



## L'ASPIRATEUR

"Hsst!" hissed a voice down at Mrs D's feet. Surprised, she looked down. There was nothing to be seen. She moved her feet back and forth.

"Hsst-hsst!" said something again, more urgently. "Watch clumsy paws, Skinny Human!"

She looked more carefully and finally detected a set of whiskers poking out from underneath a pile of paper that had somehow fallen from the table to the floor.

"Oh, is that you, Bert?" she asked kindly.

"Course it me," replied the hamster huffily. "Who else you expect it be? Man in Moon or something?"

"Well," began Mrs D. defensively. "Not exactly that, but -"

"Pay 'tention," interrupted Haricot Bert, "me grumpy!"

"You certainly seem to be," said Mrs D.

"That French hamster back again," whispered Bert. "He full of himself again."

"Oh, that would be that nice Gordon Bleu, then?" asked Mrs D. "He was a bit of a charmer, I seem to remember?"

"Pah," said Bert angrily. "He just a - what you call it, Bill?"

Another hamster poked his nose out from underneath the pile of paper. His pouches were suspiciously packed and a scrap of paper was hanging out of the side of his mouth. "Mm'm'mm," said Bill.

"That right," said Bert, "that French hamster he just one charabanc."

"M-mmm!" said Bill loudly, "Mm'm'mm!"

"Okay clever clogs, you know best. That Gordon Bleu just one charlatan! That better?"

Broccoli Bill seemed satisfied with that and set to work on some nice black tissue paper that formed part of the pile on top of him.

"So what's Gordon been up to?" asked Mrs. D, wondering vaguely if she had really let all that tissue paper slip off the table, or whether...

"He been inventing things again," announced Bert grumpily. "That all!"

Mrs D. pondered this for a while. At last she asked cautiously: "Is that not what hamsters do best, then?"

Haricot Bert eyed her balefully. "Hamsters from HamLabs™ do it all time. That what we good at. But French hamsteurs not good enough."

"Oh," said Mrs D.

"So what he done now?" demanded Bert.

"I don't know," answered Mrs. D., since it seemed expected of her.

"He only done invent an Aspi-ratter!" growled Bert.

There was a squeak from within the pile of paper. Patty Perkins poked his head out, whiskers quivering, eyes bulging. "Rats!" he whispered. "Where rats? Hamster not like rats, nasty horrible slimy rats! Rats!" He powered back into the pile of paper and then lay very still.

"Anyway," said Bert more cheerfully, "me no think you very pleased when you see -"

At that moment, he was interrupted by a crash from the kitchen. Mrs D. hurried through. On the floor, still spinning wildly and bouncing from one side of the room to the other, was a small flying saucer, painted in broad red, white and blue stripes. Gradually it lost momentum and spun to a halt. There was a pause, then the lid sprang open and a rather dazed-looking hamster hauled

himself out. A small beret was stuck lopsidedly to one ear. His thick fur was all over the place, but in seconds he had put that to rights, adjusted his beret, and was looking around nonchalantly.

“Ah, mais c’est la belle mademoiselle!” he exclaimed on seeing Mrs D. “Ah, my foolish ‘eart ‘e go ba-boum! Zees eez un plaisir extraordinaire!” He scampered over to Mrs D and prepared to be stroked. She obliged.

“And eet eez - ‘ow you say - ze Valentino Day, hein?”

“Valentine’s Day,” confirmed Mrs D.

“Ah, ‘ow romantique!” enthused Gordon Bleu, flattening himself out on the floor under the pressure of her hand. “Ah, but mademoiselle - you will be verre surprise! I ‘ave a present for you on zis romantic day!”

“A present?” asked Mrs D warily. She had seen hamster presents enough to know that they were sometimes not quite what she had hoped for.

“Ah, mais oui! Let me see, where did I put ‘im?” He closed one eye thoughtfully. “Ah, ze uzzer one, ‘e ‘as ze present! Rico!” he shouted, “bring me ze grand invention!”

Haricot Bert stood at the kitchen door, fur bristling. “Name not Rico, it Bert,” he growled.

“Ha! Rico, Bert - ‘oo cares?” replied Gordon coolly. “Zees beautiful lady, she would like to see ‘er present. Allez, fetch!” He turned back to Mrs D. and added quietly, “Zose rosbif ‘amsters, zey verre, verre - ‘ow you say - touchy! Ooh la la!” He shook a front paw dismissively.

Bert, however, was not happy. “You want show your stupid present,” he mumbled, “you show it yourself. Me got more important stuff to do.” With which words he turned his back and retreated into the pile of paper with Patty and Bill.

Gordon Bleu shrugged magnificently. “Eh bien, mademoiselle, I will show him you by myself. Just ze two of us. You will swoon, I suppose. It is a machine I make from - ‘ow you say - pieces? En France, we *leuve* - ” he growled out the word “- *leuve* to use again, you know?”

“Ah,” said Mrs D, finally cottoning on. “You recycle old things into new? That’s very good. And what have you recycled, then?”

“Oh, it was a nussing of nussing,” said Gordon modestly. “An ancient machine I ‘ave discovered. It ‘ad not been used for years. Years and years. Covered in dust outside. Full of dust inside. Kept in a dark place. But with my gigantic brain, I ‘ave made it into an Aspirateur!”

There was a squeal from under the paper and a flurry of activity.

“Aspirateur?” asked Mrs D.

“Oui, mademoiselle,” said Gordon modestly, “*Automatique Super-Pouchère Intelligent* - et tout le reste... Eet sucks up yoghurt drops, carrot-tops, noix, all zose lovely sings, and stores zem in a little sack for when you need zem. You have heard, sans doute, of La Fontaine?”

Mrs D, slightly taken aback by this change of direction, paused before answering.

“La Fontaine?” she asked cautiously. “The collector of fables?”

“Ah, mademoiselle,” said Gordon Bleu admiringly, “you are not just ze pretty face, but are quite ze vulture of culture as well! Eh bien, so you know ze fable of ze cigalle and ze fourmi? ‘Ow is ‘e in English?”

“The grasshopper and the ant?” replied Mrs D. “The one sang all summer long and stored up nothing for winter, and the other worked all summer long and did not starve. A lesson for us all.”

“Bien sûr!,” exclaimed Gordon happily. “Well, my Aspirateur does exactly that. Stores up ze food for ze harsh months of winter. Come, I show eet to you now. You will be transport wiz delight!” He swaggered off in the direction of the cupboard under the stairs.

As she passed the pile of paper, Mrs D. distinctly heard the sound of one hamster sniggering, and a low mutter of “He in trouble now!”

“Et voilà!” Gordon threw back the door and dramatically pointed inside. Mrs. D looked in.

There was not much to be seen, except for her vacuum-cleaner. At least... She peered more closely at the vacuum-cleaner. Something was different about it.

She switched on the light. And gasped.

The vacuum-cleaner had been vandalised. The handle had been removed - nibbled off, it looked from the teeth-marks. And instead of a neat plastic cover over the dust-bag, there was simply a very large plastic bag hanging out, stuffed full of hamster treats of one sort or another. The power-cable had been replaced with a large wheel taken from a hamster-cage. Ribbons and string were tied here and there.

“Eh bien,” enquired Gordon Bleu smugly, “what you sink of zat, mademoiselle? Astounding, hein?”

Mrs D controlled herself. “Astounding,” she agreed.

“Un cadeau merveilleux for le jour de Valentine, n’est-ce pas? Now you will never want for food, all ze winter long!” Gordon Bleu presented himself for stroking.

Outside in the hallway, Haricot Bert and Broccoli Bill sat and smirked, chewing vigorously on tissue paper.

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