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Junkies, Judges and Jail

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Published by Neville-Douglas Publishing Ltd

Extract

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ONE

ALL HE WANT FOR XMAS IS A BOA CONSTRICTOR

'Tha sees, Steve, it's like this. Tha'll nivver believe it…'

It was almost 5.30 pm on Christmas Eve 1982, and I was locking up Wilford Smith & Co, Solicitors of Rotherham, when Albert Heptonstall appeared on my doorstep.

Albert was the youngest of Jack and Madge Heptonstall's nine children, and the family had been regular clients since I set up in business with my partner Steve Wilford in 1981. In fact he was the only one I hadn't yet represented in court, but as he was only eleven, there was plenty of time for him to follow the family tradition. Albert had already managed to break into a police compound, get into a police car and play with the short-wave radio, causing the complete breakdown of all the mobile police radios in the Rotherham area – not to mention trying to kill my tropical fish.

In the past, Albert had only ever come to the office with his father, but this time he was alone and looked unusually vulnerable, an undersized scruff minus the usual Heptonstall grin. I was about to learn that this wasn't all that had disappeared.

'We've lost Elliott,' said Albert tragically. 'He's gone.' The usually happy-go-lucky lad bowed his head as if struck by some terrible malady.

My mind raced through the names of Jack's children. Horace, Boris, Morris and Venn, Cloris, Doris, Lorris and Tyrone… But

Elliott? I could stand the suspense no longer. 'Albert?' I ventured, 'Who's Elliott?'

'It's me boa,' said Albert.

'Your what?' I asked, somewhat confused.

'Me boa,' said Albert.

I didn't want to show my ignorance, but there seemed no option. 'What's a boa?' I asked.

Albert paused for a moment, as if in a trance, then said, 'It's a constricting non-venomous reptile which crushes its prey by compression. The initial attack is remarkably quick, and usually made with the mouth open.' He demonstrated by forcing his mouth as wide open as possible, then continued: 'A coil is simultaneously thrown around the victim, and is then strengthened by the other coils.'

Speechless, I felt my mouth drop further open than any boa constrictor's. How on earth could Albert speak so fluently and knowledgeably on such a subject?

He took my silence and surprised expression as a signal for further explanation. 'It's a snake, a bloody big un' an' all, all five foot of 'im. Some git's pinched 'im, the thieving bastard,' Albert finished, and I finally understood.

I tried to cheer him up by asking: 'Where's the snake from, Albert?'

Albert brightened. 'From South America, where the Indians come from. Tha knows Indians, dun't tha? Ghandi, Sitting Bull, Geronimo, tha knows?'

'Oh yes, of course,' I replied thoughtfully. I had difficulty with Albert's geography – in fact I had difficulty with just about everything Albert said – but at least on this occasion he seemed to mean well. 'How're your mum and dad, then, Albert?' I asked, trying to change the subject.

'Dad's aw reet, but Mum's upset. Tha'll nivver believe this neither, but we wa' burgled yisterday.'

'Never!' I said in astonishment.

'Aye', said Albert. 'We were all aht, an' someone must have been watching t'ouse, 'cos they brock into my dad's shed and 'ad some of 'is tools away. They got inta kitchen an' all, and that's what really upset me mither. She'd a big pot o' stew on t'cooker like, ready to cook for tea. It must 'ave been some bugger wi' a grudge, 'cos the dirty bastard did 'is business in t'pot. It reet upset me mither, that did.'

'I can imagine, Albert, that's terrible,' I said, horrified.

'Aye', said Albert. 'She was reet upset she 'ad to chuck 'alf of it away.'

Only half of it? My mind boggled, and I quickly changed the subject again . 'What were you doing with a five-foot boa constrictor in the first place, Albert?'

'Bugger all, now,' replied Albert in his eloquent way. ''E's gone, nicked, pinched, leafed, swiped, knocked off…'

I interrupted before he could think of more synonyms for the word stolen. 'How do you know he's been pinched?' I asked. 'Maybe he just slithered off.'

''E was in transit,' said Albert. He always phrased his replies in such a way as to keep the listener interested, almost as if he was sharing a secret with you, a trait he'd picked up from his father.

'In transit? From where and to where?' I asked.

'No – 'e was in t'Transit van!'

'Oh! So where's the van now?' I enquired cautiously.

'That's the point,' Albert whispered, 'It's gone an' all. Argh, nicked, pinched, leafed…'

'Yes.' I said, interrupting his flow, 'Now let me see if I've got this right. You have an extremely large snake which you keep in your father's van?'

'No,' Albert corrected me. 'Our Morris's van. You see, me father wain't let him in t'house, cos o' shit,' said Albert bluntly. 'Me father dun't like snake shit in t'house.'

'I can understand that,' I said, imagining what boa constrictor excrement might look like.

'Not only that,' continued Albert, ''E's a bit friendly, Elliott. We keep 'im in t'green'ouse, where it's warm, because 'e dun't like cold, tha sees. If we dun't ger'im back quick, 'e'll dee.'

I glanced out of the window at the Christmas tree in the churchyard, with its fairy lights on branches weighted with snow, then my thoughts returned to Albert, who had been concerned enough to walk the three miles from his home to my office in search of his bloody snake. I couldn't help thinking that there were plenty of snakes in Rotherham, not all of them reptiles.

'What do you feed him on?' I asked.

'Nowt, now,' said Albert sulkily.

'Before he was stolen, I mean?' I clarified.

'Oh, then?' said Albert. 'He'd eat the odd rat or mouse, or even summat bigger.'

'And how often did you have to feed him?' I asked.

'Ivvery day,' said Albert. 'If you don't, 'e gets a bit restless, and that's when 'e gets a bit friendly round tha neck.'

'And then what does he do?' I asked.

'Squeezes,' answered Albert, making a gurgling noise.

'How long have you had Elliott?' I went on.

'About six months,' said Albert. 'I swapped him for three koi carp, a whippet, and some spare parts off me Dad's Skoda. It was a good deal really, because the Skoda's knackered and the whippet weren't in t'club, but it's gone to a reet good 'ome with a bloke who breeds them on a farm.'

'What was Elliott doing in the van?' I persevered.

''Avin' a change of scene. 'E was in his golf bag, where 'e lives. It's a big golf bag, and it opens at t'side instead o' t'top, and it's got, like, a cushion inside to keep him warm. He sleeps a lot, but he's reet affectionate.'

'Yes, I'm sure he is, particularly if he gets you round the neck.

But aren't these types of snakes dangerous, Albert?' I asked.

'Nay, tha's just got to mek sure it dun't get thee round t'neck, or it'll gi' thee a reet 'eadache.'

It suddenly occurred to me that whoever had stolen the transit van was driving around with a potentially lethal snake on board. Even if I wasn't worried about the thief's well-being, I certainly should be bothered about other road-users: if the snake got friendly while the driver was at the wheel, the consequences could be tragic. Besides, Albert wanted his snake back, and I imagined Morris wanted his van. I began taking notes.

'What else was in the van?' I asked.

'There's an electric pump for a garden pond,' said Albert, 'and some spanners, and a big plastic doll, one of them that blows up – our Morris borrowed it from Boris. Argh, and twenty thousand Benson and Hedges,' said Albert casually. 'They're mi Dad's, and 'e dun't know they've gone yet. 'E likes a smoke, tha knows. The thieving bastard will gerrit when me Dad finds aht,' Albert said, pulling a gruesome face and thumping his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

'I've no doubt, Albert,' I said. 'But that doesn't help the situation at the moment, does it?'

'What do I do, Steve?' asked Albert. 'It's Christmas, and I've got Elliott two rats for his present.'

I suggested that he report the theft to the police. 'Eh, I can't do that,' said Albert, 'Me Dad'll nivver wear that.'

'Fine, then I'll report it,' I replied. Albert was even less enthusiastic about this, but I reiterated my concerns for other road-users until he saw the point.

After a long discussion, we decided on our strategy. Albert would put an advertisement in the 'Lost and Found' section of the *Rotherham Advertiser*, in the hope that the thief or his associates might see it and feel disposed to hand back the stolen goods. I doubted whether this would achieve anything, but at least it was

something to do. More importantly, it was Christmas Eve and the sooner we reached a decision, the sooner I would get home.

'Steve, would you write the advert for me?'

'Of course. I'll do it now, and you can add anything you feel appropriate,' I said. I took a piece of paper from the reception desk and wrote:

'LOST OR STOLEN, ONE BOA CONSTRICTOR. A FORD TRANSIT VAN TAKEN ON 23RD DECEMBER CONTAINED A VERY DANGEROUS SNAKE, WHICH SHOULD BE RETURNED TO ITS OWNER IMMEDIATELY. PLEASE TELEPHONE: 382121 AND ASK FOR ALBERT.

I handed the note to Albert, who felt he should offer something in return. 'Tha dun't want any bottles of whisky for Christmas, does tha Steve?'

'No thank you, Albert, I'm trying to give it up,' I answered, avoiding the prospect of handling stolen goods.

He got up from his chair and held out his hand for me to shake. I did so in the certain knowledge that the lad was destined to become a professional thief, yet I couldn't help liking the little bugger. I don't suppose Albert's behaviour was all his own fault. Jack, his father, had never claimed benefit, but had lived a life of dishonesty, which his children accepted as normal. He had never been corrected or given proper direction, although he had been taught a certain moral code – he was respectful to the elderly and, like his father, would never consider defiling anyone's home by burgling it, although as Jack used to say, the 'commercials' were fair game.

At the door, Albert looked back at me in such a distraught way that I couldn't help feeling sorry for him. 'I will get 'im back, wain't I?' he asked pathetically.

'I hope so,' I replied. 'I really do.'

'Well, Merry Christmas then,' Albert said, trying to smile.

'Yes, Merry Christmas, Albert, and a Happy New Year.'

As I watched Albert trudge through the slush, I felt the cold wind blowing flecks of snow onto my face, shivered, and realised that Albert, in a greying T-shirt stained with gravy under a National Coal Board donkey jacket with 'SECURITY' emblazoned on the front, wasn't dressed for a long walk home. I called him back, grabbed my coat and briefcase, and walked over to the taxi rank with him.

There were two taxis waiting, and I asked the driver of the first to deliver Albert to his front door. I paid, Albert jumped in, and waved as the taxi pulled off, the Heptonstall grin back on his face. At least the thought of arriving home in a taxi had made him forget Elliott for a moment.

(to be continued…)