



FETCH!

‘So,’ said Haricot Bert, ‘talking of hamsters -’

‘But we weren’t,’ interrupted Mrs D.

‘Wasn’t wot?’ demanded Bert impatiently.

‘Weren’t talking about hamsters,’ said Mrs D.

‘Course we was,’ said Bert in annoyed tones.

‘No, I’m sorry, we weren’t.’ Mrs D shook her head firmly.

‘Skinny human just said the word,’ said Bert.

‘What word?’ said Mrs D, now baffled.

‘Hamsters,’ said Bert.

‘Hamsters?’ said Mrs D.

‘There you go again, human just said it,’ said Haricot Bert triumphantly. ‘So we was talking about hamsters. So, talking of hamsters, it now scientifically proven that hamsters – what was it zackly that HamLabs™ said, Bill?’

Broccoli Bill interrupted his consideration of a large piece of cabbage. ‘Hamsters better than dogs and things,’ he mumbled through the space left between two full pouches.

‘That right, missus,’ said Bert. ‘New report from HamLabs™ says hamsters better than dogs and cats and parrots. On scale of three to seventeen -’

Mrs D held up her hand. ‘Shouldn’t that be one to ten?’

Bert and Bill fell about laughing. Bill snorted so much that the cabbage went down the wrong way and he began to choke. With a few deft nips to the tail, Bert set him to rights again.

‘One to ten? One to ten?’ exclaimed Haricot Bert. ‘Wot planet you living on, dimwit? One to ten so – wot that word Gordon?’

Gordon Bleu brushed his fur with a languid back paw. ‘Zat would be “passé”, mon ami,’ he announced.

‘That it: one to ten so pasta, like wot my Continental colleague mention. Wot you do with one-to-ten if worse than useless?’

‘A negative number – like minus one?’ suggested Mrs D, uncertain now.

‘Pooh!’ said Bert dismissively. ‘No such thing as negative numbers. Melvyn Thickett say so. He top theorist in HamLabs™. Anyway, hamsters no like negativity. Modern science use three to seventeen, then hamsters can use one and two for real rubbish score.’

‘Like “one” for skinny human intelligence,’ muttered Bill.

All three hamsters sniggered.

‘And “two” for cabbage wot isn’t fresh,’ he added, for good measure.

‘And sixteen, seventeen for anything like – like wot, Gordon?’ asked Bert.

‘Comme HamLabs™ et tout ce truc-là,’ said Gordon Bleu, waving his front paw airily.

‘Right,’ said Bert.

‘Right,’ said a voice in amongst some cotton wool.

There was a pause while everyone admired the new numbering system.

Eventually Mrs D decided to move things along: she had a busy morning ahead of her. ‘So, cats and dogs and parrots and things?’ she prompted.

‘Parrots and things?’ said Patty Perkins, sounding confused. He poked his head out of a pile of cotton wool and wood-chips.

‘Number one, then,’ said Haricot Bert, ‘the dog –’

‘Shouldn’t that be number three?’ asked Mrs D innocently.

‘The dog,’ repeated Bert.

‘The dog,’ said Patty.

‘Dogs stupid. You throw stick, dog chase it all the way then come back with stick in mouth. Dead pleased. Look smug. No brains.’

‘Well,’ said Mrs. D, thoughtfully. ‘But I suppose they enjoy doing it?’

Bert rolled his eyes. ‘What the point?’ he wanted to know. ‘Dog might as well sit where he was, take a snooze.’

‘Take a snooze,’ said Patty comfortably. He yawned widely.

‘Anyway,’ said Broccoli Bill, ‘point is, HamLabs™ gone one better than dog. No need dog no more. You want to see FETCHIT®?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Mrs D, doubtfully. ‘Will it take long?’

‘FETCHIT®’ e stand for Fullie En’anced Zingummy pour Chasing ‘urled Itèmes,’ explained Gordon Bleu in a low voice next to Mrs D’s right ear. She jumped, not having seen him creep up on her.

‘Ready, Teddy?’ shouted Bert.

Teddy Parker came wandering out of a pile of old newspapers that he had been patiently tearing to shreds, in preparation for a good snooze.

‘Ready,’ he said. He laid hold of a long black baton, with several LEDs flashing on it. There was a dirty old stick attached to it. Mrs D looked at the dirty stick and felt a real sense of foreboding.

‘Ready, Teddy, go!’ shouted Bert and Bill in unison.

Teddy pressed two buttons on the batons. There was a *flash!* and a *ping!* and the stick flew up into the air, bounced off the ceiling and crashed against the far wall, leaving two muddy marks.

‘Whoo!’ shouted Teddy and he galloped off to the stick, grabbed it in his jaws and brought it back to where the baton lay.

‘Whoo!’ shouted the other hamsters. ‘Ready, Teddy, go!’

Having skilfully re-attached the stick to the device, Teddy repeated the performance. This time the thing caught in the curtains and left a long streak of dirt on them. Almost before it had landed, Teddy scampered off, picked it up and brought it back. Without pausing, he set up the stick again; *flash!* and *ping!* - this time it cracked against the window.

‘OK, OK!’ shouted Mrs D desperately. ‘I’ve seen enough! Stop now, please!’

Teddy looked disappointed. ‘Just one more?’ he said with big appealing eyes. Without waiting for an answer he fired it off again, and then chased it out through the door into the hallway where the stick had come to rest with a discord on the piano. He trotted back proudly with the stick in his teeth.

‘So that FETCHIT®,’ explained Bert. ‘Pretty cool, eh? Better than dog.’

Mrs D made no comment. It seemed to her that they had replaced, not the dog for catching the stick, but the human for throwing it. But best not to say anything, she thought.

‘Skinny human want parrots?’ asked Broccoli Bill, a little obscurely.

‘Skinny human want parrots?’ said Patty Perkins.

‘Do parrots throw anything?’ asked Mrs D cautiously.

‘Parrots no throw,’ scoffed Bill. ‘You know nothing?’

‘No throw, know-nothing,’ said Patty.

‘Parrots will be fine, then,’ said Mrs D.

Broccoli Bill set up a small device in the middle of the room. It had the HamLabs™ logo in plain sight, and more buttons, wires and lights than seemed necessary. ‘This the MACAW®?’

Gordon Bleu had managed to sidle round to Mrs D’s left ear without being noticed. He now breathed into it: ‘Excusez-moi, ma chère madame. MACAW® eez Miniature Appliance pour Copying

Anyzing Wot eez said.'

'Are we all ready?' said Bill. He switched on the device. It began to hum loudly.

'Are we all ready?' answered Patty.

'Are we all ready?' said the MACAW<sup>©</sup> in a tinny voice, a bit like Professor Hawking.

'Are we all ready?' asked Patty.

'Shut up, Patty!' shouted Bill.

'Shut up, Patty!' said MACAW<sup>©</sup>.

'Shut up, Patty?' asked Patty.

'Shut up, Patty?' asked MACAW<sup>©</sup>.

Chittering noisily, Bill flicked the power switch again. There was a loud crackle and then the humming died away. Silence fell.

'Interesting,' said Mrs D with the slightest hint of a question-mark over her statement.

'Work better when stupid Patty not here,' muttered Bill, glaring at Patty.

'Patty not here,' muttered Patty Perkins. He began to groom himself very carefully indeed.

'Anyway,' said Haricot Bert, trying to sound cheerful. 'Parrots not useful any more. Hamsters have MACAW<sup>©</sup>?' He scratched his ears. 'We done dogs, we done parrots. You want to see cats?'

Mrs D looked at her watch. 'I don't think –' she began.

'We got PUSS<sup>©</sup>,' said Bert persuasively.

'Pretty Useless zing wot Sits and Sleeps all ze tam,' murmured Gordon Bleu helpfully.

Teddy snored loudly.

'No, really,' said Mrs D firmly, 'I do have to get on with –'

'Wot Skinny Human want, zaktly, then? Skinny Human interested in gormless gerbils, maybe?' asked Bill scathingly. 'Oh we know: in mean nasty rats?'

'Rats? Rats?' asked Patty, running round fearfully. In his anxiety, he tripped overt the stick, stumbled against the power button for the MACAW<sup>©</sup> and got the stick entangled in all the wires. He ran off with the whole lot, chased enthusiastically by Teddy.

'Or goldfish wot go round and round and round all day?' continued Bill sarcastically.

'Round and round all day,' said MACAW<sup>©</sup>.

'Round and round all day?' said Patty.

'Round and round all day?' said MACAW<sup>©</sup>.

'Round and round all day?' said Patty.

'Round and round all day?' said MACAW<sup>©</sup>.

Mrs D left them to it. She thought a nice quiet stick-insect would be the best pet.

