Nobody noticed or they were too polite to say anything if they did, but Dan de Lion was really looking very wilted indeed. And who's looked up flagrant? And while you're about it, you'd better do preposterous. And are you sure you know what wilt means? And poetic justice?

"Now then, 'Umble Bumble," Beekle Henry said when the sound of shouting had faded somewhat. "What sort of berry would you recommend?"

However, 'Umble Bumble was now having second thoughts about the wisdom of his idea. He was suddenly having visions of Beekle Henry hanging in Ida the Spider's larder until she decided to roast him for dinner.

"I'm not at all sure about this, sir," he said. "Remember the picnic, sir, and the jam tarts. You don't seem to have much luck with sticky stuff, sir, now I come to think of it, sir."

"Well think of something else then," Beekle Henry said.

"I'll try, sir," 'Umble Bumble said doubtfully.

"In the meantime," Beekle Henry said. "What about a blackberry? They should be ripening by now."

"I dunno, sir. I dunno about this at all," 'Umble Bumble said unhappily.

"Come on, old Bumble," Beekle Henry said. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. He who hesitates is lost. The race to the swiftest. No guts, no glory. All that sort of thing."

And so, despite 'Umble Bumble's reservations, they spent the rest of the day finding a nice, ripe blackberry, drenching it in 'Umble Bumble's honey and then setting it nicely on an elegant leaf tray. The idea of the tray, of course, was so that Beekle Henry, himself, didn't end up stuck to the berry.

That evening, when everything was ready, Beekle Henry put on his best weskit, shined all his shoes – a job he hated even more than you lot do – and with 'Umble Bumble hovering nervously by his side, set off to see Ida the Spider. And you can be sure that brave and nonchalant as he tried to appear, Beekle Henry was very apprehensive indeed.

When they had gone a little way – Beekle Henry was twirling his cane and dawdling and generally taking twice as long as he needed to – Slimy Snail came puffing up behind them.

"Ahoy," he called. "Heave to for a minute, will you?" Beekle Henry was, of course, only too glad to oblige.

"What's up?" he said.

"Shhh," Slimy said. "It's Dan de Lion. Have you noticed how sort of ... seedy he's looking. I'm very worried. Something's wrong, but I don't know what."

"Do you think so?" Beekle Henry said. "He looks all right to me."

'Umble Bumble said nothing.

"Don't be obtuse," Slimy snapped. And I do hope you have a dictionary handy because I'm really not telling you what words like nonchalant and obtuse mean any more.

"I'm not," Beekle Henry said. "Obtuse. Whatever that is. I've just got a bit on my mind, old chap. Hammocks and spiders and all that sort of thing, you know? We'll talk to Dan de Lion when I get back and sort everything out then, eh?"

And despite Slimy's protests, Beekle Henry set off again, walking rather more quickly than before so that Slimy soon fell behind. For his part, 'Umble Bumble knew that Dan de Lion was indeed going to seed, literally, but thought that Beekle Henry had quite enough to worry about just at the moment.

Ida the Spider lived in a large bush and had strung one of those really splendid webs between the bush and a neighbouring tree. She was just waking up for the night when Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble arrived.

Webs, and spiders, by the way are most interesting. The thread starts off as liquid called scleroprotein which is exuded by the spider's spinnarets and which hardens on contact with the air. Weight for weight, spider web is stronger than steel and most spiders can make different sorts, some sticky for capturing other insects and some not, so the spider can move about its own web without being trapped itself. Have you ever wondered how spiders can make those huge webs that span seemingly impossible distances? Well, I certainly have and it turns out that the way they do it is to start spinning a thread and to let the wind carry it to an anchor point across the chasm. This first thread then becomes both bridge and foundation for the rest of the web. You should also know that in South America spiders can grow so big, up to 25cm across or a foot, foot to foot, so to speak, that they actually hunt and eat birds.

It was just as well Beekle Henry didn't know that because Ida, even though just a plain old orb-web weaving spider, was quite frightening enough.

"Ah," she said as Beekle Henry stood before her bowing politely. "A client, I do declare." Her voice was just as sticky and silky as her web, and just as repellent.

"I-I need a new hammock, please," Beekle Henry said. He was very frightened and his voice trembled slightly, but to his credit he held his ground instead of turning tail and fleeing.

"Of course," Ida the Spider said. "Delighted. Simply delighted." Then her voice suddenly became as sharp as a bite. "Usual terms of payment, naturally."

"Er, yes," Beekle Henry said reluctantly. "I suppose so."

"Well then," Ida the Spider said. "Let's measure you up. Busy, busy, busy. No time to waste, you know."

And Beekle Henry couldn't help shivering as Ida the Spider used two of her legs to spin him this way and that while two more of her legs stretched a tape measure up, down and sideways.

"There, all done," Ida the Spider said with satisfaction. "It will be ready for you to pick up first thing in the morning."

"Oh," Beekle Henry said alarmed. "So quickly. Won't I need a final fitting?"

"Final fitting?" Ida the Spider snorted. "Final fitting? This isn't Saville Row, you know."

"Oh," Beekle Henry said, and then: "Thank you."

"Payment on delivery," Ida the Spider added sharply.

Saville Row, just so that you know, is a street in London populated by tailors who like to think they're the best in the world. Men, who like to think they're frightfully important or frightfully rich, or both, like to go there to have their suits made to measure – bespoke tailoring that's called. But you can't just walk in off the street and say I'd like a nice houndstooth check, please. Dear me no. You first have to be introduced to the tailor by one of the people who like to think they're frightfully important. Snobbery that's called and it's an extremely silly way for grown men to carry on, especially when you can buy a perfectly good suit in any old shop for a fraction of the price you'd pay on Saville Row.

Houndstooth check is a particular sort of pattern woven into the cloth, but I've always thought it a fatuous name. It seems to me that houndstooth ought to mean full of holes, which is what a piece of cloth would be if a hound ever got hold of it.

Ida the Spider's last remark was very much on Beekle Henry's mind as he and 'Umble Bumble made their way home. Payment on delivery had a nasty, final sound about it.

"I do hope your idea works, Bumble," Beekle Henry said.

"Cheer up, sir," 'Umble Bumble said. "Look on the bright side. If it don't work, you won't have long to worry about it." Which was a thought that Beekle Henry failed to find at all comforting.

"Anyways, sir," 'Umble Bumble added. "You don't have to go back if you don't want to, you know."

But Beekle Henry had stopped listening. Instead, he was watching a furry thing waving about above the grass, only just visible in the dusk.

"Oh no," he said, as if he didn't have enough trouble already.

"What's that, sir?" 'Umble Bumble said.

"Shhh," Beekle Henry whispered. "There's a cat. I can see its tail."

'Umble Bumble looked and then smiled. He knew that even Beekle Henry was quite capable of flying away from a cat, but instead of teasing him, which you or I probably would have been unable to resist, he said:

"It's all right, sir. Don't worry. That's just Bloggs, sir."

"Bloggs?" Beekle Henry said.

"Bloggs, the cat with the seeing-eye frog," 'Umble Bumble said. "She's blind, sir. Let's go and say hullo."

"Wait," Beekle Henry said, but it was too late. 'Umble Bumble had already flitted off.

"Oh bother," Beekle Henry said to himself as he trailed along behind, but despite himself he was rather intrigued, as who wouldn't be. I have never heard of anything quite so absurd as a cat with a seeing-eye frog. And if you looked up preposterous then you should already know what absurd means, and do you remember fatuous?

Bloggs was actually a most dainty animal, quite unsuited to her name. She was a tiny grey tortie-tabby with dabs of orange, and in certain lights she could look decidedly green. She had been blind since birth and perhaps because of that she had a very gentle nature,

never, ever, for instance, bullying beetles, which we all know cats are very prone to doing.

Bloggs' frog was absolutely devoted to her. Bloggs, you see, had saved his life. The frog had been trapped on a water-lily leaf by a large fish with a large appetite who was determined not to leave until he'd had lunch, or dinner, or breakfast, or all three at once, and who was getting very good at jiggling the leaf, with the idea of tipping the frog into the water.

Then Bloggs had heard the frog's croaks for help and, even though cats hate water, she had plunged in, swum to his leaf – guided by the croaks – and carried him safely ashore, riding on her head. And the frog had more or less stayed there ever since, guiding Bloggs about like a mahout on an elephant, which meant that Bloggs could now roam much more widely, confident she would always be able to get home safely.

'Umble Bumble flew right up to Bloggs and hovered just under her nose where she could smell who it was.

"Good evening, madame, your ladyship," 'Umble said. "And a lovely one it is, too. And good evening to you, Blogg's Frog. How are you, sir?"

"Why Bumble," Bloggs said. "How nice. We are very well, thank you. And you?"

The frog croaked.

"Splendid, splendid," 'Umble Bumble said. "Allow me to introduce my good friend, Beekle Henry."

Bloggs sniffed gently at Beekle Henry, who bowed.

"Enchanted," he murmured.

"Forgive me," Bloggs said. "But you smell worried."

"I am rather," Beekle Henry admitted, and then one thing led to another and the whole story came out.

"Oh my," Bloggs said when Beekle Henry had finished. "How distressing for you, and how alarming..."

Well 'Umble Bumble, Bloggs and Bloggs' Frog chatted on for a bit while Beekle Henry listened glumly and then the four went their separate ways. When Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble were nearly home, they were ambushed by Slimy who had been lying in wait for them.

"Now look here, you two," Slimy said. "There's a serious matter to discuss, so don't go running off again."

Beekle Henry had quite forgotten about Slimy's concerns and couldn't imagine what could possibly be more serious than hammocks and spiders and spiders' appetites, but he allowed himself to be led further off to make sure Dan de Lion would be unable to hear. 'Umble Bumble followed and when Slimy stopped, he was the first to speak.

"It's no good, your worship," he said. "There's nothin' to be done. You can't change dying, and you can't change death." There was a very long silence.

"What do you mean, dying?" Slimy said at last.

"Your worship," Bumble said. "When a flower is fertilised with pollen and the seeds start to grow, the flower's job is finished. It dies so the plant can use its energy to make seed. And that's what's happening to Dan de Lion. 'Is job in life is finished."

"But that's not fair," Slimy said and his voice was trembling. "He's my friend and I need him."

"Sorry, your worship," 'Umble Bumble said. "But life never is fair."

Slimy began to weep and Beekle Henry could feel that he wasn't far off himself. 'Umble Bumble waited patiently. At last, Slimy borrowed Beekle Henry's blue-spotted handkerchief and blew his nose.

"What can we do?" he said after a bit.

"Well," 'Umble Bumble said. " 'Is royal worshipful majesty wouldn't want to see you all upset, sir. It would make 'im feel worse, and 'e's only got a day or two left, sir."

"Come on, old Slimy," Beekle Henry said. "We'll just to have brace up for his sake."

"I suppose so," Slimy said miserably, but although he did his best, poor Slimy was still looking very upset when they returned to Dan de Lion, who was wise enough to realise what was wrong.

"Slimy," he said kindly. "Do you know the worst thing about dying?"

Slimy shook his head.

"Well," Dan de Lion said. "It's knowing that I'm making my friends miserable. And worse, it's knowing that my friends will go on being miserable long after I'm dead and won't know anything about anything any more."

"Oh," Slimy said.

"I need your help, Slimy," Dan de Lion said. "And you, Beekle Henry. And you, Bumble."

"Oh," Slimy said again, and then: "I-I'll try."

Beekle Henry didn't sleep a wink all night. When he wasn't tossing and turning on the cold, hard ground worrying about Dan de Lion or Ida the Spider, he was tossing and turning on the cold, hard ground worrying about tossing and turning on the cold, hard ground, which as everyone knows is quite the worst thing for a beetle's equanimity.

If Beekle Henry, when he went to bed, had had any doubts about the wisdom of braving Ida the Spider again, by the time the sun was tickling the clouds awake his resolution was rock solid. He had to have that hammock no matter what, and if it came to it, then being eaten alive would be better than ever having to spend another night like the last.

He went and woke up 'Umble Bumble indecently early and got much the same reaction that you lot get when your parents are trying to sleep in a bit and you decide that the only way of being quiet is to have a pillow riot, or to do your music practice to get it out of the way, or to play football in the bathroom with the kids from next door. And if that ever happens again, watch out. That's all I say. Watch out.

"Do go away, sir," 'Umble Bumble groaned. "It's far too early." But Beekle Henry wouldn't.

"Come on," he insisted. "I can't stand it any longer. We have to go and get my hammock." And grumble as he might, 'Umble Bumble was dragged forth and found himself stumbling along in the half-darkness carrying one side of the berry tray.

Just before they got to Ida the Spider's, however, he made Beekle Henry stop, and then he covered the berry with another leaf.

"Don't want to give things away to soon, your worship," he said. "And are you quite sure you want to go through with this? We all know what might 'appen, sir."

"I'm absolutely certain," Beekle Henry said. "Dead certain."

"That's what worries me," 'Umble Bumble muttered, but under his breath. "All right, sir," he added in his normal voice. "But you'd better let me do all the talking, this time."

"Anything you like," Beekle Henry replied. "Just so long as we get it over with."

Ida the Spider saw them coming and parachuted down to earth on a strand of web.

"Well, well, well, well, well..." she said in her oiliest voice and eyeing the tray the two little creatures were carrying. "Breakfast, I do declare. What have you got for me, I wonder? I do hope it's delicious, but then no matter if it's not. Beetle is such a good standby, don't you find? I never get tired of beetle."

Despite all his resolve, Beekle Henry couldn't help shuddering.

"Er, please your ladyship," Umble Bumble said. "May we see the 'ammock?"

"Why certainly," Ida the Spider said. "Here it is. A masterpiece, if I do say so myself." She took a cloud of cobweb from behind a stone, unrolled it and slung it with practised ease between two stalks of grass.

"Note the exquisite workmanship," she said. "Note the darts at shoulder and hip so that the fit is absolutely precise. Note the extra widening here for the waist, and a very wide waist it was too, I might add. Note the extra depth at the end to fit all those feet... Come, sir. Come. Try it for size."

Ida the Spider held down one side invitingly. Beekle Henry stepped nervously forward and climbed in. Ida the Spider gave him a little pinch as he passed and smacked her odious lips.

"Luverly crackling," she said.

Beekle Henry winced but instantly forgot all about it as he sank into the most blissful comfort he ever could have imagined. His old hammock had done well enough but not having been tailored expressly for him, it had been a bit tight in spots and a bit loose in others. This one, however, fitted like a second skin and was utterly elysian. Beekle Henry felt a flush of bliss suffuse him from head to foot and then his eyelids inexorably began to close. However, just as he was drawing breath for his first delicious snore, all the more delicious because of the terrible night he had just spent, Ida the Spider abruptly tipped down the side again and Beekle Henry found himself rudely rolled to the ground.

"That's all," Ida the Spider said. "That's all you get until you've paid for it. Now, what have you got for me?"

Beekle Henry dusted himself off. Out of the corner of his eye he happened to notice the tip of a tail flicking above the grass but he was so pre-occupied that he thought

nothing of it. He looked at 'Umble Bumble and drew a deep breath. The moment of truth, as they say in bull-fighting, had arrived.

Beekle Henry squared his shoulders, bent down and drew aside the leaf covering the honey-drenched blackberry.

"What is that?" hissed Ida the Spider. "What is that revolting looking object? And whatever it is, you needn't think I'm eating it. You needn't think I'm going anywhere near it."

"But madame, your worship," 'Umble Bumble said hurriedly. "Madame, your most excellency, this is the finest example of early-season, fresh-from-the-vine drupelet of *Rubus fruticosus*, naturally marinated in *Bombus* honey expertly brewed from the nectar of summer flowers with just a soupcon of apple-blossom pollen. It's food fit for a king or, indeed, a queen such as yourself."

And while Ida the Spider simpered a little, her vanity gratified by being called a queen, she was no more taken in by 'Umble Bumble's panegyric than I expect your are. And I'll just have a little rest here while you look up all those extremely interesting words. Bet you never thought saying blackberry in honey could be so complicated. Slimy was most impressed when he heard about it afterwards. And don't forget panegyric.

Are we all ready then?

Ida the Spider moved one hairy leg a fraction forward, then another and another. Both Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble recognised this as the beginning of a slow stalk that could only have one end.

"Now, your majesty..." 'Umble Bumble began desperately.

"Not another word," Ida the Spider hissed. "Not another word, or I'll eat you too."

"But madame..." 'Umble Bumble said, greatly brave.

"I like bee," Ida the Spider said. "I like bee almost as much as beetle."

But before 'Umble Bumble could speak again and thereby surely seal his doom as well, Beekle Henry got in first. There was a slight quaver in his voice but for all that he was determined to meet his fate with all the dignity he could muster.

"It's all right, Bumble, old chap," he said. "Let's not make things worse than they are. You've done your best and I'm very grateful, but we all knew the risks. And now I really think you should leave. I'd rather you didn't ... watch. Say goodbye to Slimy and Dan de

Lion for me. Tell them they were the best friends a beetle ever had. And as for yourself, I can't find the words to tell you how dear you were to me. Now please. Don't say anything. Just go."

Ida the Spider was suddenly very close.

"Any second now," Beekle Henry said. "Do hurry up, old chap. Go!"

Just then, however, a voice broke in from above; a furry voice, a purry voice, a kind voice.

"Not just yet, I think," the voice said, taking them all greatly by surprise. Indeed, Ida the Spider sprang back in alarm.

The voice, of course, belonged to Bloggs who had crept up the way cats can without anybody noticing. As usual, Bloggs' frog was sitting on her head.

"Now," Bloggs said. "Do please correct me if I'm wrong, but as I understand this contract, Ida the Spider in exchange for a tailor-made hammock shall receive an offering of food, or, in lieu of acceptable payment, she shall receive Beekle Henry. Is that, in fact, the situation?"

"The food is not acceptable," Ida the Spider hissed. She was both furious at the interference but also wary. Bloggs, with the help of her frog, would make short work of her, after all.

"It's not acceptable," Ida the Spider repeated. "The beetle's life is forfeit."

"Ah," Bloggs said. "But fair is fair. You can't say the food is unacceptable until you've actually tried it."

"What!" Ida the Spider shouted. She was now openly angry. "You must be joking. Me try that!" she said, pointing at the berry. "I'm not going anywhere near it."

"Well then," Bloggs said. "I'll just wait while Beekle Henry takes his hammock and departs. Safely."

There was a long silence. At last, Ida the Spider took a tentative step towards the berry, then another, muttering all the while under her breath unspeakable things about meddling cats and busybody frogs poking their noses into other people's private business without so much as a by-your-leave or an excuse-me.

'Umble Bumble meanwhile sidled over to Beekle Henry.

"Get ready to run," he whispered.

"But what about the hammock?" Beekle Henry whispered back in an agony of indecision.

"Never mind that," 'Umble Bumble insisted. "If you get the chance, just run..."

Ida the Spider was now standing before the berry, frowning with revulsion. She made a move to touch it and then drew sharply back.

"Ugh," she exclaimed.

"Come on, Ida," Bloggs said encouragingly. "No berry, no beetle."

"It's not fair," Ida snapped. "I slaved all night on that hammock and I'm entitled to be paid for it."

"And paid for it you shall be," Bloggs said. "If, that is, you play by your own rules."

There was another long, tense silence. At last Ida the Spider gave in.

"Oh...very well," she snapped, and leaning forward she seized the berry with her two front feet and, just as 'Umble Bumble had planned, instantly found them stuck fast.

"Run, Beekle Henry!" 'Umble Bumble shrieked. "Run!" And Beekle Henry lumbered around in a three-point turn and set off for the tall timber, er, grass. He didn't get far, however. No sooner had he finally revved up to speed when he ran full tilt into a dainty, furry paw that suddenly plonked down right in front of him, expertly guided by Bloggs' Frog.

"Oh no," groaned 'Umble Bumble. "I thought you were on our side, you ...cat!"

"I'm not on anybody's side," Bloggs said mildly. "But a deal is a deal."

"Even if Beekle 'Enry is eaten alive?" 'Umble Bumble had quite forgotten his respectful nature and was fairly dancing with temper, which meant an awful lot of feet being stamped all at once.

"Never mind, old Bumble," Beekle Henry said. "When all's said and done I suppose I was trying to cheat Ida the Spider, and now I'll just have to face up to the consequences like a beetle."

"But..." 'Umble Bumble started to say.

"Don't be upset," Beekle Henry interrupted. "A beetle has to do what a beetle has to do."

"But it was all my idea," 'Umble Bumble said. "If Ida the Spider is going to eat anyone, it should be me."

"Absolutely not," Beekle Henry said. "You may have thought of this but I actually did it. I didn't have to. Nobody forced me. But I did it. The responsibility is mine and mine alone. Ida the Spider shall eat me and the sooner the better. Let's get it over with."

Meanwhile, the frog had been whispering in Bloggs' ear.

"Well actually," Bloggs said in an interested voice. "I don't think Ida the Spider wants to eat anyone any more, at least for the moment. She's having much too good a time."

Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble turned about and what they saw was truly amazing. Ida the Spider was crouched over the berry, gripping it with all eight legs and giving little moans of pleasure as she buried her head in the fruit. She had honey all over herself and was just the stickiest mess imaginable, but she was having the time of her life.

Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble looked at each other and couldn't help bursting into laughter at the irony of it all.

Bloggs interrupted them.

"I shouldn't hang about if I were you," she said. "There's no telling what Ida might fancy for seconds."

Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble abruptly fell silent, picked up Beekle Henry's new hammock and quietly crept away. Just as they were about to disappear, Ida the Spider looked up and bellowed:

"More! I must have more. Bring me more or I'll eat you."

The two little creatures broke into a run and breathed a thankful sigh as a curtain of grass closed behind them, shutting Ida the Spider from view.

Well, things after that might have been perfect for Beekle Henry – his new hammock was indeed blissful – if it hadn't been for the decline of Dan de Lion. And sad as Beekle Henry felt himself at the dying of his friend, he felt even sadder for poor old Slimy who was taking it very hard. Dan de Lion just faded away, as flowers will, until one day all that was left was a stem and a bit of dried-up frizzle. And Slimy seemed to fade with him. He was truly heart-broken. He had gone through so much to keep his friend alive during the drought, and then Dan de Lion had saved him from starvation in turn. Now, there was nothing Slimy could do, nothing he could say that would change the inevitable progression of life to death. Watching his friend die was the hardest thing Slimy had ever

done, even though Dan de Lion while he could still speak had urged him not to be miserable but to accept that this was the way of all things.

When Dan de Lion was finally, undeniably dead, Slimy went into his shell and nothing Beekle Henry or 'Umble Bumble could say would comfort him. Slimy was inconsolable and, indeed, his two friends began to think he would never come out again.

Even Beekle Henry, ordinarily the most complacent of beetles, was sufficiently upset that he found himself wondering about some of the big questions: how did it all start; where do we come from; where do we go; what does it all mean? Well, I expect you may have wondered about that too, or, if you haven't already I'm pretty certain that some point you will, but I have to tell you there are no real answers. A lot of different people have a lot of different explanations which they chose to believe are true, but that's all those explanations are, beliefs. None of them, not one, can be proved to be true. As you grow older, people who believe they know will have a lot to say on the subject and will try to make you think that what they say is true, just because they believe it. I want you to listen, to think about what they tell you, and then to make up your own minds for yourselves. I don't want you to let anybody tell you what you should think about such things.

Personally, I chose not to believe anything very much but the idea I like best is what's called the big-bang theory. To the best of our knowledge, scientists think that the universe, time, space, everything, began nearly 14 billion years ago with a gigantic expansion of light, heat and other forms of energy, which some people have nicknamed the big bang. Fourteen billion years is an unimaginably long time. A billion is one thousand million, and a million is one thousand thousands, and a thousand is ten hundreds, and I'll bet you know what a hundred is. But do you know this? If you were to count seconds night and day, never stopping even to eat or to sleep, it would take you almost 12 days to get to just a million. To count seconds all the way to 14 billion would take 444 years, less a day or two. So you can see what a huge number 14 billion really is.

Anyway, at one moment nearly 14 billion years ago there was nothing, and the next instant there was everything. This huge outburst of energy which, we think, began time and space also, in turn, formed particles, and the particles then formed very simple atoms which because of gravity began to cluster together. When the clusters became clumps and

the clumps became huge clouds, gravity kept squeezing and squeezing until there was so much pressure and so much heat that it triggered what is called nuclear fusion, and with nuclear fusion the stars were born. Nuclear fusion is, indeed, what causes our own sun, or star, to give off so much light and heat, without which we wouldn't be able to live.

Nuclear fusion in the stars also takes the very simple atoms that were made just after the big bang, hydrogen and helium, and changes them into much more complicated elements, and these elements are what go to make up everything you see around you, including ourselves. Everything. To the best of our knowledge, the materials, the atoms, the molecules that make us and everything else, originally were formed in a star. I like to think that we are literally children of the stars, children of the universe.

Nobody, however, has any real idea of what caused the big-bang in the first place, and also, it has to be said, that a lot of people think the big-bang theory is all nonsense anyway and have very different explanations of how we come to be here. Time may tell the truth. Time will certainly help you to think and decide for yourselves, and there is no need for any of you to be in any particular hurry to make up your minds.

As I said, Slimy was inconsolable and Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble had not seen him for so long that they began to fear he might have died too. Then at dawn one morning, the two friends were rudely awakened by Slimy shouting and hollering at them.

"Look!" he yelled triumphantly. "Look! Look! He was a king after all. A real king! He was a king all the time. Look! Look!"

Beekle Henry and 'Umble Bumble gazed upwards.

"Do you see?" Slimy rattled on, absolutely thrilled to pieces. "Something made me come outside, I don't know what, and look! Look! Isn't it fabulous? Do you see? Isn't it just the most magnificent thing."

And it was. It truly was. What the three little creatures were looking at with astonished awe was Dan de Lion's 'clock' or puff, the ball of tiny hairs that would float his seeds away on the wind, the seeds that Dan de Lion had died to make.

The clock was sprinkled with a fine mist of early morning dew and the rising sun shining through the droplets invested them with all the colours of the spectrum so that they shone and sparkled like jewels, like jewels in a king's crown. Beekle Henry, 'Umble

Bumble and Slimy Snail didn't know that what they were seeing were really miniature rainbows, not diamonds and rubies and emeralds, but they couldn't have cared less.

Dan de Lion at last had his crown, his royal crown, and it was the most splendid thing any of them had ever seen.

"You're right, Slimy," Beekle Henry whispered at last. "He really was a king."

"A prince of kings," Slimy said.

The three of them stood there hardly daring to breathe until the sun had warmed enough to dry the dew. And as the last magic jewel winked out, the first touch of the morning breeze arrived, Dan de Lion's seeds rose and drifted away to begin the cycle of life all over again.