

## The Bah-Hum Bug

"No, it's no good," said Mum grumpily. "They're still going to come. Might as well not have bothered!" She threw the last canister of spray in the bin with a noise which made Dad jump in fright.

"Don't do that!" he shouted, "You almost gave me a heart-attack. Come on, the lot of you, get out of this kitchen and leave me to get on with it! You spend two hours with that horrible can of spray, making it impossible for me to breathe, and getting artificial snow all over everything and stinking up the place with pine-scent, and then you say it's no good and get all sulky. I'm not putting up with any more of it, you're just a bunch of spoiled children!"

Dad was grumpy. The rest of the family crept quietly backwards out of range.

"We'll just have to get some target-practice in, Mum," said Alexander, "And squash them with brussels-sprouts and Christmas pudding and things. You know I'm good at it - let me get them with the sprouts!"

Mum cuffed her eager son round the back of the head. "Don't be daft! One single brussels-sprout on the wall and what's your dad going to say? Probably think I put you up to it. Talk sense!"

"Well, why don't we put down some bait in the corners and then capture them in jam-jars. Like we did with the wasps which invaded last summer? That worked OK, didn't it?" Amy toyed with a jam-jar - this one was half-full of marmalade. Alexander looked at her pityingly. "Jam-jars? You're nuts, you are. You ever seen one of these bugs? Humungous they are, big as rats and twice as mean. A teeny-weeny jam-jar wouldn't hold them for more than a minute. What do they teach you at that school?"

"More than you, you little squirt - here, stick your nose in this jar..."

Mum only just managed to separate them before a full-scale riot broke out. "Come on, you two, give me a break. I'm supposed to be keeping you quiet while your dad gets on with things in the kitchen. Don't forget we've got your grandmother coming tomorrow."

That did it - the thought of two hours of their grandmother cooled them down like a bucket of ice-cold water. The three sat down heavily in the hallway, brooding. Sometimes Christmas just was no fun at all. Above their heads, from out of the cracks in the ceiling and from the light-fittings, crept large beetly things, red-eyed and dangerous. They made drumming noises with their legs:

"Bah-hum, bah-hum, bah-hum!"

Mum looked up in despair: "Oh no, I told you they'd be back. I told you I shouldn't have bothered with all that spraying? It was just no good at all. Quick, Alexander, pass me that sprig of mistletoe!"

"What? Going to give them a kiss?" asked the boy. He dodged his mum, and passed the mistletoe.

"Here, Amy, you're taller than me now. See if you can knock any of them down. Alexander, make yourself useful and catch any that fall - stick them in this empty box of decorations."

So began an impressive dance for three: Amy prancing around, waving a sprig of mistletoe at the bugs which were now creeping out various cracks and crannies, knocking them off the walls and ceilings; down below, Alexander rushed around with the box and a disused fairy, sweeping the bugs as they fell. Mum, meanwhile, directed operations - "There's one! No, just above that - that's it. Gotcha, you little blighter!"

"Bah-hum, bah-hum, bah-eeh!" as the bugs plunged red-eyed from their precarious perches up above.

Within minutes, Alexander's box contained about twenty of the Bah-Hum Bugs, Amy was bright red in the face, and Mum was laughing madly.

Dad shouted from the kitchen: "What's going on out there! I thought I told you to keep quiet?! Now you've made me burn the beans! And the bread's turned out all wrong - what's my mum going to say tomorrow?" There was a severe bashing of pots and pans and the sound of the oven-door slamming. A strong smell of burning wafted towards them.

The rest of the family hushed. Alexander tip-toed into the living-room clutching his box of bugs. The other two followed him.

"Now what are we going to do with these?" he asked. "Can't let them out again, it'll just set everyone off worse than ever. Oh, why do we bother with Christmas - it just upsets everyone!"

"Shut up, you jerk - now look what you've gone and done!" Amy pointed at the box her brother held in his hands. As he had been speaking and getting fed up with Christmas, the bugs inside had got larger and were trying to force their way out. Alexander held on to the lid grimly, preventing a mass outbreak of bah-hums. Mum stood by with a candle and Amy waved her mistletoe over them like a magic wand. Gradually, they all calmed down, and the bugs seemed to subside.

"Don't moan about Christmas in their hearing, my boy," whispered Mum in Alexander's ear. "It only encourages them. If you have to say anything, try this..."

Mum burst into song:

*"Ding dong merrily on high..."*

There was a roar from the kitchen: "Any more of that noise and I'm leaving home," bawled Dad. **"God, I hate Christmas!"**

"Oh no, that's done it," groaned Amy, her eyes on the box of bugs. Sure enough, at Dad's words, the lid of the box, despite Alexander's best efforts, flew off and over his head, landing on top of the Christmas Tree. A horde of Bah-Hum Bugs swarmed out and over the carpet. "Bah-hum, bah-hum, bah-hum!" they went, like an army on the march. Their little red eyes gleamed eagerly.

Amy, quick-witted, shut the door to prevent them from escaping. Mum and Alexander chased them round the room, quietly. Mum was desperately singing: *"Come Christian Men Re-joi-i-oice..."* and Alexander, having got the hint was droning about *"Now's the Season to be Jolly..."* in a voice that could only have encouraged the bugs even more. But their joint efforts could not drown out the crashings and smashings which came from the kitchen. Dad was bad.

So it was all to no avail. The bugs made relentlessly for the Christmas Tree, which Mum had spent a considerable amount of time decorating. Within the space of a minute, the mandibles of the Bah-Hum Bugs had stripped the tree of all the coloured balls, the tiny white lights, the stars and the wooden drummers and angels. All that was left was a rather dull dark-green tree.

"Oh no, Mum," breathed Amy, unable and unwilling to believe her eyes. "Oh no! What'll we do?"

But Mum was made of sterner stuff. Utter devastation caused by a horde of bugs was not going to get her down. Not now. "Get your recorders out, you two. There's work to be done here."

And for the next half-hour, there was magic in the air as the three of them tootled and sang their way through an entire repertoire of Christmas Carols. When they started, the bugs were rampant. Not satisfied with gorging themselves on everything on the tree - Bah-*Hum!* Bah-*Hum!* - they were gaining strength and already working their way through the sprigs of holly, the brightly-wrapped presents, the Christmas wreath which hung at the window - Bah-*Hum!* Bah-*Hum!* But Mum reached for the Cointreau bottle, and Amy and Alexander played on. As the impromptu concert continued, the bugs began to slow down; their merciless march of destruction became less organised; more and more bugs drifted away from the main body of their fellows, and some began wandering in aimless circles. Two or three curled up. Mum sprinkled the carpet with some of the spices which went into mulled wine. Immediately, all of the bugs shrank visibly.

The concert continued, growing stronger by the minute. Then there was a moment which had seemed impossible barely an hour earlier: from the kitchen came the quite outrageous whisky-fed rumblings of a father in song, a growling rendition of some Carol, which Amy guessed was *"The Holly and the Ivy"*, although Alexander could have sworn it was *"Silent Night"*; Mum thought it sounded more like *"Come All Ye Faithful!"*. The point was, it was undeniably Christmassy. And just then, as if to confirm it, outside the window snow began to fall.

The last of the Bah-Hum Bugs rolled belly-up on the carpet and expired.