

“Now,” said Haricot Bert, scuttling back beneath a pile of sawdust and lettuce-leaves which had miraculously appeared from nowhere in the preceding ten minutes, “Now quite safe.” He buried himself rapidly in sawdust and cotton-wool, until nothing showed he was there, beyond a vague movement under the surface. “OK - switch on!”

Riddle Dumble, who was assisting in the Great Experiment, scurried forward and flung himself at the “ON” button; he pressed hard with both his front paws.

Nothing happened.

Riddle looked confused and took to nibbling at the button. Accidentally, his bottom placed itself on a jumble of wires and junction-boxes. All of a sudden, there was a “fizz” and a “crack!”, and a howl from Riddle; then a bright light from the sky swept across the city below. A great curtain of light, which appeared from somewhere in the east, and dazzled all those who looked up from their tasks, moved inexorably across the houses and the parks, sweeping across the birds in the sky and the squirrels in the trees, and temporarily disabling the traffic-lights. Cars and lorries screeched to a halt, their drivers peering up into the sky, shading their eyes. The intense light passed over them majestically, and disappeared westwards. As it vanished, order was restored, and life in the city returned to normal, apart from a number of dazed pigeons and old ladies, who stumbled about looking fearfully at the sky.

There was some rustling in the pile of sawdust. “All safe now?” came an enquiring voice.

Riddle Dumble, whose bottom was slightly singed, peered round. “Who said that?” he asked, suspiciously. “That you, Bert?”

“Course it me, dumbo Dumble!” snorted Bert. “Tell me if it safe. Can cutting-edge experimental HamLabs™ scientist come out from secure location?”

Riddle Dumble looked round short-sightedly. He could see nothing dangerous. “OK to come out!” he confirmed, and fell to cooling his tail, which still smoked gently.

Haricot Bert emerged, one whisker at a time; then one eye; then a pink paw; another eye, blinking furiously. All did, indeed, seem safe, so he clambered out, a smile of smug satisfaction on his face.

“There,” he announced, “That done it! New SuperScanner® now working. What triumph for HamLabs™!”

Just then, a small flying saucer emerged from the air, smoke belching from several orifices. It bounced on the grass beside Riddle Dumble, did two flips and a sideways somersault, then rolled to a halt next to the compost-heap. Almost immediately, the lid was flung wide open, and two worried-looking hamsters sprang out and ran for cover, chattering in panic.

Haricot Bert looked interestedly in the direction of the new arrivals. “That you, Bill?” he enquired, peering vaguely in the direction they had taken. “That you, Patty?”

“Oh,” came a voice from behind the compost-heap, somewhat muffled by - no doubt - the odd piece of decaying carrot. “That you, Bert? You safe?”

Bert answered in the affirmative, and eventually Patty Perkins and Broccoli Bill emerged from their hiding-place.

“Bert,” squeaked Patty excitedly, “We got report immediate-wise to Control Centre! Something awful happen!”

“Dreadful,” muttered Broccoli Bill, poking his nose interestedly at a large piece of cabbage which had rolled off the compost-heap. “Appalling,” he muttered, “Terrifying, horrible...mmmm” He lost himself in enjoyment of the cabbage.

Patty Perkins took up the story for Bill. “We flying through air, on patrol. Suddenly, big flash of light, shock horror, loss of chocolate-drops, almost crash. Only incredible skill from pilot save us from certain squashing.” He mopped his brow. “Phew!” he added.

“Me pilot,” he noted further, in case Bert got the wrong impression.

Bert, in fact was not in the least concerned. “Big flashy light?” he inquired. “Bigger than any seen before in history of hamster-kind, maybe?”

Patty nodded vigorously. “Bigger than that,” he confirmed.

“Oh,” said Bert smugly, modestly examining his pink nails, “Don’t think we need bother Control Centre with that, then?”

Bill, who had pouched the last of the cabbage, looked up sharply. “What you mean?” he demanded. “It was worstest thing ever happen to hamsters. Control Centre got to know!”

“Oh, I think they’re already aware,” mentioned Bert casually. “After all, big light only the latest in series of highly successful experiments by HamLabs™!”

“You made big light, then?” demanded Bill, his fur bristling.

Bert, intent on his nails, did not notice Bill’s wrath. “Oh, yes,” he admitted. “You just saw SuperScanner® in action. Runs on Windows 98, Windows XP and any other kind double-glazing. Need no special cables. If it move, SuperScanner® scan it.”

“Whooosh!” he demonstrated, helpfully, “Zzzish!”

“Then what, big boy?” demanded Bill, advancing upon the Proud Inventor, teeth chattering. Patty Perkins and Riddle Dumble looked on, pouches full, vaguely interested.

“Then we print it on SuperPrinter®,” said Bert, waving his paw vaguely in the direction of the western horizon. “Look, over there!” All four hamsters looked over to where the sun was now setting. It was a glorious technicolour display of reds, oranges and, high up, yellow and white. If you looked carefully, you could see the vague outline of the city etched out in the shapes and colours of the clouds, but in all the wrong colours.

“Oh,” Bert sighed: “Walter Cress dafty - he still not got colour-cartridge to print out blue. Need refill. We need start up SuperScanner® again. Dumble - prepare to scan!”