

Dratted Boiler

Mrs D. said some bad words. The central heating boiler was on the blink. Again. She phoned the Gas Man and they said he'd come, somewhere between one and six in the afternoon. And can we do anything else for you at this time, madam?

Mrs D said some more bad words.

Here was a small gasp from behind her, on the floor. She looked round. A small hamster sat staring up at her balefully.

"Skinny human say naughty words," it said accusingly.

"Yes," admitted Mrs D. "Sorry."

The hamster shrugged. "That all right," it said, "I heard worser than that. You should hear Haricot Bert when he get going."

"Really? I'm very surprised."

"Shocking!" said the hamster, and chewed nonchalantly on the carpet.

Mrs D. looked closely. "You're Riddle Dumble, aren't you?" she said at last, after racking her brains for the name.

"That right, missus," agreed the hamster.

"Haven't seen you for a long time," said Mrs D. conversationally.

"That right," mumbled Riddle Dumble through a mouthful of carpet tufts.

Mrs D. ran to the kitchen and got some spare Brussels Sprouts. She came back and placed them in front of the hamster, who, without a pause, started nibbling them instead. There was a distinct bald patch in the carpet now. Mrs D. sighed.

The hamster looked up, his eyes bulging from the pressure of his full pouches. "You unhappy?" he wanted to know.

"No," said Mrs D. "Just – well – annoyed."

"Ah," said Riddle understandingly. "The dratted boiler."

Mrs D. was about to correct him and draw his attention to the damage to the carpet, when another hamster appeared from under the stairs.

"Mm'mm," said Riddle in greeting.

"What you got there?" demanded Broccoli Bill sharply. "That sprouts. Me want some." He stuck out a paw and swiped one of the sprouts. Riddle Dumble thought for a moment about defending his breakfast, but then decided against it. The two hamsters sat busily on their bottoms and chewed for a few minutes. Mrs D. gazed forlornly at her carpet.

At last Riddle was finished. "Dratted boiler again," he told Bill.

Bill was interested. "Central heating?" he wanted to know.

Mrs D. nodded. "On the blink again," she reported.

"Dratted boilers," said both hamsters in unison.

"You want HamLabs™ technology," advised Broccoli Bill in a know-all sort of voice. "It never break down."

"Never?" asked Riddle Dumble looking confused. "What about that –?"

He did not finish his question, since Bill nipped his tail. "You want to try out SolarPower™ technology, skinny human," he advised.

"Oh," said Mrs D., interested. "Now we have thought of that. Capturing the rays of the sun and all that – very good for the environment and the atmosphere."

Broccoli Bill just shook his head in despair. "You humans know nothing! That right, eh, Riddle."

"What that?" asked Riddle Dumble, who was eyeing up another patch of carpet.

"That right," said Bill, ignoring his friend. "SolarPower, missus," he said. "That stand for Sprouts or Lettuce Activated Radiation"

"Ah," said Mrs D., slightly disappointed.

"Or, what that other thing?" mused Bill. "Oh! Me remember: you want Nucolor™ heating. Much better. Everything go with a bang, then!"

Mrs D. was doubtful. "I don't really approve of nuclear power – all that plutonium and stuff that contaminates the world for centuries to come."

Broccoli Bill rolled his eyes. “Oh, right again, skinny one,” he advised in a decidedly sarcastic tone. “Spot on! Nuculor, right? Like Nice Uncooked Cabbage Under Loads of Radish.”

“Mm’mm!” exclaimed Riddle Dumble enthusiastically. “You got some then?”

Mrs D. was puzzled. “But how can SolarPower or Nuculor do anything to heat up my radiators?”

Broccoli Bill indicated that this was a trade secret. His lips were sealed. Not sealed enough that he couldn’t ask: “you got any of those nice yoghurt drops, then?”

Mrs D. went off to find them, anxious for her carpet if she refused.

By the time she came back, a third hamster had arrived.

“Dratted boiler,” Bill was advising the newcomer.

“Ah,” exclaimed the hamster, “ze tratted sings! *Pouff!*”

“Except she called them a different word,” said Riddle in a stage whisper. “A bad word!”

“May not *une femme*,” said Gordon Bleu charmingly, “give expression to her emotion? Eet eez ze way with ze ladies! And zay must not change, *jamais du tout!*” He winked at Mrs D. and bowed gracefully.

Mrs D. distributed the yoghurt drops. A long pause ensued, everyone busy with their own thoughts.

Gordon Bleu finished first. “Ze little ‘ooman ‘as tried, zen, ze compensation boiler?”

“You mean condensation?” said Mrs D.

“Ah, *mais non, mais non!*” Gordon Bleu shook his front paw vigorously to indicate rejection and offence. “I ‘ave no idea what eez ze condensation. Ze compensation boilers – invented in *La Belle France*, you will comprehend.” He looked steadily at Broccoli Bill, as if challenging him to argue. Bill stared back and said nothing. “Ze compensation boiler, eet eez verre, verre elegant. Eet never break down. Ever. *Jamais!* Not once! But if eet break down, you get zee compensation.”

“Well,” said Mrs D., “I think I’d like one of those. Can you order me one?”

Gordon Bleu sucked in his breath. “Ah, *chère mademoiselle*, if only I could! But there is a long – ‘ow you say? – a long time of attending for them from the factory in *Parrel!*”

Broccoli Bill snorted, but said nothing. Gordon glared at him.

It was Riddle Dumble who pointed out that a nice big bed of sawdust and cotton-wool kept him warm, and he didn’t see why humans needed central heating.

“Cos humans is skinny.” Broccoli Bill stated the obvious. “No fur. Useless. You got any carrot-tops, human?”

Mrs D. considered this request in the light of the preceding statements. Riddle Dumble began to eye the carpet again. Mrs D. went and fetched some vegetable scraps. And so the day passed. There was more debate amongst the hamsters about the relative merits of other HamLabs™ heating technologies, including something rather mysterious named Kindling, which was So Top Secret that no one could be persuaded to divulge any details.

“You heard of Amazon?” was all that Broccoli Bill could say.

Mrs D admitted she had.

“Well, then,” said Bill. “like that, only a lot hotter.” He refused to say anything more. Mrs D. was rather inclined to fear the worst.

Gordon Bleu had much to say about the alternative technologies available on the Continent, principal among which was *La Couverture Écossaise*. It sounded like a tartan blanket to Mrs D., but Gordon waxed lyrical about it for so long she was sure she must be mistaken.

At length, just after five o’clock, the Gas Man arrived. Everyone trooped through to see him work on the boiler. The Gas Man was quite grumpy already, and he did not want an audience. He had a particular aversion to small fat hamsters. He said so. This did not go down well. At length, however, he agreed to proceed.

“Could do with a cup of tea, though, know what I mean?” he said pointedly.

“Sorry,” said Mrs D., determined not to be hospitable to such a boor. “We only have carrot-tops, raw sprouts and some red cabbage.”

He turned up his nose at this offer. Riddle Dumble expressed a great interest in the red cabbage, however.

“What’s wrong with it, then?” the Gas Man wanted to know.

“Dratted boiler broke,” Riddle Dumble informed him.

“Again,” added Broccoli Bill.

“Ze lovely lady eez ‘artbroken,” stated Gordon Bleu in a voice full of menace. “She wait so-oo long!”

The Gas Man rolled his eyes, muttered something instructive about ‘the bleeding obvious’ and started to take the boiler apart. It took a few minutes. Some of the screws were stuck tight; and he was a bit nervous, since Gordon Bleu was making chattering noises just beside his left ankle, and he was acutely aware of Broccoli Bill propped up on his hind legs, staring at him fixedly. At last, however, the cover came off and he laid it to one side.

Then he gasped.

Mrs D. gasped.

Gordon Bleu looked astonished.

At the foot of the boiler was a huge mound of cotton-wool and sawdust, decorated here and there with bits of vegetable.

A grizzled and grumpy face poked itself out from the nest.

“What blazes going on here, then?” it grumbled.

The Gas Man looked at the hamster helplessly.

“Goddam, you lousy critter!” growled the old hamster. “Cat got your tongue or what?”

“Cats!” muttered Riddle Dumble nervously.

“That you, Mr van Rimbaud?” asked Broccoli Bill.

The hamster hauled himself out of the enormous nest. His fur looked a little singed here and there. And there were distinct traces of soot all over. Come to think of it, the cotton-wool showed signs of charring.

“Sure thing, son,” Butch van Rimbaud replied cheerily. “I was just having me some shuteye when this no-account skinny varmint poked his nose in where it ain’t wanted! Now, son,” he said to Bill, “you just hand over some of that chow there, and I’ll be heading back to the bunkhouse! Nice and warm there – at least, it was.” He looked at the Gas Man with interest. “You here to fix this contraption, or what?”

The Gas Man nodded, suddenly weary of life.

“Well, you keep your foot on the gas, young fella. An Old Timer like me don’t like the cold in my bones no more! No, sirree!” And with that he retreated back inside his copious nest.