

**Two Men and a
Spoon in a
Winter
Wonderland**

By

Keith Pugsley

**With encouragement, inspiration and
companionship from
Paul (“Two Sheds”) Wilson**

January 2011

Foreword

This is the story of two men and an order spoon walking part of the South West Coast Path in the depths of winter. The walk had to be truncated. So did this story. But if you enjoy tales of heroism and extreme acts of valour in the face of overwhelming odds, then you're in for a treat. Probably.

Anyway, come with Pad and Pug down the S.W.C.P. in a snowstorm. But tread carefully. We had to.

1. A Motto, and a Plan

It's October, and we're bugged down in the Snug at Long Lane Farm, all behaving characteristically.

- Pad gazes wistfully into the glow of the log burner, mesmerised by the dance of the flames on the pallet wood, sips mulled port, burps contentedly.
- Dobby's rustling furiously through her project papers, tapping forehead with irritable pen, searching for inspiration.
- Gilly busies herself between kitchen and Snug, feeds the log burner, stirs the tagine, ensures our every need and whim is attended to.
- And I've got my nose in a Latin primer, recalling conjugations, declensions and the pluperfect subjunctive of fifty years ago. I'm a man on a mission, seeking out a suitably abstruse but clever little phrase to describe our adventure. Some trite but arcane motto that will encapsulate for all time the uniqueness of our endeavour.

It was Pad's idea. A full four minutes ago, before he'd started gazing wistfully and burping contentedly. In one of those rare moments when his focus was here in the Snug with the rest of us, apart from Gilly of course, who was still administering to the needs and whims. Out of the fug in the Snug it came, quite unannounced.

"Why don't we walk down the South West Coast Path, Pug, you and I? I like walking, me."

"Well, I'm up for it. I'm a seasoned walker, me. Got me "A"Level. When do you fancy doing it?"

"I've got a few days leave due, this side of Christmas. If you're free, we could give it a bash then."

"O.K., in principle. There'll be a lot of preparation to do, and the first thing we'll need is a motto."

"A motto?"

"A motto. You know, a *raison d'être*, a *cause célèbre*. Some pithy little saying with which we can inspire the nation to espouse our cause and follow in our footsteps."

"O.K., if you say so. I thought we'd just need some boots. Where do we get one of these pithy sayings then?"

"Fear not! For I am a wordsmith of some renown. I will fashion one from my own bare brain. Wife! Pass me my Latin primer. I like mottos, me."

And I've been slaving over the Latin primer ever since. Our motto needs to be short and to the point, a bit like me. And it also needs to be stout and unwavering, a bit like Pad. I'm wrestling with vocabulary, boxing with the grammar. I'm having a right punch-up with the syntax when suddenly,

"Semper intrepidus, nos!" I exclaim excitedly, as if I've just discovered a previously unheard of gerundive.

"What?" Pad's ejected from his log burner induced reverie.

"Semper intrepidus, nos!" I repeat, triumphant. "Our watchword, our motto, we could have it printed on tee shirts. Or something."

"But what does it mean, pray?"

"That's the particularly clever bit. What makes it arcane, intellectual even. It's a cut above yer average motto. It's in Latin, you know. And it means

"We're always intrepid, us."

"Sort of Leeds Latin, then?"

"Yeah. And it sort of sums us both up, you know, intrepid, fearless in the face of adversity, bold explorers both, daring to go where others have never ventured before. Et cetera."

"Yeah, like Amundsen, Shackleton, Scott of the Antarctic, Billy Connolly. I like it, me. *"Semper intrepidus, nos."* Got a nice ring to it. Well done, Pug."

"Thought you'd like it. Now, if that's agreed, we'll next need a plan. Better to be prepared you know."

So we spend the next three or four minutes deciding where we'll walk. As it's going to be mid winter, sometime just before Christmas, and snow threatens, we figure it would be an idea not to be intrepid too far afield and away from civilisation, accepting that Devon and Cornwall are lands unto themselves in any event. We quickly settle on a stretch of the Path between Croyde Bay in North Devon and Minehead in Somerset. That's quite local to Long Lane Farm. Should we have to bail out and abandon the walk due to adverse weather conditions or banditry, we should be able to find our way back to civilisation at a point not too distant for Gilly to retrieve us. Not that that's likely to occur of course. After all, we're intrepid, us.

We choose to start our adventure in Croyde Bay on a date yet to be determined. Adopting the Iain Ferguson¹ theory, that coastal path walking should be done with the prevailing weather behind you where possible, we shall be travelling due North West, against oncoming traffic, as most

¹ For more of Iain, see *Two Men and a Spoon go Hill Walking* (May 2010) by the author.

S.W.C.P. walkers seem to simply follow the Guide, which takes you the other way.

Day One should be a "moderate" 6.3 miles to Woolacombe, followed by a "strenuous, becoming easy" 4 miles to Lee Bay. Day Two would commence with an "easy to moderate", and familiar to us both, 3.3 miles into Ilfracombe, and thereafter a "moderate, strenuous in parts" 5.3 miles to Combe Martin harbour. This part of the path is also local to me, and quite well known. Combe Martin car park to Lynmouth is a rather more daunting 13.3 miles "strenuous". An early start and brisk yomping style are indicated for Day Three if we are to make Lynmouth before dusk. Day Four promises to be kinder to us with its 12.3 miles "moderate" to Porlock Weir. Day Five should be a relatively easy option as it's a mere 9.5 miles "moderate" to the beach at Minehead, where the path finishes (or starts, depending on where you're coming from and your point of view).

"You'll need a decent pair of boots." I'm getting technical now, perhaps showing off a bit, giving Pad the benefit of my vast experience in these matters.

"Gottem!" comes the reply. "In fact I've got three pairs. My old boots, now used for gardening. Then there's the bargain pair I bought in Barnstaple, which only cost me eighty quid extra because I overstaid my welcome in Lidl's car park. And there's a pair I've been keeping for best. 'Course, I might buy some more in the sales. And I've got a new hi-tec rucksack, you know, in British Racing Red, because they told me it'll go faster. And special hermetically sealed waterproof overtrousers. And gaiters, to keep the water off the overtrousers. And a hat, to keep the water out of everything. Even me rucksack's got its own rain coat. I'm well prepared, me."

I feel a tad overwhelmed now. Pad seems to have got it all locked off and velcroed up. I was rather expecting to be lead walker this time, a sort of Hilary to Pad's Tensing. All I can offer is a lame

"Well, I've replaced the dodgy knapsack we riveted together in Tintagel². I got a real beaut. Most commodious, strong yet light. And it cost me a mere £4 from a charity shop. The best of it was, I found six euros in one of its pockets, so it's already experienced in Alpine backpacking, and effectively cost me nought."

"Has it got the webbing at the back to prevent you getting sweaty and sore?" Pad's waxing technical again, and he's better at it than me.

² See *Two Men and a Spoon go Hill Walking* (May 2010) by the author.

"Dunno. Er, I expect so. Probably. It's got a special pocket for the mobile phone. And one for the Swiss Army Knife."

"Oh, that's handy then. I like pockets, me."

"Fancy a drink? Beer? Red wine? Asses milk?"

We decide to call a halt to all this planning malarkey. Pad'll phone me with the confirmed dates of his leave, whereupon I shall surf the web or the Guide³ in search of suitable B & B accommodation along the route.

That was in October. Pad's leave dates were confirmed, and as promised, I booked our accommodation, with a little difficulty as it appears Christmas week is bang out of season for coast path walking and most of the likely venues were not taking guests. Here's the official plan of the 2010 Pad and Pug S.W.C.P. Walk. It's done in the official Coast Path Vernacular:

PAD AND PUG WALK ALONG THE SOUTH WEST COAST PATH

Please note the following itinerary and preparations for this walk:

Dates: Commencing Friday 17 December 2010 at approximately 9.00 a.m. Greenwich Mean Time at Croyde Bay, where Gilly will have taken us after breakfast, we'll walk from South West to North East through Woolacombe, Lee Bay, Ilfracombe, Combe Martin, Lynmouth, Porlock and Porlock Weir to Minehead. The walk terminates on the beach at Minehead on the shortest day, 21 December at approx. 16.00, where our transport back to Long Lane Farm will await us.

The Route and stop-offs:

Date	Stretch	Mileage	Stopping at
Friday 17 December	Croyde Bay beach to Woolacombe	6.3 miles moderate	Woolacombe? For lunch. Possibly the Red Barn.
	Woolacombe to Lee Bay	4 miles strenuous, becoming easy	The Grey Cottage, Lee, EX34 8LN, which is accessed up a steep path between the Old Chapel and Park Cottage. Julia Waghorn (01271 863257) will minister to our every need here at a cost of £35 each inc. brekkie. Deposit of £30 despatched today.
Saturday 18 December	Lee Bay to Ilfracombe	3.3 miles easy to moderate	Hele Bay? At the Hele Bay Hotel, for lunch, probably, or something.
	Ilfracombe to	5.3 miles	The Fo'c'sle, where Chris, on 01271

³ *The South West Coast Path Guide 2001 Edition*

	Combe Martin	moderate, strenuous in parts	883354, has a twin room and breakfast for us at a cost of £65.00 (£32.50 each). Deposit of £25 paid to secure.
Sunday 19 December	Combe Martin to Lynmouth	13.3 miles strenuous	The Captain's House (aka Riverside Guest House) No.1 Torrs Road EX35 6ET where Mrs. Parker-Clifford (01598 753369) will let us snuggle up to her ample bosom in a twin with breakfast for £30.00 each. £30 deposit paid.
Monday 20 December	Lynmouth to Porlock Weir	12.3 miles moderate	The Ship Inn, Porlock, where Katy's warming the sheets for us in a bijou twin at a modest £30.00 each (Katy's not included). £30.00 deposit paid to secure.
Tuesday 21 December	Porlock Weir to Minehead sea front	9.5 miles moderate	Retrieved from the beach by our last landlady Gilly Pugsley, Lady Mallens of Bedfordshire, who will convey us to her establishment at Long Lane Farm. No charge for transport or accommodation, and I get to nestle in the ample bosom again.

Here's a suggested list of what we should wear/ carry on the way

Light shoes
Walking Socks (2 pair)
Throwaway socks for evening (say 3 pair)
Cotton shirts 3
Walking Trousers
Evening trousers
Walking jumper/waterproof
Headgear
Throwaway pants (4 pairs)
Gloves
Walking boots
Pyjamas

PLUS

Mobile phone duly charged
Camera and charger
Money, say £200
Credit and Debit cards
Tubigrips
Stick
Maps
Journal
Plasters
Medication

Tea Tree Oil
Throwaway razor
Tooth paste and brush
Book
Swiss Army Knife with at least 34 variously useful attachments.

ALL IN A DECENT BUT LIGHT RUCKSACK

Pad spent every Saturday and Sunday between October and our walk yomping along the roads of rural Oxfordshire, with an uncomplaining Dobby in tow, getting match fit, taking in the local hostelries, testing out the equipment. I, however, spent these days in idleness and dissipation. I've got me A Levels now. This walk'll be a doddle, I thought.

2. Soirée at The Grampus

'Twas ten after five on an ice cold inky black morning in late December and I sat bolt upright in my bed, jerked into a cruel anxious wakefulness by the weather forecaster on Radio 2. With only seven shopping days to Christmas, the news had been a mix of trivia and schmalz, competition and carol. The sudden announcement of severe weather warnings and six inches of snow in the South West was particularly inopportune on this morning, the first day of our fabled adventure along the South West Coast Path. I leapt athletically from my bed (stumbled blindly in actual fact, with the remnants of last evening's litre of red wine fuzzing up my edges) and dived (staggered) to the window. It was clear we'd had snow fall, but I couldn't be sure for at least a couple of hours, just how much, the winter darkness up here at Long Lane Farm being so profound.

Pad had arrived just after dark the previous evening, stashed his car in the Stash to protect it from the worst ravages of the expected snow, and taken up residence in the guest room. We had a convivial evening, and drank deeply to the success of our venture, to absent friends, the Queen, anything else we could think of. Gilly fed the conquering heroes on gammon steaks, potato wedges and ratatouille, a sustaining repast that was to set us up for the rigours of the days ahead.

I should perhaps step out of the narrative for a few moments, to introduce the reader to the other members of the crew. Pad, (real name Paul "Two Sheds" Wilson, on account of the minimum number of outhouses he considers it reasonable for the aspirational British male householder to sport about his suburban garden without loss of face) has been my very good friend since 1994, when I met him at a Shakespeare festival production of Henry V. He was wearing a duffel coat and carrying a jar of Anywhen Marmalade at the time, so Gilly dubbed him Paddington, or Pad for short. The name seems to have stuck. He's an Independent Financial Advisor turned trainer, and, like me, does clinical hypnotherapy when there's an "R" in the month or a smoker in the vicinity. He lives with wife Dobby, the house elf, in a small village in Oxfordshire. Dobby's a hypnotherapist too, when she's not designing and delivering training, and the three of us make up an Entrancement, which, as many of you will know, is the collective noun for a group of three or more clinical hypnotherapists.

Anyway, Pad and I have had many mini adventures together. We've braved the alpine roads of North Devon in a Reliant Robin driven by a retired tank commander. We've trod the boards in panto as Dobbin the Wonderhorse.

He once saved me £15,000 on a property deal through his subtle and to-the-wire negotiation. We have complementary skills, do Pad and I. I have the skills, mainly, and Pad complements me on them. Seriously, though we are quite different in personality, we look out for each other, and are not likely to be phased in a difficult situation. Probably.

Gilly, my wife of nearly forty years, became, for this adventure only, the Support Services Department. Rendering advice, succour, support, an excellent shepherd's pie and the odd lift, she was to become an essential attribute to any team of hardened, match fit die-hards such as Pad and I. You can read more of Gilly's exploits in *"Two Blondes and a Spoon do Iceland"*⁴.

And finally there's No.13, the order spoon from Friendship House in Barnstaple, who's accompanied me all over the world, and featured in my adventures with Iain Ferguson on the South West Coast Path⁵. He occupies one of the many pockets in my commodious Peter Storm jacket, and emerges for the odd photo shoot.

Back to the narrative. At 7.00 a.m., as dawn threatened to poke its reluctant finger through an indigo sky, I chanced another look out of the window. Definite signs of snow, about three inches of the stuff. Bugger! That could make the going tough, and the path invisible. We'd planned for an early start, and should be getting on the road as soon as daylight would permit.

My gear is all packed, all rucksack and jacket pockets closed, zipped, buttoned and bowed. I'm the completer-finisher of the expedition, and I've been almost irritatingly ready to go since I hit the sack last night, a little the worse for the red wine, but prepared in my balaclava, Peter Storm jacket and boots to strike out for the path. Pad's nearly ready too, but taking a slightly more relaxed stance. There's time for the bacon rolls Support Services have laid on. Pad will even take time to brush his teeth after the roll. Me, I've done all that before I got them dirty.

"There's about three inches of snow fallen over night, Pad, and it's settling on the roads. Support Services have cleared the drive, however, and warmed up the car for our foray into the wilds of woolly North Devon. You ready to go?"

"I must just take a slash. Which means I must remove the gaiters. And the overtrousers. And of course adjust the thermal long johns."

"Have you a bottle of water?"

⁴ *"Two Blondes and a Spoon do Iceland"* by Gilly Pugsley, (December 2010)

⁵ See *"Two Men and a Spoon go Hill Walking"* by the author (May 2010)

“And fill my bottle with water. Apart from that, I’m ready for the off. We must have a picture of us ready to go. Wait till I’ve got me leggings on again.”

I think Support Services has taken well to her role. She’s repaired the fuse that blew when I plugged the battery charger into the light bulb. She’s taken professional quality stills shots of us as we make our final preparations and adjustments, don balaclava, rucksack, leggings and gloves. She’s loaded our accoutrements into the back of the car. As we walk up the drive she looks a little strained to me. Is it the adrenalin from being involved at the cutting edge of this ground breaking experience? The concern for the welfare of these two adventurers as they make their way boldly? Indigestion, perhaps?

We toboggan up the drive on three inches of virgin snow and burst onto the main road, by 8.20, fishtailing our way up to Coil Cross and beyond. The major roads have a thin layer of pack ice where traffic has gone before. The minor roads through Georgeham and Croyde are perma-frosted, and there’s the glint of diamonds on tarmac as the early sun dazzles through the hedges.

By 9.05 Support Services pulls up at Croyde Burrows, where we’re tipped out, forced to pose for yet more photos and strike out for Baggy Point.

“Which way, Pug?”

“Look out for an acorn. Then, if there’s a choice, the default option is the sea should be on our left.”

“There’s the acorn. And I think that’s the Atlantic Ocean.”

We’re off! We’ve left a tearful and distraught Support Services behind us as we stride manfully along the South West Coast Path, with the sea broadly speaking on our left. The going’s good, the walking easy. And though it’s blowing a gale onshore from a sky grey and glowering, and ice crystals are almost visible as they form on our extremities, yet we’re making good time. Out of Croyde Bay with Middleborough Hill on the right and Pencil Rock pointing accusingly out of the Atlantic Ocean. We skirt around the extremity of Baggy Point, venturing as near as we dare to the edge of this headland in the face of a furious north easterly.

“Must have a picture of No.13 at Baggy Point,” shouts Pad at the very tip of the headland leaning heavily into the offshore breeze.

I don't mind confessing, I'm feeling a touch trepid right here. As I clutch No.13 between clenched teeth, Dictaphone in my right hand, stick in left, fumble in pocket 453 for camera and pocket 279 for Swiss Army Knife, I'm beginning to doubt the wisdom of coming so very "prepared".

By 9.45 we've rounded the cape and we're yomping down the Tarka Trail, wind to our backs, overlooking the rich yellow-brown expanse of Woolacombe Sand and the white water rolling into Morte Bay. We stop for our first water break.

"Hell, me bloody water bottle's froze solid. And this energy bar's like concrete. Any energy it might give's being used up eating the bleedin' thing," complains Pad.

"Would you prefer an averagely tasty carrot baton?" I chance, though I know the batons are packed somewhere really handy, like the bowels of my rucksack, and I'd rather not have to venture there just yet, in the middle of a howling gale.

"No that's OK Pug, we'd better keep the batons for emergencies, or dark nights. The energy bar will suffice for now."

10.20. Approaching Putsborough on the descent down Napps Cliff we've lost the Path. It's occasions like this that highlight, early on in our venture, the very different walking styles we are to adopt. The Ordnance Survey Explorer Map sheet 139 hangs by a cord around my neck in its protective plastic wallet, like some huge and incongruous medal of achievement. It is our lifeline, our security blanket, our saviour. I'm consulting it right now, trying to decide whether we should carry on to what looks like a minor road just north of Putsborough Manor, or shinny down the cliff to Putsborough Sand; dangerous and daunting, but apparently more in the direction of Woolacombe. I'm on the horns of this very interesting dilemma, beads of real sweat breaking out on my concerned brow, when Pad pipes up,

"Look at thaaaat, Pug! A stonechat. Dainty little bird with a distinctive note. See how it flirts its tail, especially on alighting. Note the chestnut-pink plumage beneath and dark brown above, the white bar on the wing and patch on the rump. That'll be the male, with its black head and white collar. They're known to inhabit these parts, you know; gorse-clad country near the coast....." Et cetera.

But I don't see the stonechat. I'm nose to dune, powering ahead with a purpose, kicking up little eddies of sand with boots and stick as I make my purposeful way along the ridge between Woolacombe Sand and Warren. We're on a bridleway now, dodging a trio of piebald ponies, approaching

Woolacombe through the dunes at scuttling speed. There are signs on the path warning *"Beware of the Adders!"*

"What can this mean? A school for trainee accountants, perchance?"
"I think you'll find they're the slithery bitey variety. Not dangerous this time of year though. They'll be asleep."

It's a great relief having this latter day David Attenborough as a walking partner. He's a veritable cornucopia of knowledge on country matters. When he's not waxing lyrical about the wonders of nature, that is.

Skirting round the base of Potters Hill we descend onto tarmac again for the last few hundred yards into Woolacombe and the Red Barn.

The Red Barn's one of the largest pub restaurants in Woolacombe. It's bright, cheerful in its crimson livery and normally a lively locale for surfers and beach bums. When we struggled through the door and discarded rucksacks, sticks, boots and other encumbrances liberally around the floor and collapsed into its plush velour seating, it was deserted, apart from its trio of bar staff, three desultory looking individuals in red corporate waistcoats and bow ties. I ordered tea, coffee for Pad and a photo shoot for No. 13 with the pretty Alison. This has become quite a custom, and a fashion in these parts for selected barmaids along the Devon/Cornwall coast. Alison was eager to oblige.

"Look at the fantastic Atlantic rollers, Pug, as they crash majestically onto the rocks of Barricane beach, hurling spray and spume high into the rays of the afternoon sun."

"You're waxing lyrical again."

"Sorry, Pug. I'm going for a slash, and some cash."

Pad's tramped the streets of downtown Woolacombe (there are only two of them) and stocked up on the wherewithal to meet the demands financial of our various landladies. Now we're back on the path on the roadside verge past Barricane beach. We sit momentarily on a bench erected above Grunta beach to the memory of Neville, Jill and Agnes Connibeer, who, has the legend, spent many a happy hour watching the pigs and passed this way for the last time in 1982, 1983 and 2001 respectively. Overlooking Woolacombe with the spray on the rocks and the afternoon sun casting a river of molten gold across the vasty deep, I'm not so sure I can resist the temptation to wax lyrical, like Pad. Must be catching.

Morte Point is, on the map, shaped like a penguin's bill. We take great care here, as the Windy Cove near the pointy bit is aptly named, and that primeval fear of being blown off the top creeps back to haunt me. I feel a lot safer descending on the other side past the tiny coves and beaches that make up Rockham Bay. It's 1.30 p.m. and we're one and a half miles short of the Bull Point Lighthouse, in clear bright sunlight. We're happy bunnies, us.

"See, Pug, behold the natural geyser!" Pad's gazing, awestruck, at a fine spray of spume and water that appears to shoot randomly skyward, perhaps twenty feet distant from us. And he's in danger of waxing lyrical yet again. Fortunately there's nobody about. In fact, the object of his wonder is merely a waterfall created by water blown up from the rocks below. He's insisting on a photo though, and his camera has run out of power, so I'll have to struggle through the six hundred or more pockets of the blessed Peter Storm jacket in search of mine.

The next mile or so is perhaps the most arduous of the day, as it's up hill and down dale all the way to the Bull Point Lighthouse, which we reach at 2.10 p.m. The sky has darkened; we may be in for a shower. But Lundy Island, nineteen miles offshore to our left, and the coast of Wales with its Gower Peninsula to the right, stand out clear and defiant in the gathering gloom. We stop for water and for Pad to consume his second energy bar of the day, this one has thawed a little in the sunlight. The former lighthouse keeper's cottages at Bull Point can be had for holidays. Contact www.ruralretreats.co.uk for information.

An hour later we emerge from the gloom of Wrinkle Wood into the gloom of late afternoon in late December in Lee Bay. It's a pretty little bay, but deserted and strangely desolate at this time of year, particularly since the once expansive and vibrant Lee Bay Hotel closed a couple of years ago. It's 3.10 p.m. and we both confess to being faintly fatigued. We're looking for Julia Waghorn's place, the Grey Cottage, our first B.& B.

"I'm pretty sure it's over the bridge and up the hill a bit. According to Julia's directions, it's on the left, up a steep lane between the old chapel and Park Cottage." I'm recalling Julia's directions of a couple of months ago when I booked the gaff. But I'm sure we'll find it. As I explain to Pad, I've given talks here in Lee to the W.I., so I'm as well acquainted with the topography of Lee and its environs as I am with the lyrics of "*Jerusalem*".

We set off at a steady if laboured trudge up the hill out of Lee Bay. A couple of hundred yards up the hill on our left we pass a concrete driveway which I

recognise as the S.W.C.P. leaving Lee on its way to Ilfracombe. We'll have to return here tomorrow morning to continue on our way. Another couple of hundred yards and we pass The Grampus on our right.

"I vote we return here this evening for some conviviality and perhaps a meal, once we've dumped our gear at the Grey Cottage. It's the only pub in these parts, now that the Lee Bay Hotel is closed. What do you think, Pad?"

"Sounds good to me. A couple of pints by the log burner would go down well. I like log burners, me. Strange name, The Grampus."

"Yes, technically, of course, it's Risso's dolphin, but it's the popular name for many whales, especially the killer. Also the slightly archaic term for someone who puffs and blows a lot. Anyway, we were going to stay here, but they don't do B.& B. anymore."

"The Grampus it is then. Excuse me, how much further to the Grey Cottage?"

I'm about to assure Pad it's only around the corner, but realise he's actually asking a kindly local, the first we've met for hours. He's walking his dog.

"You're on the right track. The road bends about a bit, but just carry straight on until you get to the top. Then ask again."

It's another half hour and about a mile up the hill before I spot what I believe to be an old chapel, long converted into a chic country residence, but retaining its ecclesiastical heritage by the clever device of naming it "The Old Chapel". Park Cottage should be to its left, but the building is obscured by a lorry, several large piles of sand, scaffolding boards and the general rubble and detritus that goes with any badly managed building site. I'm certain that the way to the Grey Cottage and Julia Waghorn's hospitality is right behind that lorry, though judging by the noncommittal shrugs of both labourers, one shoving a desultory barrow, the other finishing his chocolate biscuit, the access is a closely guarded secret. We skirt carefully around the lorry, rearrange the piles of sand with an idle shovel and remove some scaffold boards, and hey presto! discover a steep grassy path behind a gate.

"That can't be the way," insists Pad. "It must be further on, round the corner. Or something."

"I'm sure this is the way Pad. Unlikely though it may seem. I'm only following directions. That must be Park Cottage, though I grant it's curious the builders don't even know the name of the property they're working on.

That's the Old Chapel, because it says so. And up there (I'm pointing up the grassy path) I see something grey. Looks like a cottage."

Pad reluctantly concedes. We struggle with the gate, because it too is littered with builder's detritus. The climb up the wet grassy slope's no picnic either, and it's liberally bestrewn with dog shit. About half way up we reach the scaffolding. The structure is lethal for your average walker. About three feet high, enclosed with scaffold board and corrugated iron, it has little architectural merit, even as a folly. The only way through is under, and it looks like a hands and knees job.

"This cannot be the way, Pug," growls Pad. "It's just unfeasible. Julia Waghorn's back passage is unfeasible."

"I agree with those immortal words, but just remember, *"Semper intrepidus, nos."* We're intrepid, us."

So the scaffold folly was duly negotiated on all fours, and though a close call, neither of us suffered decapitation or lasting injury. A few yards further up the slope we came to a high wooden gate, and the back of a garage. Pad put his shoulder to the gate and forced a quick entry. Past the dustbins and a bird table we stumbled, and up to an ancient and peeling pale green front door. One brief rattle on the knocker summonsed a jolly lady of ample proportions.

"Julia Waghorn, I presume?"

oooOooo

The welcome we received at the Grey Cottage made up for the tortuous nature of our arrival. The well proportioned twin ensuite was warm and comfortably equipped, and we were provided with a pot of tea, coffee and delicious home baked fruit cake and biscuits. I broke out the carrot batons to add to this pre-prandial feast. Pad tickled Julia's ivories, with her consent of course. He has a habit of tickling peoples' ivories, often when they're least expecting it. I took readily to the ensuite for a shower. Pad's more of a bath person, so he headed for the bathroom. I didn't see him again for about two hours.

"Enjoy the bath, Pad?"

"Yeah, but did you see the size of the bleedin' thing? I had to wait for the tide to come in. Did twelve lengths. Then I fell asleep."

Neither of us relished the walk back down the hill to the Grampus, especially in the crocs⁶ I'd packed for evening wear. Fortunately, Julia Waghorn's kind partner (I never got his name) whisked us back there in his car. Yes, Julia's Grey Cottage does boast a perfectly adequate front entrance and drive, which we would have reached in about a further quarter of a mile, had we taken Pad's wussy way out.

The Grampus was as chilly in temperature as it was warm in atmosphere. Though it boasted two log burners, neither was being driven with the gusto we have grown to expect. Pad set to with poker and log box in the back pool room, where we played a dozen games as Pad thawed the place out. I let Pad win twelve nil, purely as a boost to his flagging confidence. No. 13 joined in, though it seems he's much better as a cue than as a player.

"Prithee, what's on the specials board, stout yeoman", I enquire as the landlord carefully pulls us a pint and a half of Otter ale.

"Beef Wellington. But we only have the two. That's what makes them special."

"We'll have a pair of Beef Wellingtons, then, if you please."

They were none too special, as a matter of fact. Tough beef in indigestible puff pastry. The pastry repeats on me now, and it's weeks later.

The soirée began without warning. Julia Waghorn had told us that Friday Night is Music Night at the Grampus, but we didn't know quite what to expect until the two gents sitting by the log burner swapped their pints for guitars and commenced a gentle jam session, strumming Ralph Mc.Tell and Don Maclean numbers, and doing rather well too. Shortly after Pad and I had begun to attack the pair of Wellingtons, the landlord joined the party with his three-legged dog Lucy and his fiddle, flooding the public bar with some of the sweetest sounds I've heard in a long while. Apparently it was open night, and all and sundry were invited to do their turn. I was contemplating an offer to do my singing in the club style, you know, old Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin numbers with an accentuated drunken vibrato style of thing. They usually go down rather well in mixed company with a couple of beers, and I had offered to entertain Julia Waghorn in this way. But somehow it didn't seem entirely appropriate in the Grampus, and anyway I didn't want to steal the show. So I let Pad offer our contribution.

Well, he started modestly enough, with guitar renditions of *Streets of London*, *American Pie* and *Vincent*. Then he took to the piano and

⁶ The same crocs, with the nut, that were worn by the author in "*Two Men and a Spoon go Hill Walking*" (May 2010, q.v.)

accompanied the landlord's sweet voice in a medley of haunting numbers. Every now and then he'd break off to poke the log burner and thrash me next door in another game of pool, and then return to guitar or piano as if it were the most natural thing to display such a mixed virtuosity unbidden. I can tell you now, reader, like I cannot tell him for fear his ego will explode, I was the proudest member of that small congregation in the Grampus that evening.

At the end of this sparkling evening of wit, talent and beautiful music, we were seen off the premises just before midnight. It had been snowing for some time. The red wine and Otter ale seem to have made the mile trudge back up the hill much shorter, for some reason. The return trip seemed, in hindsight, to have been accomplished in minutes.

Now, the street lights in Lee are surprisingly good, but they weren't up to illuminating Julia Waghorn's back passage and the scaffold folly in a blizzard. This we negotiated with a combination of the Davey lamp attachment on the Swiss Army Knife and my hand-crank magneto torch (light on batteries but heavy on the wrist). And a slice of intrepidity. Avoiding the dog shit and a second decapitation in under six hours, we made it back to the Grey Cottage.

"Where's the sugar, Pad?"

"You're eating it."

"Where's the rest of the cake?"

"You've eaten that too."

"If we make it to the Fo'c'sle tomorrow, shall we try something they can't fuck up?"

"Yes, I think so. Beef Wellington still coming back?"

"(Snores)"

3. The Ghost of Ernie Pugsley

Five o'clock on a cold and frosty morning. We awoke to whiteout. Peering out of the window I could see a good couple of inches of snow on the roof of Julia Waghorn's bird table. Two desultory robins trudged grumpily about, knee deep in their search for the odd grub.

"How about good old ham, egg and chips tonight?" Pad was ahead of me in the culinary aspiration department.

"Yeah, with perhaps a drizzle of brown sauce?" I added wistfully, thinking if we're going down market, we should at least do it in style. "The Fo'c'sle shouldn't be able to fuck that up too easily. Ham, egg and chips it is. If we make it to the Fo'c'sle, that is. Have you seen outside?"

By a quarter to eight we were at the breakfast table while the cheerful Julia Waghorn bustled about with pots of steaming Darjeeling, aromatic Columbian, plates of delicately poached salmon, great slabs of toast and a mountain of scrambled egg. We feasted on this hearty fare, each steeped in his own thoughts. Mine were focused on getting out of Lee as soon as the light would permit. I rather fancy Pad's attention was on the wildlife of the area, in which he clearly shared an interest with the large and ebullient Julia. While I refolded the map to show this morning's portion of the walk, Pad and Julia pored studiously over the *Observer's Book of Wild Birds*, comparing notes, plumages, nesting habits and other ornithological trivia. They had clearly hit it off, these two twitchers, with their common interest in wildlife. In hindsight, they resembled a couple of rare species themselves, perhaps a lesser spotted waghorn and a great tit.

We finally toggled and booted up, mounted rucksacks and left the Grey Cottage for the icy wastes beyond at 9.05. Through the gate at the bottom of the garden we strode, into a winter wonderland. Down the grassy lane we step gingerly, clutching stick and feeling our way forward through the virgin snow and steaming dog shit. Under the scaffold folly for the third and, hopefully, final time, and I reach the gate at the bottom of the lane first, to find the catch is on the other side, behind a fresh deposit of builder's spoil. It takes this diminutive adventurer an act of faith and an almost superhuman effort to mount the gate, rucksack and balaclava beladen, reach down the outside edge and release the catch, so that Pad may weave his way unhindered into the outside world.

These images as we descend into Lee village:

- Ø The main road through Lee is deserted, eerie, surreal, covered with an inch or so of virgin snow. No-one has passed this way on foot or by vehicle since we stumbled up here last night.
- Ø We feel our way down the hill, sticks in hand, jabbing at the highway verge for a hold in the cool, blue early light.
- Ø A small child, or is it an oriental dwarf, clears a patch of tarmac with swift, rhythmic, circular movements of a dustbin lid. As I approach, he (it) turns and grins at me toothily.
- Ø A large black powerful automobile roars up the hill towards us, fishtailing in the slime. I see a sort of sardonic terror in the driver's eyes as it passes.

We're back to the concrete drive we passed yesterday afternoon. It's 9.30 and we're back on the official path at last. The sky's changing from a foreboding battleship grey to a pleasant cobalt blue, with clouds of purple, crimson, magenta and yellow ochre. It's a water colourist's dream.

"I think we did a couple of extra miles there, which we could take into account," says Pad. "But Julia Waghorn's place was a good call, Pug. Well done!"

"One does one's best. But actually, it was the luck of the draw. Very few B.& B's open this late. I did try one just up here, called the Blue Mushroom, right on the route of the Path, but we're way out of season for them."

"It's not that we couldn't accommodate you, just that it's so bloomin' cold up here at Christmas. And you might get marooned until the spring!" I didn't see the arrival of the slight and elderly Mrs. Blue Mushroom in her duffel coat and plus fours, but she clearly saw us coming. I apologise for the oversight and Pad explains where we spent last night.

"Oh, Julia Waghorn's place. Well, you made an excellent choice. I've just been speaking to her. She's got a chocolate cake for me. You do know she cooks most of the food for the Grampus?"

What, even the beef wellington?" I chance.

"Oh no! They'll have been frozen. Julia bakes the cake and bread. That sort of thing."

I'm relieved I haven't Julia to blame for the heavy, greasy feel in the pit of my stomach.

By 9.45 the Blue Mushroom's behind us and we're on the cliff, skirting our way through snow-strewn sheep pasture. I'm keeping a wary eye on the path, as although I'm familiar with it in fine weather, it would be easy to mislay in the snow. Where the paths diverge, the default option seems to be to follow the sheep. Surely they know the way?

So we yomp at a fair rate past Shag Rock, and though I'm tempted to investigate the goings on there, we stick to what we believe is the path and on to the worryingly named Breakneck Point. From there it's a steady up-and-downer through the seven hills of Torrs Park and a winding decline close to the cliff edge at Ridge Rocks. That's where Pad takes a tumble.

"What are you doing down there?"

"Breast stroke, I think," he replies to my blandishment.

"I could do with a cup of tea, Pad. What do you think? The Landmark in Ilfracombe serves a decent cup, and it's right on the path.

"The Landmark it is. Give us a hand out of this mud will you?"

We reach the outskirts of Ilfracombe at 10.45, drop down through the Southern Slope Municipal Gardens and into the Landmark for tea. The twin cooling towers of the Landmark theatre restaurant are a truly hideous intrusion into the townscape of this slightly jaded Victorian jewel of a resort. But the tea's decent, and I can check in with Support Services. Pad suggests I invite her down for coffee.

I'm in the gents, now, communing with the proverbial. On the door of my cubicle there's a flyer advertising a forthcoming attraction. Stephen Venables, Speaker of the Age, is to address the masses in a monologue he calls "In the Steps of Shackleton". The flyer gives the wording of an advert placed by the doughty Ernest in the *Times* of 1913, when he was seeking companions for his voyage of discovery:

"Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in the event of success."

Support Services have come up trumps again. Digging the car out of a foot of drift at Long Lane Farm she's come for coffee and to pick up some of Pad's excess accoutrements, thus lightening his load. I'm saving my excess accoutrements for best. She's left now, with Pad's trollies, electric kettle, hot water bottle, first aid kit and second best stick, and we're back on the way to our next stop, which is Combe Martin.

Now I'm really on home turf here. I was born in Ilfracombe some sixty-one years ago, and it is with a sense of the proprietorial that I escort the bemused Pad through its streets. We set off down the Esplanade and St. James' Place, avoiding the windswept stroll around the Capstone Rock, a famous haunt for drink and drugs abuse at any time of year, not wishing to

encounter a band of festive smack heads on its Christmas outing. Besides, Pad's in need of pastry, and I'm aware of perhaps the finest purveyor of North Devon pasties in these part. Unfortunately for Pad, they're closed and we forge on to the Quay and Harbour, where I point out, as I always do, the official birthplace of the author at No.1 Quayfield Terrace. Onwards we stride past the beached lobster pots and the stench of putrifying fish, after Pad's pretended to be impressed with the official birthplace.

"That's Larkstone Beach, and there beyond is Rapparree Cove," I indicate to the ever attentive Pad. "Neither is marked on the map, which is a little surprising, as Rapparree in particular has a rather interesting history. In the late eighteenth century a ship called the *London* was drawn onto the rocks, probably by wreckers. It contained a couple of hundred black African slaves, en route for Bristol. Alternatively, or so it's believed, they may have been French colonial prisoners of war from the West Indies. Anyway, the bodies were hurriedly buried in the sea wall and the whole scandal covered up for a couple of hundred years. Then, in the 1890's, Rapparree was the site of a furious schoolboy battle between the beach hut manager's son and a young German prince who was to become Kaiser Wilhelm."

"He of WWI fame?" Pad's entering into the spirit of my local history lesson. "That's right. It's not widely known that World War One started right here in Ilfracombe. Or that the immediate cause was a boundary dispute over a beach hut."

"Is that true?"

"Oh, absolutely. One hundred per cent. You know me, Pad."

We scramble across yet another snow dusted field and over a padlocked five bar gate to regain the path just north of the Municipal Baths, and then it's a steep but pleasant climb to the summit of local nature reserve and site of iron age fort, Hillsborough. The views overlooking Ilfracombe are astonishing, and there's some evidence of dog walkers here, though we haven't yet chanced upon an official hill walker. We descend from the peak down the steep and partly stepped other side, to Hele Beach, where the grey shale and sand is dusted in a smattering of snow. It's exactly one o'clock.

"We just might get that pasty for you here, Pad. There's the Hele Bay Hotel, or if you fancy something a little more exotic, Hele Billy's."

"Not to worry, Pug. I'm reminded I shouldn't really indulge in pastry before dark."

"What reminds you?"

"The bleedin' beef wellington."

From Hele the path takes the route of the A399 for some time and we're torn between the treachery of the unsalted pavement and the lunacy of the oncoming traffic on the main road. The off road detour up to Rillage Point gives brief respite from the cat and mouse with the traffic, and skirting around jagged and spectacular Widmouth Head I feel kind of safe as I know the owner. But the descent towards Watermouth Cove is sheer, the path narrow, stepped and unpassable if you meet a walker from the opposite direction. Which we do. A day tripper with his dog, marching determinedly towards Ilfracombe, where he'll catch the bus back. Wimp! Amateur! We swap greetings, receive assurance that Combe Martin is not so very far distant, and squeeze past both walker and dog exchanging a physical intimacy that would hardly be proper on the flat.

We're following the little acorns religiously, when we can see them, and we can sense the A399 just on the other side of this hedge. Why is it then that just here, above the Watermouth Cove boating marina, they seem to be laughing at us, expecting we doughty pair to dive headlong into the waves, or sink vaingloriously beneath the foreshore mud? The little acorns point down towards certain misadventure in the tide.

"Perhaps the path doubles back and goes under the A399?" ventures Pad, trying to be helpful.

"I don't think so Pad. If the path had subterranean aspects, I think as a local I would have heard of them. And I haven't packed my potholing gear, have you?"

(We discovered later that there is a path at beach level, negotiable at low tide in the summer months, if you're quick. But as we didn't know this at the time, our decision was wise. I expect. Probably.)

We doubled back up the thirty odd steep wooden steps and through the hedge to join the A399 at Watermouth Castle. Now we're dodging from side to side again, making choices between hip-cracking ice-covered verges and the maniacal traffic. But not for long. The acorns have appeared again; directing us across an anonymous and still largely snow bound camping resort. We're not really sure of our bearings until Pad spots the elusive post sticking out of the snow in the middle distance. Surely there'll be a tell-tale acorn to give us a clue. Soon we're proceeding again at a fair yomp, along the cliff path and away from the A399. Past Outer Stone, Turk's Cove and Egg Rock and into the car park of the Sandy Bay Hotel.

It's ten after three in the fast darkling afternoon. The pyramidal drama that is Little Hangman Hill is a fitting end to this day's walk, and I give an encouraging

"I know just where we are now Pad. 'Tis but a short step on road and beach to the shining metropolis of Combe Martin."

oooOooo

The Fo'c'sle at Combe Martin is right on the small beach. I chose it for its location, its views across the Bristol Channel to distant Wales, and its nautical tradition. I'd booked a twin on the top floor, in what would, I suppose, have qualified as its Crow's Nest. But because we were so far out of season and the only guests, probably in the whole of Combe Martin on that freezing Saturday evening in late December, the landlord had kindly decreed that we should spend the night in the luxury of the superior first floor accommodation, and we each had a double ensuite. Mine overlooked the beach and Combe Martin Bay to the north, and more of the beach and the pubs on the quay to the west. Complete with hot and cold running, TV and Freeview and the seafarer's telescope overlooking the bay, I really was in my element. Captain Hornblower rounding the Horn, seeking out the Frenchies in the Bay of Biscay, etc. Pad's room overlooked yet more of the snow-dusted beach and, to the east, Little Hangman Hill, which we would tackle on the morrow.

Except that we had by now separately come to the decision that a re-evaluation of the route was called for. As I studiously refolded the map to show half of tomorrow's route from Combe Martin to Lynmouth, it dawned on both of us, simultaneously I suppose, though the thought had been festering with each of us throughout the day. The 13.3 miles "strenuous" march in sub-zero temperatures on snow and ice without a stopping off or bailing out point about half way, might be just a little too taxing, with the pressure of the short daylight hours.

"What would Ernie Shackleton have done at this stage, had he been in our august company?"

"What did he say, something about *'low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in the event of success.'* He'd have gone on. But we're not on wages. "

"No. And I'm not sure we'll be in for a heap of honour and recognition in the event of success."

"You're right there. Perhaps we should ask the locals. There's bound to be some about in Combe Martin on a Saturday night."

"We could ask Ernie, of course."

"What, Ernie Shackleton? He's dead, you know. Or very old, probably."

"No, Ernie Pugsley. He runs The Dolphin, just over the way. Does good food too, or so I'm told."

"We're not staying here then?"

"No food, to speak of. The last pair of wellingtons have been taken."

So we took eighty winks, forty each, freshened up a bit and hit the fleshpots of Combe Martin's red light district in search of wine, women and song, or in our case, beer, ham egg and chips and Ernie Pugsley. Combe Martin's a famous watering hole. Until recently it boasted nine pubs, all vying rather successfully for the trade of its two thousand or so smack heads and drunkards. There are three pubs alone at seaside end, as it's unofficially and affectionately known, and they all boast names in the nautical tradition. The Fo'c'sle, or as Pad would have it, the Popsicle, was, as mentioned, out of food of the exotic type our seasoned pallets demanded, i.e. ham eggs and chips. The Royal Marine looked a touch posh and uninviting, with its cavernous but nearly deserted restaurant. All fake beams and plastic sauce bottles. Ernie Pugsley's Dolphin looked more promising with its garish display of flashing Christmas lights, pool table and log burner. It was the log burner that sold Pad on the Dolphin and we grabbed two pints of Doombar and the two chairs nearest to the burner so that Pad could tend to its every need and whim.

Now I have a bit of an account to settle with Ernie Pugsley. Many years ago during the annual village wheelbarrow race and fireworks display he short changed me by a fiver when my mind was temporarily distracted by the then customary overindulgence in alcohol. I could never let that momentary aberration go, particularly when I heard that Ernie had been well known for this practice for years. I resolved never to drink in his establishment again. And yet here was I, drinking his Doombar, eating his ham egg and chips (with an order of bacon and a baguette on the side as suggested by Pad) and playing his pool table. Had I lost my senses? Had I been separated from all recognition of my principles? Was he getting the better of me again? He sat, apparently unconcerned at my presence, at the end of his bar, in light conversation and banter with the locals. Every time I scowled at him, he smiled sweetly. Every time I growled for more beer, he grinned back at me, the quintessential mild mannered mine host.

Pad, with No.13's help, only beat me 5-2 at the Dolphin. And then only because my judgement was a little blurred by the bottle of house red and several pints of Doombar we used to wash down Ernie Pugsley's indigestible processed ham. We left just before closing, just in time to pick up brandy and port snifters at the Popsicle before turning in.

"Either Ernie Pugsley's a changed man, got religion or something, or your average north Devon publican has difficulty with the concept of the tab," comments Pad as he takes a pull at the Sandemans.

"We 'aven't been bleedin' done again 'ave we?" I'm a little hazy on where we are and who I am.

"On the contrary," adds Pad, "ham, eggs and chips, a side order of bacon, a baguette each, four pints, a bottle of house red, £10-20p each? I think we've been treated 'ansomely"

"Well, bugger me, I've got me own back on Ernie Pugsley! At last, honour is done!"

4. Off the Path and on the Piste

"Avast there, me hearties! Haul in the t'gallants. Set the mainbrace, Mr. Gerard. Hard a starboard, helmsman. Pass me that belaying pin before I have you thrown in the brig! Look sharp, now." I'm Capt. Hornblower, R.N. again, having a bit of fun up here aboard the Popsicle, peering out onto a grey Atlantic through the maritime telescope. Suddenly the short wave radio crackles into life.

"The West Country's in whiteout. Sub-zero temperatures abound. Most airports are closed. It's the busiest day of the year for air traffic and there'll be no arrivals at Heathrow today. Precious few departures. If you're thinking of walking across Exmoor today, think again. You'll need to be very intrepid indeed. Et cetera."

I'm dragged out of the reverie by the realisation that they didn't have much short wave radio in the Napoleonic wars, and of course it's a severe weather warning on the flat screen telly in the corner. The news is dire however, and there will be consequences for our walking plans. An urgent meeting of the crew is called for, so I summons Pad to the Captain's cabin. We're deep in conference now. The map, spread out on my capacious double bed, overflows onto the sofa.

"It seems to me, Pad, that we have three options. We can bail out now, call it a day and walk back to Long Lane Farm, or call out Support Services for a lift. We could take a chance that the way ahead isn't as bad as the BBC would have it. From here we would climb up Little Hangman, Great Hangman and Holdstone Down. If the BBC are right and things get a bit desperate, we could bail out about half way into Lynton and make for Hunter's Inn. From there we could drag in Support Services, or failing that Air Sea Rescue, to come to our assistance. The third option would be to get to Hunter's Inn by bus (and I have come prepared for this eventuality with my recently acquired but as yet untested bus pass), or Support Services, and then walk on to Lynmouth if we can find the path. What are your thoughts?"

"Well I don't want to abandon the walk just yet, but I'm a bit nervous of climbing up there and losing the path. We're still intrepid, us, but we don't know what we'll find. I'm for getting nearer by road and then finding the path into Lynmouth. We can carry on being intrepid from there."

So it was that our decision to re-evaluate the walk was forced upon us. I summonsed Support Services on the mobile. She agreed to dig the car out of the three foot drift that had settled over night, and to meet us at the Popsicle for coffee.

Meanwhile my attention was drawn to a mechanical conundrum. I'd been wrestling with the controls on the shower, which seemed to be set somewhere between freezing and frigid. Examining the temperature control knob, I discovered it was made of plastic and that the little ridges which are supposed to marry with the knurled nut on the body of the shower had worn off. It was never going to turn, not without the intervention of a monkey wrench. Which I discovered on the Swiss Army Knife, between the mosquito net and the drain rods. Once again, with the application of a little brute force and some engineering know-how the good old S.A.K. had proved its worth. Soon my very skin was being flayed off in shards, and a steamy fog was forming in the cabin such as wouldn't look out of place in the Sargasso Sea.

The breakfast table at the Popsicle fair groaned. Not because it was overladen with provisions, rather because it had been chosen to host the only guests at the Popsicle this far out of season and all its colleague tables rested in idle repose. No. 13 took his customary place in the flower vase, while Pad fetched an electric fire to thaw out his frostbite and landlady Karen brought on the full English.

"Ernie's ham is still sitting reluctant in my belly," I comment, when there's a brief lull in the conversation. "But I must say I warmed to ol' Ernie last night. At least he didn't rip us off."

"No, if anything it was the reverse procedure. I don't think we paid for any of the beer."

"How is Ernie, he must be getting on now?" I ask Karen as she plonks down a massive steaming cauldron of tea.

"He died. It must be about two years ago. His daughter runs the place now."

"But I was talking to him, or rather scowling at him only last night. He was collecting glasses, chatting to the punters etc."

"Well, all the same, I can assure you he's dead. This must be your wife."

Support Services was shivering, waif-like, just outside the window, glancing enviously at our coffee pot and the remains of the full English. Karen let her in the tradesman's entrance and she joined us for coffee.

"Now, we have fresh instructions for you, Support Services, I mean, dear. You are to convey us from here to the Hunters Inn, or Woody Bay, or as near as you dare to either, and we shall endeavour, being intrepid, to make it back onto the path to Lynmouth, as arranged. And you can take another instalment of Pad's excess baggage with you. Is that clear?"

I think she got the gist. Anyway, by 9.20 we're on our way up Combe Martin High Street, weaving our cautious way through the abandoned cars, dodging the comatose drunks and general Saturday night detritus. It's third gear most of the way, winding our way up to Easterclose Cross, dropping down to second on the declines. The main road is coated in frozen slush and pack ice. We take a left at Blackmoor Gate and we're on virgin snow in places, but Support Services sticks to the cart tracks wherever possible, and though it's dicey, it's do-able until Paracombe Church, where most of the snow on Exmoor has drifted clean across the road to a depth of eight inches for as far as we can see ahead. We can only expect so much from Support Services, and she's kicking us out here. As we slither to a standstill at Killington Cross, two large and people-laden charabancs plough their thunderous way through.

"That's Mickey Hopkins, driving that second coach. He can take you from here," exclaims Support Services, as she heaves my rucksack back into place on my shoulders, and I venture gingerly forward, prodding snow with stick, testing for a firm footing.

"Too late, he's gone. Anyway, this is a walk, you know, and we're perfectly capable of doing it unaided. We're intrepid, us!"

"I'm going out now, and I might be some time," adds Pad, lips a-quiver.

Back in the spirit of the walk again, we must look something like Ernie Shackleton and his merry men now, clad in our best arctic gear, me in the balaclava and Pad with his anti glare sun shades, as we strike out across the icy wastes for distant Lynmouth. We have no dogs, no sledges, not even a tent. We are enigmatic strangers in a new and wonderful land, where perhaps no human foot has trod before.

"What about all these abandoned cars then, Pug? Who left them here?"

"Well, I suppose a few have gone before. But they must have been intrepid blighters, like what we are."

"I say, can I offer you a lift?" She's fortyish, blonde, pretty. And she can handle that BMW in the snow for sure. And it's a good three hundred yards since Support Services heaved us out to fend for ourselves. The inside of the Beamer looks mighty attractive. So I'm quite surprised to hear my own voice when it squeaks

“Very kind, but no thanks. We’re out for a walk, you see. It wouldn’t do to cheat, would it? Not in the tradition of Rannulph Fiennes, you know. We’re intrepid, us.” I’m sure Pad agrees with my instant and unilateral decision on the offer. I heard him mutter something like *“You can count on me.”*

Woody Bay Station, one of the last outposts of the railway enthusiast, we reach at 10.35. It’s fully operational, and a train leaves at eleven. Unfortunately, in the opposite direction and only for about half a mile. Amazing, isn’t it? The rest of the country’s transport infrastructure has ground to a standstill and little narrow gauge Woody Bay Station, the last remnants of the Lynton to Barnstaple Railway, run by its skeleton volunteer crew, is open. You can even join Trevor and Celia for a brief encounter in the tea rooms.

But I digress, and we walk on for half an hour or so to find the road relatively clear of snow, all but a few drifts and some slush. Pad’s taking in the wondrous wintry scenery across bleak Wildner Top and threatening to wax lyrical again. I, rather more prosaically, am concentrating on avoiding the few bits of traffic on the road, which seem intent on mowing us down on the bends. I expect the points score for a couple of unsuspecting hikers just before Christmas is high. I’ve erected the warning triangles and traffic lights I found in the Swiss Army Knife between the Aldis lamp and garlic press, but these precautions are of limited avail. Jabbing my stick into the road helps a bit, but I may have to deal a few passing cars a glancing blow upside the windscreen *pour encourager les autres*.

Another 16% decline and, worryingly, signs of recent avalanche. At the entrance to Dean Farm, some half a mile further on, there’s a big blue sign with a “P” on it. Pad’s going to take up the invitation, while I keep lookout for the toilet police. I take this opportunity to study the map and find Dean Farm on it. We’re not that far from Watersmeet, probably. There’s hardly any traffic on the road, but the light’s poor. It’s not nearly as bright and sunny as we’d hoped. Time to phone home and check that Support Services arrived safely. We’ll have to use Pad’s phone as I’ve relinquished mine to Support Services. Her need was clearly greater than mine. There’s not been a peep of traffic on this benighted road for about two hours, so this would be a good time to make contact.

“Hello Gilly!” Pad’s made contact. But he can’t hear the reply to his greeting, because at this very moment there’s the roar of throttle, the crunch of gears, the staccato rattle of rubber on gravel and the RAF motorcycle display team in full regimental regalia complete with mascot come racing around the bend towards us. We dive for cover as the support

entourage of acrobats, four-by-fours, two pantechnicons, three bus loads of tourists and a cattle truck thunder by.

"Can you hear me now?" Pad shouts above the drowning din.

"What was that?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Pad assures Support Services.

"Anyway, you got back OK?"

"Yes, thanks. But more snow is forecast for tomorrow. How far have you got?"

"We're just passing the nursery at Barbrook. The sign says "Welcome to Lynton and Lynmouth, twinned with Benouville." That's somewhere in France."

"Somewhere in France?"

"No, not us. Benouville's in France."

"Where's Benouville?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter."

There's nothing much at Barbrook, just a few holiday cottages and a petrol station. Pad's in need of sustenance to take him through the afternoon, and stocks up on energy bars, which have been his staple daytime diet for the last three days. He's managed to get into the only queue in Devon, perhaps in the entire country today.

At Barbrook we take the left fork along the bank of the River Lyn. The right fork would have taken us eventually to Lynmouth via a huge windy diversion and Watersmeet, but we figure if we climb into Lynton we could at least walk on the S.W.C.P for a token couple of miles today. And that would be more intrepid.

A mile further on we take another left fork and find ourselves climbing the steep tarmac ascent through Lynbridge and the beginnings of civilisation at Lynton. Down Station Road we crunch cautiously, and into the main drag of what passes for a High Street in Lynton. We're flushed with the success of making it to civilisation, and decide to celebrate with refreshment at the Oak Room, where Spanish Irene serves us latte and a pot of tea for one.

"Donde esta la estacion, por favor señorita?"

"What did you ask her?"

"Where's the station?"

"But we don't want the station. We want the Valley of the Rocks."

"I know where that is. I just think it's polite to talk to the locals in their own language, if you can. And I don't have much Spanish. I think she was impressed, don't you?"

"Hmm."

“Buenas tardes, señorita, y muchas gracias penis.”

“What was that?”

“Good afternoon, and thanks a lot, cock.”

One thing I did learn from Spanish Irene, as she held No.13 for the statutory photo shoot, was that in Spain it's inadvisable to travel or to do anything much on Tuesday the 13th. Which I find quite strange, as in England nothing ever happens on a Tuesday. Fridays are, on the other hand, generally very eventful.

It's 1.00 p.m. as we set out for the Valley of the Rocks on one of the most terrifying roads I can recall. Pavement and carriageway glitter like crystal glass. Maintaining a vertical posture whilst proceeding in a forward direction is impossible. It's many degrees below and we're walking on perma frosted tarmac. I can only make headway by clinging on to walls, gates and passers by. Pad finds my situation extremely comical, but then he does boast bigger feet, more surface area in contact with terra not very firma.

And this is how we enter the truly awesome Valley of the Rocks, on all fours at times, crawling across the pack ice encrusted rocks. We are alone in this primordial setting, at one with a sort of prehistoric nature. Pad's absorbing the archaic splendiferousness of it all. I'm gritting my teeth against the cold and looking for the South West Coast Path. I find it winding between Ragged Jack and Castle Rock, and soon we're back on the path proper, for the first time today. If the hills above Ilfracombe were Alpine in appearance, with their light dusting of snow under a blue sky and bright golden sunlight, then here we are truly Himalayan in aspect. Progress is slow. Steep cliffs of Hollerday Hill to our right, sheer drops onto jagged and unforgiving rocks of Ruddy Ball to our left, and we struggle along the pack ice in the centre, scattering wild goats as we go.

Then we get to the difficult bit. Lynton on the cliff is connected to Lynmouth at sea level by a clever cliff railway, and both Pad and I have travelled it many times. Today, like most other seaside attractions in late December, it's closed. The alternative is a steeply inclined zig-zag path running down the cliff and under the railway. Like all other walkways today, its covered in black and white ice and barely negotiable. And the only other alternative route is back into Lynton, past the candle shop where Pad intended to stop for a gift for Dobby but forgot, all the way back to Barbrook and down the riparian road into Lynmouth. We could of course visit the candle emporium for Dobby's present, but I'm not sure we'd fetch up in Lynmouth before dark if we adopt this option.

So, though it's not looking too feasible, it's the zig-zag we plump for. I'd kind of prepared for this sort of activity with the down hill slalom on my Wii machine, but I have to admit that the real thing is a tad more exacting than the virtual. The North Walk suddenly takes a murderous dip down the cliff face and we're in the first zig. After a few yards we're committed. We can't go back, and the onward trek is a laborious juggle with stick, handrail and rucksack as we inch our way down, treading virgin snow wherever possible as there's more grip. We're both of an age where we can do without breaking a hip, and I'm off to Africa in the new year, so can't afford any time out of harness, let alone convalescent.

"Note this lamp standard, Pad, it was kindly donated by a county councillor, out of something called The Community Fund"

"That means your Council Tax, mate."

"Oh, it's not her money then?"

"I think not. More yours."

"That's what I thought. There's a sign here exhorting us to be careful with the delicate flowers."

"Yes, well I'm going to walk on them. Infinitely safer than the path. So here's an

OFFICIAL APOLOGY TO THE LADIES, GENTLEMEN AND BURGHERS OF LYNTON AND LYNMOUTH.

"Sorry about your delicate bleedin' flowers"

And with that Pad leaps onto the bank and tramps through the virgin snow, and the flowers, delicate or otherwise. I swiftly follow suit, and I can report that delicate flowers have superior adhesion properties. They should be bottled and used extensively on our snow bound highways.

So it is that we descend the cliff path to Lynmouth, a walk that could be accomplished in ten minutes in temperate conditions, in a mere forty five. I slither to a bumpy halt when I meet the wall of the Lynmouth Pavilion. Pad misses the Pavilion, ricochets off a palm tree and toboggans out of control into Riverside Road. And though we're relieved to have made it relatively unscathed, yet our ordeal is not over. The streets of Lynmouth may be more on the level, but they're just as treacherous. We're truly glad for sight of dry land when the Captain's House heaves into view at the end of Torrs Park Road. Now we're anticipating a hero's welcome indeed, champagne, bunting, garlands of flowers, ticker- tape parades, dancing girls, feasting and merriment.

PAD AND PUG'S QUICK GUIDE TO HOSTELRIES IN THE WILD WEST (LYNMOUTH) ON A SUNDAY NIGHT AT CHRISTMAS

The following does not pretend to be a comprehensive review of the hostelries of this small and quaint resort, nor does it claim to be professional, accurate or even fair. It represents the impressions of two anonymous but intrepid foot travellers gained on one desperately cold evening in December. If it helps guide an opinion or even make a choice, then it will have done its job.

THE CAPTAIN'S HOUSE

What to expect

1. To have been forgotten, so that you are admitted to the premises from a sub- zero outside after about half an hour's cajoling and persuasion of the owner's diminutive 10 year old son, who will tell you that his parents have "gone for a walk and should be back in about ten minutes".
2. To be allowed, reluctantly, the privilege of sitting in the dimly lit hall for an hour, sharing the one chair and the stairs (ten minutes each and then change over) while the owner and his wife finish their "walk".
3. A dark, foreboding chilly atmosphere in a mausoleum of a building decorated in the classic Gothic Balinese style, where Victoriana vies with the temples of Angkor Wat.
4. A room of the size, temperature and humidity of the ice box in your fridge, decorated in the style aforesaid with, if it's room 5, a life size portrait of Bette Davis as its only distinguishing feature.
5. Tepid water and barely detectable central heating between the hours of 4 and 9. p.m. only.
6. A conversation with the disembodied voice of your arrogant bully of a landlord, when he finally arrives with his Thai wife a little before 4.00 p.m., from which it is clear that you are in fact in the wrong for arriving too early and inveigling your way into the premises from the sub-zero blizzard going on outside.

What Not to Expect

1. Soap, shampoo, conditioner, fresh towels, tea making equipment, other than a kettle that should have been condemned years ago.
2. A vestige, even a hint, of warmth.
3. Access to the Guest Lounge before the master returns with the key, which is in his pocket when he goes for a walk.
4. A refund, in any circumstances, should you decide the premises and hospitality are not up to snuff, and that anyway you should make for home on the next bus.

THE RED LION

What to expect

1. A decent pint of Doombar.
2. Some pretty lacklustre fish and chips (the “plat du jour”).
3. A fake gas burning “logburner” you can huddle round like penguins if the locals will let you.
4. Mr. Propington, the popular character at the bar who will liven up the most mundane of bar room chatter (not) between frequent pints of Stella.
5. An interesting example of the local ethnic pastimes of North Devon. This one’s called “Mind Your Head”, and consists of predicting how many customers will slip and crack their skull trying to negotiate the ice laden slope by the front door. One point for an adult, two for a pram, five for a pensioner. It looks like great fun, but the loser has to fetch a bucket of sea water to wash away the blood.

What not to expect

1. Riveting conversation, bonhomie, wit or subtle sarcasm.
2. Music or entertainment of any kind.
3. A warm welcome from the staff or locals.

THE VILLAGE INN

What to expect

1. Dark glowering looks, surreptitious glances, and an invitation to depart “just as quickly as you fuckin’ came in, squire!”
2. The fumes of stale beer, stale fags, and the dying embers of a shagged out log burner.

3. A fight. In fact a good old fashioned full-blown pugilistic brawl, if you want one. Lots of reminiscences about the fight game, and how the only two locals propping up the bar could have been contenders.
4. Broken noses, cauliflower ears, and some not-so-fancy-any-more footwork.

What not to expect

1. A welcome in the hillside.
2. That your order for a small port and lemon and a Campari and soda will be looked on too favourably.

THE ROCK HOUSE

What to expect

A warm welcome, bright lights, intelligent conversation and a completely riotous game of Speed Monopoly with Glenys, the proprietor, her son Adam, barkeep James, and Lorna. If Speed Monopoly's your thing and you want to wheedle your way into a game here, it's only necessary to wander nonchalantly between the tables in the lounge muttering discretely meaningful little phrases such as "Advance to Mayfair", "Go back to the Old Kent Road" and "Bank error in your favour, collect £200". When you think you're making headway, come out with something truly ingratiating, like "You have won a beauty competition, collect £10." You'll find that Glenys will be like putty in your hands, and you'll be invited to take a seat in the liveliest board game of the year. And even if your pal bankrupts you and all comers, takes your last eight quid and mortgaged Whitechapel in the process, while spending most of the evening on the phone to Dobby as you act as his agent, yet you'll go home with that wonderful warm sensation that means you've made some friends for life. And if you ever pass this way again, this is where you'd stay, rather than return to the mausoleum on Torrs Park Road just because your belongings and your deposit reside there.

But it was to the Captain's House that Pad and I returned, just before midnight, through the icy wastes of Lynmouth. Even the robins were still awake and hunting in the desolation for something to eat.

If the heating was ever on in our room, it'd long been extinguished. Pad donned gloves and headwear. I replaced the balaclava. No.13 put on his longjohn. We all dragged the bedclothes around our heads and tried to sleep. It was going to be a long and tortuous night.

5. Bailing Out

"Did you sleep well, Pad?"

"Not a lot. How about you?"

"Not at all, so far as I'm aware. Someone kept putting the light on."

"Oh, didn't you know, the light goes on every time the door opens. That's how I figured this is the ice box in what amounts to a huge 'fridge. When the door opens, someone takes out half a pound of butter, or replaces a pint of milk. I should keep your eye on them carrot batons if I were you. D'you see all those little bits of mouldy food in the corner, the half-eaten yoghurt, that open tin of beans?"

"Yes, I think I see them." I don't really, but I feel I should humour him.

Maybe he's having hallucinations because he's hypothermic?

"Yeah, we've been trying to sleep in a big student 'fridge. And we've been allocated room 5, the ice box."

"I see. Anyway, there's been more snow overnight. In fact it's snowing now, heavily."

We'd already agreed on a plan of action in the event of another whiteout. In the haze and euphoria of last night's beer and Monopoly, when I'd persuaded Pad to hang in there in the Captain's Fridge, I mean House, pending developments today, we'd made a tacit agreement. If significant snow were to fall again in these unimaginable sub-zero conditions, climbing out of Lynmouth up Countisbury Hill could be deadly, and the chances of losing sight of the path up there on the way to Porlock Weir didn't bear thinking about. Above all, there seemed to be no projected thaw any time soon, so the farther away from Long Lane Farm we got, the less likelihood there'd be that Support Services, or anyone else for that matter, would be able or willing to retrieve us from Minehead in two days' time. It was time to bail out, while the parachute would still open. We'd walk out of here at first light and make for home along the main road.

Breakfast at the Captain's table was a trifle subdued. I think our spirits were deflated over the bail-out decision, and what this would mean for our street cred amongst the walking fraternity, not to say our record of intrepidity. I think I was harbouring some guilt over making Pad stay in this frigid hellhole rather than forego my deposit. Pad, too, admitted to having difficulty letting go of the feelings of frustration and anger at the injustice of his treatment at the hands of the Captain of these premises. But his wife, whom I shall call Mrs. Pelloponesian, to protect the innocent and because she was Phillipino, was most accommodating. I couldn't help

thinking it wasn't her fault she'd been selected by an arrogant self-opinionated money grubbing bully (see the comments on the website, I didn't make it up!) to run this bizarre and antiquated take on Fawlty Towers.

We toggled up in our most comprehensive way, and donned the waterproofs for the first time, before exiting the Captain's House for ever. The blizzard we plunged into felt strangely warm and welcoming after the chill within, and we struck out with new vigour and determination up the virgin snow covered hill and back to the main road. Now, when you're leaving Lynmouth at dawn in a snow storm, you have to be particularly careful to select the right road, as there are at least four ways out. I'm wearing the map as a necklace, rather fetching I think, and that way it's instantly at hand to consult on occasions like this. So naturally, I'm convinced we cross the river, take a left and follow the hill out of the village. Pad's not so sure. There's just a hint of a fleeting doubt dancing on his slightly perturbed brow. Lynmouth's deserted. Most of its inhabitants haven't set foot outside since the whiteout began. But there's one solitary forlorn character just here on the banks of the East Lyn, waiting to be asked directions, and Pad doesn't disappoint him.

"Yes, that road will get you to Barbrook, but it goes to Watersmeet first, and then sort of meanders gently up the valley. It'll take you about an hour and forty five minutes. If it's passable. However, if you take that road, you'll be there in about thirty minutes, and it's definitely passable. I may not look it, but I'm the village paper boy, me, and I know these things. There are no papers today, by the way. Didn't get through."

He's about forty five, wiry, with a friendly manner but an indefinable quality of the disappointed. Anyway, I'm glad we chanced upon him, as he's saved us a massive and fruitless detour in a blizzard. In fact the people of Lynton and Lynmouth are undeniably pleasant and, for the most part, helpful. I think last evening early on we bumped into some of the sleazier subset. Lynmouth low life.

It's a steep drag up the hill out of Lynmouth, but the road's not so bad, and soon we're panting through Lymbridge in single file, me setting a resolute pace, Pad taking in the wonders of nature, as is his wont. At 9.20 we pass the quaint Bridge Inn, and by 9.35 we've come full circle back to the Barbrook Filling Station. I'm tempted to investigate whether the queue has subsided into single numbers yet, but although Pad's got a desire for a Mars bar, he acknowledges it's not an actual need he's experiencing. We pass by on the other side.

Ten o'clock. Cathyn's Cross and New Mill Farm. Pad reports back to Dobby. She hasn't been able to emerge from their house in Oxfordshire for three days, and now she's got cabin fever. She was to have travelled to the West Country by train to meet Pad on Minehead beach as we two conquering heroes emerged triumphant from the wilderness. I've been keeping this fond reunion a closely guarded secret from Pad since we left Long Lane Farm, but it's not going to happen. She's got to struggle out now or go mad. Here, as Pad rather lyrically describes the situation, a bright liquid golden orb gleams tantalisingly from a perfect creamy cobalt sky, but abandoned cars still litter the main road, and the tiny villages of Paracombe, Martinhoe, Woody Bay and Trentishoe are marooned in a wilderness of ice and frost.

At ten thirty we reach Woody Bay Station, and clamber over the tracks in a foot of snow in a vain attempt to secure a cup of coffee with Trevor and Celia. There's no sign of life, but, amazingly, trains are still scheduled to run. There'll be one along at eleven if we care to wait. The only trouble is we'll have to yomp over a mile of snowbound pasture to get back to the road to Blackmoor Gate, so we decide to give the narrow gauge a miss.

Plodding now, along the bleakness of Wildner Top in a drift, we come across the remains of a recent accident. We're just outside Lorna Doone House, and it's five past eleven. A sports car has made an error of judgement and come to grief buried half way into the radiator of a light ambulance. Police, Fire and Air Sea Rescue vehicles abound. A helicopter circles overhead. We are later to find out that the hapless paramedic had been summoned to the assistance of the sports car driver when he spun uncontrollably off the road the first time. Dragged unceremoniously out of a cow field, the driver leapt back into his sexy little Merc and promptly totalled the paramedic's ambulance. Hey ho, I've seen it all now.

Ten minutes later the silence is almost tangible. We're just admiring the view of sunshine on the snowy downs of Exmoor, and Pad has just waxed lyrical for perhaps the last time on this epic adventure, when from out of nowhere, at high speed with klaxons wailing, hurtles a police vehicle from one direction, to be met by a large and lumbering snow plough from the other. And we're right in the middle, with nowhere to leap.

"O.K.Pad, you can put me down now. But you must admit that was a close call!"

"Yeah, I suppose there was only room for the one of us."

“Well there’s always the air raid shelter on the Swiss Army Knife, but I need a little notice if I’m going to erect it properly. Perhaps you’ll let me know next time.”

We finally made it to Blackmoor Gate and the Old Station Inn at noon, and Support Services met us there with friend Pam Parkin for a celebratory cup of coffee, and to whisk us home to Long Lane Farm, some four miles distant. Pad stayed with us over night, and we whiled away the evening with red wine and reminiscences of our adventures over the last four days. As Support Services dug his car out of the snow drifts in our back car park in the morning, we resolved that we would finish this walk, when the weather is more clement, perhaps in August.

So watch this space.

