

## Philby's Fetish by Frank Hibberd

'Would you mind calling your dog off my leg?'

'I'm very sorry, madam.' Ray smiled at her. 'He has good taste in legs, if I may say so. But his interest is mainly in your leather boots. He has a leather fetish.'

'I shall feed his fetish if he's not careful.' She brandished her riding crop.

She was a woman in her twenties, wearing jodhpurs and riding boots. The dog was a nondescript wire-haired terrier, white on a good day, but with rather fetching brown areas on each side of his head.

'Sorry again, madam,' said Ray. He stood up and grabbed the dog's collar. 'Come on, Philby.' He sat down again with his two friends, and waved a finger at the dog.

'Sit! Now, just sit there.'

Evidently her curiosity had been aroused.

'Why did you call him Philby?'

Ray ruffled the hair on Philby's head.

'The dogs' home told us he had a habit of disappearing. It seemed to fit, miss..er..?'

'Just call me Paula,' she said.

'Pleased to meet you, Paula,' said Ray. 'This is Dave, a highly paid lawyer. Jim is a less highly paid doctor, and I am Ray, a lowly paid mathematics lecturer.'

Paula laughed.

'Well, I manage Brimley's dairy farm.'

'Ah!' said Jim. 'Brimley's. You produce cheese, don't you. I've had some of your superb Red Leicester.'

'Indeed,' she said. 'One of my specialities.'

'Oh! My goodness! Will you marry me?'

Paula laughed again.

'I need notice of that question.'

'And take your place in the queue,' said Ray.

Dave nudged Ray and pointed at the television. The national lottery numbers were about to be revealed.

Ray enjoyed the slightly old-world atmosphere in the pub – the large painting of a speeding stagecoach on the flock wallpaper, the polished pine tables and chairs, the cuttings from hop vines suspended above the beer pumps – and half regretted the intrusion of a television set.

'We take it in turns to buy a ticket each week,' Ray explained to Paula. 'We don't expect to win, but it's interesting to see how many numbers we get right.'

They watched as the balls rolled. After the fourth ball, Jim sat forward in his seat excitedly.

'Look, we've got those!'

He held out the ticket for them to see. Philby neatly plucked it from his hand and swallowed it, looked up at his master and wagged his tail.

They looked at the dog in horror.

'What do we do now, Jim?' said Ray.

'I'm a doctor, not a vet,' Jim replied. 'I suggest we shoot him.'

'Over my dead body!'

'I could arrange that, Ray.' Jim was only half joking.

'See how he deals with his awkward patients,' said Dave.

Jim grinned.

'Look, Dave,' said Ray, get the rest of the numbers. Anybody remember what our numbers are?'

The three friends looked at each other.

'I think there was a thirty seven,' said Jim.

'No, I think that was a thirty four,' said Dave.

'Did I see a nineteen?' asked Ray. 'Look, it's no good. We'll have to get the ticket.'

'Excuse me!'

The three friends looked at Paula.

'I know a bit about dogs. My own dog used to eat socks, and we had to unsock him several times. You need hydrogen peroxide. Get him to drink dilute hydrogen peroxide.'

Ray looked at her hopefully.

'OK, Paula. How do you get him to drink it?'

'Pour it down his throat! Use a syringe if you can find one.'

'Come on, quick!' said Jim. 'Let's ask Fred.'

Fred the barman didn't know of any hydrogen peroxide.

'Do you have a first aid kit?' said Paula.

'Of course.'

Fred pulled out a large box from under the bar.

Paula opened it.

'Aha!' she said.

Ray triumphantly pulled out the bottle of hydrogen peroxide.

'Just a minute,' said Fred, 'what do you want that for? I'll have to account to the manager for that.'

Paula smiled at him winningly.

'Don't worry. This is an emergency. We'll get you another box – or three more if you want them.'

'Let's take him outside,' said Ray. 'This could get a bit messy.'

Ray held Philby firmly on his lap. The others sat around them on the terrace. Paula held the bottle of hydrogen peroxide ready.

'Come on boy, open wide!' Ray opened his mouth wide in demonstration. Philby looked at him impassively.

Ray held him tighter and attempted to prise his jaws apart. The one eye that was visible somehow managed to convey his reproach for this mistreatment.

'Here, let me,' said Dave. 'I'll open his bloody mouth.' He made a grab for the dog. As Philby slipped from Ray's grasp, he broke free and disappeared across the car park and into the twilight.

'Well, thanks Dave,' said Ray. 'Now what do we do?'

There was silence for a short time.

'I've got an idea,' said Jim. 'We spread out in a circle round the car park. Then we put one of Paula's boots in the middle. He won't be able to resist that. Then we grab him.'

Ray nodded enthusiastically. 'That's a great idea, Jim. Come on, let's do it.'

'Just hang on a minute!' Paula was not so enthusiastic. 'Those boots cost ninety quid. I don't want them mauled by a slavering dog.'

'He doesn't slaver.' Ray was indignant. 'Jim, Dave – have you ever seen him slaver?'

'That's hardly the point, Ray,' said Jim. He turned to Paula. 'Look, we'll buy you another pair – an even better pair – won't we, fellas.'

Ray and Dave nodded vigorously.

Paula shrugged her shoulders resignedly.

'Okay, okay. But look, I'm not going to hobble around, one boot on and one boot off.'

'Dave,' said Ray, 'you're the smallest. Give the lady your shoes.'

'What? What am I going to wear?'

'Oh, you can manage in your socks for a bit, can't you?'

Dave reluctantly removed what turned out to be hob-nailed boots. Equally reluctantly Paula put them on, and said in surprise that they were very comfortable.

'I'd like a pair like this, Dave. Where did you get them from?'

Dave hesitated. Ray laughed.

'He sends away for them. They're to remind him of his humble origins, now that he's a wealthy lawyer.'

The trap was set. They peered expectantly into the gloom from their hiding places around the car park. After a few minutes Philby appeared, cautiously approached the boot, and then began worrying it. As they crept towards him Philby suddenly realised the danger, but too late: bootless, fleet-footed Dave leapt upon him.

Ray got a hot dog from the bar, and held the sausage above Philby's head, as Dave held him firmly down. As the dog craned upwards with mouth open, Paula got in a good squirt from the bottle. Philby coughed and spluttered, but swallowed. A few minutes later he produced a deposit, apparently with little discomfort. There was no sign of a ticket.

'He must have pooped it,' said Ray. 'Come on, let's have a look.'

'I've had enough,' said Paula. 'Look at my boot.'

There were a number of scratches and tooth marks visible.

'Are you seriously suggesting we go roaming in the gloaming, looking for a pile of dog poo? Isn't there a way of claiming, even with a lost ticket?'

Ray nodded. 'I believe there is. But we'd have to give all the numbers. Dave, where did you get the numbers? Haven't you got them written down somewhere?'

'I got my lad Ronny to get them from his computer. I suppose we can try him.'

Jim rang Ronny on his smartphone. He gave them the thumbs up.

'He wrote them down.'

There were no more winning numbers.

Jim used his smartphone to check the payouts.

'About eight million first prize. One hundred and fifteen quid for four correct.'

'Yes,' said Ray, 'at about a thousand to one, there should be about thirty thousand tickets with four correct.'

Dave grimaced.

'Nothing like a spot of maths to cheer us up, eh, Ray?'

'Ah, well,' said Ray. 'A hundred quid for Paula's boots. The other fifteen quid to the pub, for their first aid box, and clearing up the mess.'

Dave shook his head.

'Forget the first aid box. We can point out that there should be clear directions to it.'

Ray laughed.

'There speaks the hot-shot lawyer. But I think we can afford fifteen quid. We can't say it hasn't been an interesting evening.'

They looked at Philby. Who wagged his tail.