

Wolfie and Jo-Jo.

Wolfie and Jo-Jo were on their usual pitch, down the Sunday Market off the Barking Road. Their Datsun van (registration K488 WAM, also used for the airport-taxi run) was parked, the back was up, and every surface was festooned with dodgy T-shirts, Cashmere scarves all the way from Bombay, CDs and DVDs fresh from authentic pressing-plants somewhere on mainland China: business was never better.

“Concertos, sir? - How many you want then? - I got Masses! I’m not asking £25 for this one, I’m not asking for £20, no, my friend, I’m not even asking £10 for it: how much d’you think I’m asking for it then, guv? One pound? - one quid?! - do me a favour, bring your mum with you next time, you shouldn’t be out on your own, spending your pocket-money! No, my friend, I’m only asking a fiver for this beautiful hand-crafted Concerto for Clarinet, and if you think you can find one cheaper anywhere else, you can whistle!” Wolfie was in his element. “What’ya mean you got a cheaper one down at Stoke Newington - that old Tony Salieri’s stall, then? Gor blimey, guv, he saw you coming from miles off then, din’t he? How much you pay? Two quid, two bleeding quid for that rubbish? - blimey, he only ever wrote one thing, he just sells it over and over to any mug that comes along. How’s it go again? - *Ta-ra-ra-boom-te-ay!* Stone me! you been done, mate! Here, you take this one home, listen to ‘em both, then get yourself back up Stoke Newington, give him what for! And tell him Wolfie down at Barking sends ‘im a big kiss! Gor, two quid, eh?”

Meanwhile, his business partner Jo-Jo was sweet-talking a gaggle of dumpy women who were suspiciously fingering some black leather hand-bags. “Madam, these designer bags come all the way from Paris, France. Fetched them myself last week, from the trade-show, oh yes. Now, this one’ll suit you, madam, just sling it over your shoulder - oh yes, ain’t she just a bobby-dazzler, ladies, eh? Madam, when you next see that daughter of yours, what’s her name - Naomi, is it? - you are Naomi’s mum, ain’t you, Mrs. Campbell? No? You’re kidding me? Well, strike me down wiv a feather, then, ‘cos you got the looks for it, I could’ve sworn! There, darling, that’ll be a tenner to you, and give my best regards to Naomi, you won’t forget? Now, then, who’s next...Mrs. Moss?” When he had sold five bags in quick succession, it was on to the rugs. “Oriental rugs, ladies, all the way from the East - no, luv, not Dagenham, not Southend, not even Boulogna: these are all the way from Persia. Special import. These are the Rolls-Royces of rugs, let me tell you. Magic carpets. If you can find one cheaper anywhere in this neck of the woods, then I’m an Austro-Hungarian!”

As the morning wore on, other items emerged from the Sultan’s treasure-chest, the Datsun van. Jo-Jo shouted his wares from one side, Wolfie from the other. “Buy one Quartet, get a Concertino free! We got ‘em all here!” Wolfie had one difficult old gent who haggled long and hard for a Requiem Mass - “Look, my friend,” he says, “I ain’t in the charity business, I ain’t. You want charity, you go down the Sally Army. Fifteen quid for a whole Requiem, you think I was born yesterday? A price like that’ll just kill me! Twenty quid - that’s my final offer. Eighteen? - done. Now, you give me your name and address, I’ll have my delivery agents bring it round tomorrow morning - Count von Walsegg-Stuppach? - how d’ya spell that then? Good doing business with you, sir. All right, then, who’s next - I got symphonies, concertos, sonatas, operas - you just ask, Wolfie Mozart’s got something for every taste! ‘Ere, Jo-Jo, ain’t that your squeeze over there - hey, Luigia, come and give us a kiss then!”

Jo-Jo looked over his shoulder, he was just concluding a very satisfactory deal with Mr. Farook in respect of an Emperor Quartet, with three symphonies thrown in for free. “Shut it!” he whispered urgently, “Just shut it, right - no, not you, Mr Farook, sir, I

was discussing something with my business associate here - stumm, right? - can't you see the wife's over there?" Sure enough, a sour-looking woman was standing, arms folded across her chest, regarding Wolfie, Jo-Jo and the lovely Luigia with considerable distaste: Luigia Polzelli, *chanteuse exotique* at "Esterhazy's", the night-club down the Romford Road, Jo-Jo and she had had a thing going for over a year now.

Wolfie was not to be told: "What, you afraid of your missus then, Jo-Jo? What's Ma Haydn done now, then? - last time she caught you at it, she was lining her drawers with your compositions, wasn't it? G'ahn, lining her drawers? They're big enough, though! Let me tell you, Jo-Jo, I don't take no cheek from my missus, she wants to line her drawers, then I'm the man to do it for her! Hey, there she is, the lovely lady - Constanze, over here, light of my life! Ain't she just a beauty, eh?" he asked the world in general. "Now, who'll take my last aria from me - 'Batti, batti, o bel Masetto' - it takes some beating, I tell you. I'm not asking ten quid, ladies..."

Just then, there was a disturbance in the crowd gathered around the Datsun. Old ladies gasped and fell back, youths turned quickly to one side and dedicatedly inspected wares on the neighbouring stalls. A big man came through, eyes fixed on Wolfie, kept walking, right up to him, stopped with his face about an inch away from Wolfie's. The smile lingered on Wolfie's face, but the flow of words had dried up. "Oh, 'allo then, Mr. B. Just passing, are we?"

"What?!" bawled the man, glaring at Wolfie. "Speak up, don't whisper, don't be shy!" He pressed his ear up against Wolfie's face. "What were you saying, then, pal?" Wolfie swallowed, said nothing. "You got to speak up when the Van-Man cometh," went on the newcomer, "The Van-Man's a bit hard of hearing, remember?" He looked around at the rapidly dwindling crowd of on-lookers. "Got this impediment, like: can't hear my business-rivals when they're screaming!" He laughed in an ugly sort of way. No one else laughed: they'd seen the Van-Man in all his moods, and every one of them was dangerous. "Here, pal," he went on, turning his attention back to Wolfie, "What d'ya think of this then - just got a truck-load in from Albania..." He reached for a pocket in his huge great-coat, the pocket he usually kept his knuckle-dusters in. Jo-Jo shrank even further behind the Datsun, Wolfie paled, but stood his ground. The Van-Man pulled out a replica hunting-horn. He held it up to Wolfie's right ear. "Now listen to this," he said; and pressed the horn - **Da-da-da-daah!!** - it went, **Da-da-da-daah, Da-da-da-daah** - over and over again. Wolfie reeled back, clutching his ear. The Van-Man looked at him in great concern. "What's wrong then, pal, gone a bit deaf? Don't like the tune? Tell you what, pal, that's the knocking of fate on your door, in't it?" **Da-da-da-daah!!**

Wolfie looked around nervously. The entire Sunday market crowd had found something to interest it and that something wasn't Wolfie and Jo-Jo's stall. Only Constanze and Luigia lingered nearby, petrified. "Listen, Ludwig," he said, adopting a conciliatory tone, "If it's about the taxi-contract..."

The Van-Man, 'Ludwig van Earwig' to his friends - very few of them, and only behind his back - looked puzzled. "Taxi-contract? Taxi-contract? What taxi-contract is that then, Wolfie?"

"You remember, the one me and Jo-Jo got from the Council last week..."

The Van-Man made a great show of being enlightened. "Oh, *that* taxi-contract! I though you was meaning another taxi-contract. Oh, *that* taxi-contract which was mine from the day it was advertised, *that* taxi-contract which I slipped good money to the Councillors for, *that* taxi-contract which some thieving, conniving, back-stabbing little Austrian playboy stole from under my nose? - no, Wolfie, I ain't bothered about *that* taxi-contract." He smiled amicably, but without humour. "No, I ain't bothered at all,

because Wolfie's going to sub-contract that contract to me, ain't he?" Wolfie nodded eagerly. "At preferential rates, ain't he?" persisted the Van-Man. Wolfie nodded again. "Very preferential rates, a little bird tells me. After all," went on the Van-Man in a cheerier tone, putting his arm round Wolfie's shoulder and leading him to one side, "After all, we're both Brothers down the Lodge, ain't we, Wolfie?" He winked grandly. "And the Grand Master sits on the Taxi Licensing Board, don't he, and he owes me - big time. He won't mind a bit of creative business on the contract, now, will he? What'ya think, Wolfie? Yeah?" The Van-Man smiled. "No 'Eroics needed, then, eh pal? And no skipping by Moonlight: o Joy!"

Wolfie could only nod, grateful that the Van-Man was being so gentle. Last time he'd had a run-in with Ludwig van Earwig, he'd spent two weeks at home with bandages around parts of his body that even now Constanze was still nursing very carefully, God bless her soft little hands.

"That's a deal, then," said Ludwig, pleasantly. "Ere, why don't you keep this hunting-horn. Beats the old Magic Flute and the Singing Parrot any day. You take it, pal - as a token of good faith, know what I mean? To seal the deal."

Da-da-da-daah!!