

## JUST A TRIFLE



Among friends, people are easily recognised by distinctive features - the colour of hair, the shape of their face - the long pointed nose, the elephantine ears - the generous smile. Sometimes it is not even necessary to look up for recognition. Across a room we know that inimitable voice - the accent, particular intonations, phrases, comments, even innocent curses.

The very few people who really knew Bert Hudson were familiar with his tight wizened face; its deep hazel eyes though few ever got close enough to see the colour; his fading ginger moustache; tight lips; short legs; big feet ..... In the office they recognised his east London accent and that irritating phrase nonchalantly thrown away at every incident or crisis - 'it's just a trifle'. He mostly said it in a laconic, laid-back way giving the impression that even if an earthquake rocked the place he would take it in his stride.

His wife, Emily, said he had learned the phrase from his mother and she from his grandmother. Emily had endured it from each generation, equally amused and irritated by them all.

'Milk in your tea dear?'

'Just a trifle.'

'Is it hot in here?'

'Just a trifle.'

'Will you be working late tonight?'

'Just a trifle.'

It was no different at work. Bert had never been ambitious. 'Content' he called it. 'Lazy' was Emily's opinion. He had started work in the tax office immediately he left school and very slowly worked his way - just a trifle at a time - to a corner of the office he could call his own with two young girls for secretaries. As the years passed the secretaries changed and each new recruit was warned by the resident one about not giggling at or commenting on Bert's special turn of phrase. Invariably the new secretary asked, 'How on earth does Mrs. Hudson live with him?'

The truth is that Emily had reached the point where she rarely noticed. Bert was no great conversationalist, even at home, and Emily had made her own life with chapel, bingo and her part-time job at the Cleaners. Bert did not like holidays and Emily would get away each year on a coach tour with her sister. It was the same annual routine.

'Now, I've left meals in the freezer for you. You only need to put them in the microwave. The house is clean. Just get fresh bread and milk on Wednesday. You won't be lonely by yourself will you?,

'Maybe - just a trifle.'

All together, Bert's had been an uneventful, colourless, work and rest life with the door closed to excitement of any kind. Except for that time when he was asked to agree to a change of figures on a business account. He did not fully understand what it was about but next day an envelope full of cash had appeared in his coat pocket with '*no questions*' scribbled on it. There were just three similar incidents and for a while Bert lived fearful of detection, gave Emily no reason for his shaving off his moustache, and took careful notice of anyone in uniform. Months later, however, nothing had been said, and Bert had persuaded himself that he had done no wrong. 'Just a trifle,' he reassured himself.

After forty-two otherwise uneventful office years, Bert was ready for retirement. There were three men superior to him in the outer office who felt it right to take Bert out for a celebration meal. They suggested he took Emily with him, but he explained it would be her bingo night. For the first time in his life Bert felt appreciated and was determined to make an effort to enjoy the occasion. It was a small pub-restaurant not far from the office. The place was dimly lit, with a post-smoking days atmosphere, but clean with polished oak tables to match the floor and the wall panels.

One small glass of wine for Bert as it was a special occasion. 'Just a trifle' he told his hosts. All four had the same starter of melon with orange, which was good as the east-European waiter's English was not clear, and by the time they were ready for their main course Bert was enjoying the storytelling and banter of his colleagues. It seemed they were all to have the rump steak with peas and chips and the waiter found that easy too. The problem came with '*How do you like it*' The three companions were unanimous and in turn broke off from the conversation to say 'well done'.

Bert was only half attentive at that moment when his turn came. His neighbour asked a question at the same time as the waiter stood with his pencil poised.

'Will you be travelling much?' mingled with 'And you, Sir?'

'Bert barely turned his head to say, 'Oh, just a trifle.'

The waiter stared hard at him for a moment and not wanting to disturb the conversation again, scribbled on his order pad.

After a considerable wait, the meal was served. Four plates with well-done rump steaks on each, and then three side dishes of peas and chips for Bert's companions. Another short wait before the chef himself appeared to place a dish by the side of Bert's steak.

'I'm sorry,' he muttered. 'There wasn't enough time for it to set properly.'

In the large dish was a collapsing mush of sponge cake, jelly and custard, topped with lashings of fresh cream.

Bert's companions held back for a moment, but realising what had happened could not contain their laughter. They burst out in loud guffaws ... 'Just a trifle,' one choked out.

Bert - a mixture of embarrassment and uncharacteristic anger, conscious of the stares of other customers, rose from the table, pushing back his chair. The chair caught the edge of the table cloth and the trifle ended its short, immature life up-side-down at his feet. He was covered in jelly, cream and custard and with those mysterious workings of another world - a strawberry on the toecap of each shoe. Attempting to back away from the disaster. his foot made brief contact with a puddle of jelly and next thing he was falling. In spite of a vain attempt to save him by one of his colleagues Bert struck his head against a projecting wall-shelf on the way down and ended in an unconscious heap topped with trifle.

An hour later two uniformed police officers embarrassed Emily by asking for her in the middle of a bingo game.

'Your husband's had an accident at the *Pelican and Trout* and they've taken him to the hospital. We'll take you there if you're ready.'

'How serious is it?' she asked.

'He's had a fall and is still unconscious. The ward says you should come.'

'Whatever was he doing?'

'We're not really sure, except it was a trifle caused it - just a trifle.'

Not understanding Emily's strange look - almost a smirk - the policemen led to way out of the bingo hall.

Early next morning Emily left the hospital with a bag of Bert's trifle soaked clothes, but without Bert. He had departed this life without regaining consciousness and had passed into that other dimension some of us call 'heaven'. As though emerging from a dream he became conscious of standing in front of a high white wall blue at the top where it disappeared into a mass of fluffy summer cloud. The wall was continuous on either side of two huge lattice gates. To the side of the gates was what looked like a small office block. Bert had not noticed it at first because being all white it blended with the wall. It was the sign on the door which drew his attention - *Administration. Wait here for attention.* Bert sat down on the ground which was also white and as cushion-soft as a cloud. After a while a tall young man in white jacket and trousers emerged from the offices and in a cheery voice said, 'We weren't expecting any more arrivals for a few minutes. What brought you now? You're early aren't you.'  
'Just a trifle.'

The young man grinned, then laughed openly and turned to go back into the office.

'I'll tell the admissions officer.'

The admissions officer turned out to be a beautiful young lady, dressed in the same uniform as the young man.

'Come into the office.' She welcomed him with an angelic smile. 'I'm sorry we weren't ready for you. We were very busy. It was party night last night!'

'I know', said Bert, feeling brighter already.

She sat him down at a desk and opened up a shining white lap-top with silver keys.

'Bert Hudson isn't it?'

'That's right.'

She studied the screen. 'We don't seem to have much about you. You haven't done very much with your life have you?

'Just a trifle.' The words had a strange ring to them, like an echo of silver bells. 'I did my best.'

'That may not be enough.'

'Enough for what?'

'Enough to get you in! And there's a picture here of an envelope with money in it, in your pocket.'

'But I didn't have any choice about that,' protested Bert. 'And in any case I gave the money to charity to make it right. Otherwise Emily would have wanted to know where it came from.'

The admissions officer added a few notes. She had a very delicate touch on the lap-top keys.

Time seemed to stand still but that did not prevent Bert's agitation. 'Do you think I'll get in?'

'The boss will decide that. It depends how well acquainted you are. It's who you know that matters here.'

'Does the boss know me?'

'Oh yes. he knows everybody.'

Bert gave the admissions officer a questioning stare. 'And how well do I know him?'

The officer gave him a smile to make every angel in heaven proud.

'Just a trifle.'

