



## Potholes or New Roads?

'What did *you* do yesterday?'

Matt had been waiting for the question. It had stopped raining now and he could easily have got out of the cab with a brief 'Oh. Nothing much'. However he knew it was now or never. Sunday this week had been different and he wanted them to know.

The three men had worked together for a long time now, patching roads. 'We're as well off as undertakers,' Matt had said on more than one occasion. 'There'll always be holes to fill. We'll never be out of work while there's tarmac to be repaired.' But heavy showers did hold the work up at times. The last one had come near to lunchtime and the three had climbed into the cab of Rick's lorry for their break.

'Shove up,' Rick had shouted to Matt as the big man got in, pressing Alex against him. 'I'll be too squashed to get my sandwich down.' Matt pressed himself against the passenger door, busy with his own lunch bag. Even then he was sure the question would come. He ate in silence, taking in the endless chatter between his companions, as well as the mixed aroma of wet, oil, and tar, damp coats and Rick's specially strong cheese and onions crisps.

'I had a dreadful day yesterday,' Alex told them. He poured out a detailed account of how his wife had gone to help her sick mother and left the kids with him. 'You know what a terrible day it was,' he rambled on. 'Rained all day. The kids were at their worst. At each other's throats the whole time. I couldn't even watch the match for the noise they were making. I had to get up every five minutes to part them.'

There was a few moments quiet as all three set about their lunches. Then it came. The question. 'You're quiet, Matt,' Rick said. 'We haven't squeezed the breath out of you have we? What did you do yesterday? Matt took a deep breath. The pause was long enough for Alex to notice. 'It wasn't something naughty you don't want to tell us was it?'

'No,' said Matt in an unusually quiet voice. 'I went to church.'

The next pause was even longer. His two friends looked at each other with disbelieving stares.

'You're having us on. Come on. What *did* you do?'

'I went to church.'

'I thought there was something different about him this morning,' said Rick. There was laughter in his voice. 'Did they actually let you in?' Alex was grinning now.

'Yes.' replied Matt. His words flowed easier now. 'And they made me more welcome than I've ever been at the Duke's Head'

'I bet you didn't spend as much there as you do at the Duke's' laughed Rick.

'What made you do that?' Alex had become more serious.

'I suppose it was Charlie really.'

They all remembered Charlie. He'd been one of the team till he had taken early retirement a few months ago. Charlie had made it clear from the start that he was a practicing Christian. Not in any preachy way, but simply by being different. Rick who had been on the job the longest felt a little ashamed to remember the way they had treated Charlie at first. They had goaded him about his faith several times a day. Things had gone wrong, tar had been spilled, even in his sandwich box, tools had gone missing, they had experimented with the foulest language when Charlie was around. Yet, nothing had ruffled him or his faith. He had cheerfully gone about his work. He had never retaliated. He had never succumbed to speaking as they did, nor had he ever been ashamed to be different.

It was a difference that in time they had come to respect. When there were problems with family at home, it was Charlie they turned to for wise words, or just a sympathetic ear. Alex remembered how when he had been laid up with a strained back it was Charlie who had called with some magazines. Three times in as many weeks he had cut the grass for him. Once a week regularly the bins had been put out by someone, no doubt by Charlie on his way to work.

'Didn't he say he was going off to be a missionary somewhere?' Alex asked. His quick memories of Charlie had made him more serious.

'Well, not exactly,' Matt explained. 'He's going out to somewhere in Africa to help build schools and hospitals for the churches.'

'So Charlie got you to church, did he?' Rick was still amused by a mental picture of this giant of a man squeezed into a pew, even though he hadn't much personal experience of pews. Matt had indeed been a little embarrassed at first. A man his size can't slip in unnoticed at the back.

'In a way,' Matt replied. 'I've always thought we gave Charlie a tough time. But he was specially good to me when my Becky died. All sorts of things he said and did to help me. He didn't preach at me. He was just there. You know there was something different about Charlie. Sometimes when we were alone he'd tell me some of Christ's words, only he didn't call him Christ. He talked about Jesus, and when he did it was as though he really knew him. There was something about him that was real religion. Since Charlie's gone I've got to thinking - I'd like to be like that myself.'

There was a another long pause, and silence except for Rick snapping shut his sandwich box.

'Do you remember,' asked Matt. 'How Charlie had all sorts of sayings? He reminded me of one of them the last time we met. It was just before he went off to Africa. He said, 'It's no good filling pot-holes when the whole road needs re-surfacing.'

'Did his Jesus say that,' asked Rick, with a laugh. 'No, you idiot,' Alex tapped him on the head with his empty sandwich box. 'We haven't been in the job *that* long.'

