

BOOTS

There are two things which more than anything else bring us close to inter-marital violence. One is when she navigates - "*Turn up there - no **up there** ... you missed it... **WHY** didn't you go up there?"* - and two, when she takes me shopping. Having worn the treads as smooth as slippers, and having sprung a leak along the stitching, I could no longer postpone the purchase of new walking boots for our imminent alpine holiday. My wife assumed that she would come with me. But, if she had, it would have been a case of - "*Hold on - I just want to pop in here*" - or - "*Two secs - I'm just going to look for a card for Auntie's birthday*" - or - "*Oh, what a lovely coat/dress/top/blouse.....you don't really mind if I give it quick try?*"... It is a less-well-known aspect of Einstein's theory that, for husbands, time slows down almost to a standstill when their wives are browsing racks of clothes. So I said "Look, I'm going to Leicester on my own." She looked surprised and hurt.

"But," she countered "You won't know whether they're....you know..."

"What? Comfortable? There are some things you can't help me with, dear. Being nervously attached to my feet is one."

"But you're hopeless. What about the time you went on your own and came back with a blazer which was too tight to button up because of your belly - *and* it made your arse look gigantic!"

"But shoes are *special* - they either fit or they don't - it's not a matter of opinion.....like that blazer - which looked perfectly fine -"

"You wore it three times - looked like you were off to the asylum, it was so tight."

"I put weight on that winter - you can't put weight on your feet...there's only three or four other parts of the body like that."

"Hum! Well, don't blame *me* if you come back with a load of rubbish.....Aren't you going in a coat? It's forecast thunder storms."

"*Isolated* thunder storms. Plenty of places to shelter.....I'll work round it."

"Make sure you go to the cut-price place just past the Clock Tower - it's called something like Bargain Shoes...Got a blue shop front..... Shall I come?"

"No!"

I have peculiar feet. I must have been last in the queue when the Great Quartermaster was doling them out, and these were the only ones left on the rack. They are more square than oblong. Finding a pair of shoes to fit them is very difficult. I have probably got through fewer shoes in my adult life than the average fakir. Not only are my feet abhorrent, the toenails are thick and opaque, like the insides of oyster shells. If there was an ugly feet competition, I would win easily; they would bring tears to the eyes of any pedicurist. Their only saving grace is their lack of odour. Even bacteria back off. Nobody's perfect.....

"I ought to take a nine but a nine is never wide enough. A ten slips at the heel, but at least I can get a ten on. Just about. Sometimes I take an eleven."

I felt in control. The shop girl - a lovely Asian girl - was flustered. She came back after quite a while with a size ten and an eleven in the style I had liked. I could not believe it. Those beautiful, stylish boots - size ten - went on easily and caressed my poor feet like slippers. I tramped around the store waiting for the pain to set in, but it never did. They neither slipped nor pinched.

Moreover, at £29.99 they were an absolute bargain. They were even more comfortable than the old brown shoes I had driven over in, which I had worn for the best part of ten years! And when

the lovely assistant scanned the box and told me they were in the sale with a further ten per cent off, I almost kissed the box and her.

I imagined with joy how impressed my wife would be that I had found such a wonderful pair of boots at such a price. The whole operation had taken barely fifteen minutes and, elated, I decided to celebrate with a pint in one of the old pubs in the Silver Street quarter. I could not recall ever going into The Globe - an Everards pub - so, relishing a pint of Tiger bitter, in I strode. While my ale was being drawn and then was settling, I read a plaque about the tavern's six hundred year history; about how it was haunted by the spirit of a woman - strangler of her own infant - a young murderess who had spent her last night alive upstairs, prior to her execution in nearby Gallowtree Gate. I amused myself studying the faces of my fellow drinkers, wondering how many of them, in medieval rags, would have hurried along to cheer her hanging; perhaps the man in the suit, severely creased behind the knees - some sedentary local bureaucrat on his lunch break? - a man with unusually prominent features.....like a shark.....devouring a (penguin?) cob;perhaps the two poriky young dyed blonde women deep in sad conversation;.....probably not the three painfully thin students half-heartedly heaving darts.....mostly at a board.....

“That will be two sixty-five, please Sir....Enjoy!”

Laughter. A group of men to my left were enjoying a huge joke, and one tiny fellow in particular caught my eye. He was wearing a vest, shorts, sun glasses with tiny round lenses - and had blue hair. There was barely an inch of him left blank by the tattooist's needle. As I drew closer I was almost shocked to register that his hair was not blue after all. In fact he had no hair, only a series of blue horizontal tattooed strands. He was entertaining the others in a rich Scottish accent.

“And we give charity money to the Indians! The *Indians*! They have a nuclear bomb and an effing space programme! Have we got a space programme? Have we eff!”

I sat down in the bay of seats next to theirs, at an angle where I could study him without staring. Such eccentric characters are rare and of special interest to those who scribble a little. As I took the head off my pint, he turned to look at me through his dark glasses and nodded. I smiled back. He gave me a little toast. Then I realised how wrinkled and old he was. A couple of teeth were absent from his grin. Putting my precious boots on the corner of the seat, I sat back and relaxed. Soon the alcohol began to conjure that delicious feeling of wellbeing which only a little alcohol can. There are alcoholics and then there are alcoholists - such as me. The sun broke free of a cloud, and in celebration sent a golden beam straight down through the engraved window, onto the engraved man's head, daubing it for a second with the golden V of EVERARDS. I laughed to myself. Life was not half-bad. The wizened woman in the next bay who was playing the table like a piano heard me snigger and burst out laughing, muttering something through a toothless mouth which I pretended to understand. Perhaps she had been a concert pianist before the demon drink got hold of her. What wonderful places old city pubs are for coming across the weird and wonderful! The students took the darts back sullenly and departed.

I considered whether - and how many of - my neighbours earned their beer money in less than honest ways, supplemented by state benefits. Let me put it this way - the men near the window did not have an industrious air about them. On a bad day I might well have felt quite annoyed to be a subsidiser of such layabouts - the black beasts of the Daily Malice and the Deadly Excess - from my pension. On this good day I did not care. There were a good many far, far richer layabouts than these. And I didn't mind subsidising the Indian space programme. Getting cold-called by a Punjabi called Darren from the moon might be fun. And it was the least we could do

after stealing India and not handing it back, well used, till a century later. I smiled and patted my boots.

The engraved man drained his glass and tottered to the bar in a pair of broken down trainers. He was at least in his seventies. As he stood chatting to the barmaid, waiting for his glass to be filled, I noticed he had Oliver Hardy tattooed on one calf and Stan Laurel on the other. What a compendium of fascinating anecdotes he would be - in comparison to that flat-arsed bureaucrat - the shark in the suit - next to him at the bar! He tottered back and I saw how his sockless feet strained the stitching of his shoes.....I thought of my boots - their pale blue suede flashes, their confidently turned-up toecaps, their humbug coloured laces, their black cleats, their ankle-hugging uppers - and imagined myself nimbly climbing the mountain paths and turning to stare at the valley below as we neared the peak-top inn to slake a well-earned thirst.....

Time was getting on. I emptied my glass and went to the toilet. When I got back the pianist and the strange old man plus company had gone. So had my box of boots. I rushed back to the toilet to see if I had absent-mindedly taken them in there.....I looked under the benches in the bar....I looked at all the other shopping bags in the place.

Outside, there was no sign of the thieves. Back inside, no-one recalled seeing a nutty woman or an illustrated man walking out with a green plastic bag. It was a daft question on a busy shopping day. I sat down with a half-pint and meditated on the mischievousness of Fate. The sun went in and the pub reverted to gloom. I made a vain effort to lift my spirits: how disappointed would the thief be to open the box and find a pair of hiking boots? ...Unless they fitted.But wouldn't he look silly - with two stringy legs decorated with ancient clowns poking out of them? A piano-playing old hag hiking down the high street - in size ten boots?? But would either care - a man with pretend blue hair - or a demented woman? Perhaps he would put them in the paper - *Size ten boots, never worn - offers?* - or on an internet site? Perhaps he would put them on, stumble and fall under a lorry.

I walked past the Clock Tower just in time to see Sharkface get on a bus carrying a green bag bulky with a box. Surely not him! The bus farted softly at me twice and pulled away. Sharkface appeared at the back window grinning hugely - apparently at me.....but maybe he just couldn't help grinning with a face like that.

“Hello again, Sir! Back already?”

My face must have immediately counselled caution because the lovely golden assistant's smile vanished like the sun. I told her what had happened and she said *oh dear*. She checked her computer for another size ten, but of course drew a blank. They carried - of course - more expensive hiking stock and a ten was available. While I was waiting for the pair to be fetched, the store, after being almost empty, began to fill up as if every Lestrian had suddenly decided it was time to buy shoes. I found myself surrounded by mums and dads and offspring. My boots came and I managed to squeeze onto a square bench between a Muslim woman in black - whose only exposed body parts were a pair of eyes and one foot - and a fat child trying on pink Wellingtons.

“No, Jade. You've got to have them. Stop sulking.”

“But I want the blue ones with elephants.”

“They were too much mon-eh...Stop it... NOW!”

But Jade was damned if she was going to stop it. How many millions of miles lie between the

delights of instigating and discovering a pregnancy and the actual misery of parenthood? The wellies were dragged off and sandals strapped back on to protest and wails. Exeunt mother and daughter. I hotched over, only to be edged out by the buttock of a teenage boy. Loosening the laces and opening the right boot as far as possible, I managed by a Herculean effort, and almost spraining my fingers, to get my foot.....and then my heel into the thing. I knew the left boot would be even more difficult as my left foot was even clumpier. I would have tried it first had the teenage thigh not made it inaccessible. I was sweating - not merely due to the hot, heavy weather. It was a stress sweat brought on by extreme shopping. The teenager left and I spread out. Before attempting the left - because my left-hand knuckles were arthritic, and reaching down with my right hand through my legs was not possible due to a bad back and a belly - which I was still working on - I asked the assistant for a shoe-horn. Shoe-horn? They kept getting stolen, she said, and so had finally not been replaced.

“What? Some people would steal anything! This is a den of thieves!”

Somehow I got the second boot on and with a sinking heart tramped - *limped* around the crowded store three or four times. One hour in the mountains in these would induce total agony. Now I had to go through the punishment of removing them...now I faced an afternoon in sweltering heat and Bank Holiday crowds traipsing from one shoe shop to the next. Cursing the sharkman, I returned to the bench and wrenched them off, almost dislocating my shoulders and elbows. I felt for my old brown shoes under my seat but they were not there. Had I sat down on the wrong bench? There were several and I *had* gone round in several circles. Painfully, I got down on my hands and knees at every bench and had a good look, causing alarm and protests as I got very close to some very nice legs. No, my lovely old shoes had definitely walked off. I asked the assistant if she had moved them. She shook her head, suddenly realized wide-eyed and open-mouthed what had happened - and seemed to suppress a snigger. She had, of course, a wonderful you'll-never-guess-what story to tell her mates that evening. She looked away and her shoulders trembled.

“The boots are too tight. How am I supposed to get back to the park n’ ride? In my socks??”

“Isn’t there a bus?”

She blushed through her golden cheeks and bit her lip. A customer came to her rescue. I stood there in my socks, feeling really hot. I was surrounded by people who didn’t care about me. There was a rumble of thunder. Looking helplessly around, I spotted a rack of slippers all reduced from ten to five pounds. Didn’t people go to supermarkets these days in slippers, even in pyjamas? Who in the busy streets would notice I was wearing slippers, and if they did, given my mood and predicament, would I give a damn?

I was in luck. The least slippery - that is to say - the most shoe-y pair on the rack fitted my feet better than Cinderella’s had hers. At least I could get home with a measure of dignity. As I paid, the air darkened and grew heavier. There was a flash of lightning and an instant crash of thunder. The bus stop was not far - about a hundred yards. I emerged into a dingy yellow light and the calm strolling rhythm of the city centre was breaking up into a broolly-pitching turmoil. A great blob of rain smashed like an egg in front of me and in the next instant there were hundreds more. A deluge of Genesis proportions engulfed us all. There were shrieks of laughter and panic as people ran for cover. The shop frontages and entrances were packed tight as, of course, was the bus shelter. I felt like the child feels who is first out at musical chairs and squeezed myself as close to a wall as I could, but the rain was at a cruel angle - at least for me. I felt and looked as if I had fallen in a river. The park n’ ride bus arrived and ploughed a furrow through the floods - right onto my legs. I dashed on. The twenty or so passengers were dry, snug and smug. I

squelched towards the back past a mother and child.

“Hey up, Mum. That man’s got slippers on.”

“Shush. He’ll hear you.”

Somebody laughed. The bus set off through the invisible streets and at the next shelter the tattooed man - dry as a bone - got on. He sat down just a couple of seats away from me. I could not believe my eyes - and I could not help but blurt out - “Hey up! That man’s got my old shoes on!”

This confirmed my lunacy. Those nearby who had been politely ignoring the presence of a beslippered nutter began to laugh and could not stop, setting each other off again and again. The tattooed man waggled his feet and turned to look at me. The infection spread up the bus via whispers and look-rounds until the whole bus was howling with laughter. At the lights, even the driver turned round, did a double-take and joined in. In the end so did I.

We arrived at the car park and I waited until the bus was empty, watching the funny little old man walk somewhat erratically and clumsily in my shoes too big for him to the far side, where he climbed into a three-wheeler as covered with pictures as he was, and drove off in fits and starts.

“I knew you’d get soaked. Serves you right....So you couldn’t get any boots to fit then?

Mmm...I’m glad you got some new slippers though. Your old pair were revolting....What’s up? You look like you’ve lost a bob and found a tanner.”