

February the fourteenth again. With more than a little trepidation, Mrs D. scanned the skies. She had already set aside a pile of chocolate drops big enough to satisfy even the most demanding, for she remembered the previous year's disappointment for Haricot Bert; also several sprigs of brassica, knowing Broccoli Bill's predilections. And now she stood at the window, gazing up into the scudding clouds. A bit windy perhaps for a saucer to land safely?

There was a sudden crash and clatter from the fireplace, and a small cloud of soot belched into the room, all over the carpet. Mrs D. jumped with shock then, recovering, groaned with exasperation, for she had steam-cleaned the carpet only yesterday. In the fireplace lay a small saucer, not one she had ever seen before: this one was decorated in bold red, white and blue stripes, and had a big letter "F" painted black on white on the side.

As she watched, the lid of the saucer was flung open dramatically; a slightly dazed hamster stood up and looked about, blinking and sneezing in the soot which was still billowing around. As he did so, a second hamster poked its head above the rim of the saucer.

"Daft hamster!" it muttered angrily. "Now look wot you done! Knew this was bad idea! But, oh no, clever-clogs knows better, clever-clogs want to drive fast!"

The first hamster wore, as Mrs D. could see when the air cleared a bit, a rather smart black beret on his head, perched nonchalantly between his ears. He appeared to pay no attention to the other hamster, but gazed around with interest.

Then he became aware of Mrs D. and leaped out, clutching a small and very crushed bouquet of crocuses. "Enchanté, Madame!" squeaked the hamster, bowing low and holding his bouquet out towards her.

"Hello," said Mrs D. cautiously. "I don't believe we have ever been introduced?"

"Mais, non, Madame," replied the hamster, having, after a moment's consideration, stuffed the flowers into his pouch; he checking his fur carefully for any stray morsels of petal. "Nn, nnnng-gg, ng!"

It was then that Haricot Bert clambered out of the saucer, looking decidedly grumpy, tired and emotional.

"Oh, Bert," she cried in concern, "Are you all right?"

Bert groaned. "Never," he muttered blackly, "Never let foreigner drive!" He polished his nose lustily. "Never again!"

"Pah! 'Ot ze matteur?" enquired the other hamster. "Rosbif hamster a peur, hein?" He smirked in a rather unbecoming manner at Mrs D. and jiggled his front paw up and down in a dismissive fashion.

"Hamster not afraid!" snapped Haricot Bert. "But saucers drive on the left here!"

"Ah!" sighed the other, despairingly, "Gauche, droit, 'oo cares? We 'amsters are - 'ow you say - esprits libres - when in our soucoupes!"

Bert sighed. "Mrs D., this Monsieur Gordon Bleu. Gordon Bleu - Mrs D."

"Enchanté, Madame," said the hamster, bowing low and covering Mrs D's out-stretched hand with little nibbles and kisses and whiskery ticklings.

"Monsieur Bleu paying visit," added Bert laconically. "Monsieur Bleu is Director of ... um..." Bert's explanation tailed off as he noticed for the first time the quite embarrassingly large cache of chocolate drops which had been set out. He waddled swiftly and unerringly towards it.

"Monsieur le Directeur de l'Institut de la Patte," said Gordon, allowing himself to be picked up by Mrs D. "'Amsters ont pattes!" he added, as if in explanation. "You find ze French amsters sont très romantique?"

Mrs D. acknowledged that she found hamsters with berets quite sweet. She stroked his long hair and the hamster grew flatter and flatter as she stroked, his little black eyes bulging with the pleasure.

Haricot Bert wandered over in a break from pouching and nibbling. His mouth was all chocolatey. He cleared some space to speak. "Stumpy Ballantyne's Day again, then," he said, conversationally. "Hamsters like chocolate drops," he confirmed, nodding his head vigorously, in case there was any doubt. "Hamsters stick to walls," he then announced, looking closely at Gordon Bleu.

Mrs D. was thrown by this sudden leap in topic. "I'm sorry?" she asked, not letting up in her stroking of the French hamster who, by this time, was almost as flat as a pancake.

"French hamsters have static," explained Bert, never once taking his eyes off Gordon. "French hamsters stick to walls."

"Oh, I see," said Mrs D. "You mean, like balloons?"

Haricot Bert nodded even more energetically than before. "Hamsters get stroked. Then hamsters stick to walls. Like balloons."

Mrs D looked doubtful. But Gordon murmured "L'amour, c'est électrique!"

So Mrs D tried. She slid the flat hamster across her palms and pressed him against the wall. Then she let go. Sure enough, to the astonishment of Mrs D, and, it seemed, to the mild surprise of Gordon and the delight of Bert, Gordon stayed plastered vertically against the wall for at least five seconds. Then, slowly at first but with increasing speed, he slid and slithered down the wall, his little claws scrabbling for purchase, until, about two feet from the floor, he went into free-fall and plopped on to the carpet.

"Ouf!" he said.

Haricot Bert looked smug. "Told you hamsters stick," he said, and cleaned his whiskers. "You sore, Gordon?" he asked in a rather too-interested tone.

Gordon Bleu looked balefully at Bert, then shrugged his shoulders. He smoothed himself down and allowed Mrs D, who was feeling guilty at her experiment, to replace his beret and offer him a grape. Soon he was feeling better.

"HamLabs™ in Europe," explained Bert. "Broccoli Bill go to France for week to show new inventions. Get Gordon Bleu in exchange." He lowered his voice and whispered in Mrs D's ear. "Not much of exchange. Eurotechnology bit primitive. Only good for sticking to walls."

Gordon Bleu looked suspiciously at Bert.

"Z'amsters ont nouvelle technologie," he announced proudly. "L'Institut de la Patte développe La Montre."

"La montre?" asked Mrs D, puzzled. "But that's a watch - I thought they were developed a long time ago?"

"Ah, ma chère Madame!" laughed Gordon gravely, "Femmes! Elles ne savent rien! Mais elles sont si belles!" He bowed gracefully over Mrs D's hand once more and tickled it forcefully.

"You desire regarder la Montre?" enquired Gordon.

"Yes, of course."

"Then demand Monsieur le Directeur what eez 'our"

"What time is it, Monsieur Bleu?"

"Eez dix heures moins vingt!" said Gordon triumphantly. There was no visible sign of a watch about the sleek hamster.

"But that's amazing!" said Mrs D. "I think that deserves another grape! Or a chocolate drop?!"

Haricot Bert coughed in an embarrassed tone. Mrs D. looked round: all the chocolate drops had now vanished.

"Or a grape," she said hastily. "Much better for handsome young hamsters."

"Eez dix heures moins dix-neuf!" announced Gordon, before stuffing the grape into his pouch.

"Well, Bert," said Mrs D. turning to Haricot Bert, who was about to curl up for a snooze, "This is a most remarkable invention. Can HamLabs™ boast of such a useful device? Just think - I could have one of those beside my bed and just rub it at night, and I wouldn't need to put the light on!"

At this proposal, Gordon Bleu twirled his whiskers suavely. "Peut-être Madame aimerait visiter mon Institut à moi? Zere we faisons l'étude des pattes, en particulier des pattes de jolies femmes..."

There was a noise suspiciously like a snort from Bert. He stared resolutely over Mrs D's shoulder. So fixedly did he stare that she looked round. And saw her clock. She looked back at Bert. Then at Gordon. Then at the clock. A little light went on. She shifted her position so that Gordon could not possibly see past her.

"And what time is it now, Gordon?" she asked innocently, stroking him all the while.

The shiny sleek hamster dodged this way and that, trying desperately and unsuccessfully to see past Mrs D. "Ze 'our eez ... ze 'our, he eez .. il est ... Ah, ze batteries sont foutues! A thousand pardons, chère Madame, ze batteries are gone - pif! - after regarding so long your belles yeux et en mangeant your raisins! Pif - gone ! Et paf! "

Bert snorted rather rudely. "HamLabs™ Talking Watch not break down. It wind-powered. Hamsters always have wind. No breakdowns."

Gordon Bleu's fur bristled. "Ah, imbécile! Wot about notre magnétophone, notre - 'ow you say - notre recorder of tappes?! Zat work sans électrique, mieux que HamLabs, hein? Vieux mince-poche!"

The two hamsters were squaring up to each other, teeth chattering, tails sticking upright.

Mrs D. intervened hastily. "Well, never mind, boys. Perhaps next time? How about another grape?"

"No thanks. It time to go," said Haricot Bert. "Hamsters have visits to make. Stumpy Ballantyne's Day always very busy."

"Oh, do you have to go so soon?" asked Mrs D., gathering up the remains of the broccoli for the two hamsters to take with them, and a extra grape for Gordon Bleu.

Haricot Bert looked round hopefully at the empty space where the chocolate drops had been, then nodded firmly.

"Eurohamsters must go now," he repeated.

"Z'amsters de retour bientôt, Madame," promised Gordon Bleu, as he clambered back into the saucer, blowing kisses with his front paws.

Haricot Bert nipped Gordon Bleu on the tail and, seizing the controls, powered up the saucer. With a bump, a scrape and another shower of soot, they were off up the chimney. Mrs D. caught a last glimpse of beret, of red, white and blue and arguing Eurohamsters; then they were gone.

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