

FASHION VICTIMS

When Mrs D. answered the door, she was faced with the usual bizarre group of six small hamsters. Some of them looked familiar, but one in particular, who had fixed her with a beady eye and seemed to be expecting some kind of welcome, was a stranger. A stranger and strange: being a pure shade of azure blue, all over.

“Er - hello,” she said, nervously.

“You no know us then?” demanded the blue hamster.

“Well...” considered Mrs D. slowly, “That one over there looks like Patty ...” She pointed at a rather fluffy brown hamster who certainly looked like Patty Perkins, but who had alternating green and black toenails on each paw and a gold ring through his left ear.

“Me now Gothic Perkins,” acknowledged the hamster previously known as Patty Perkins, before turning his attention more closely to an overhanging shrub beside the front door.

“And I think - but I can’t be sure - you must be Teddy Parker?” went on Mrs D., bending down to look more closely at a dark-grey hamster who had a cluster of rather fetching braided gold threads tied into his fur and

onto his short pink tail. This twitched his whiskers and stood on his hind-legs “Me Teddy Parker - you like hair-extensions?”

“Well, very nice, I’m sure” said Mrs D., doubtfully. “But I’m afraid I don’t know you other three. Are you friends of Haricot Bert and Broccoli Bill?”

“What?!” demanded the blue hamster, outraged, “You no know me? Me Broccoli Bill!”

Mrs D. looked at him severely. “Oh no, young man,” she said, “Broccoli Bill is certainly not a blue hamster. Broccoli Bill is a rather svelte grey and white hamster. Not at all blue. I think not!”

The blue hamster looked round at his ill-assorted companions. He snorted in disgust: “Me said humans no understand fashion. Told you so! Hamster trend-setters, skinny humans out of it!” He turned back to Mrs D. “Me fall in bowl of blue dye in kitchen. You know nothing?”

A penny suddenly dropped. Mrs D. had had a bowl of blue dye sitting in the kitchen last week, and had been surprised to find it overturned on the kitchen floor one afternoon, when the back-door had been left open. She had blamed the cats. But now it seemed...

“Let me look at you more closely,” she said. The blue hamster waddled up to her. Mrs D. peered at him, half-closing her eyes. “Mmm, yes,” she said doubtfully, “I

suppose you ARE Bill. But, you poor thing, can we not do something to get that dye off you?”

“Get dye off?!” squeaked the little hamster, his nose bristling with rage, “Hamsters very trendy now. Blue hamsters cool now! No want lose blue!”

“Oh. I see.” said Mrs D., beginning at last to detect a common thread in the appearance of the six hamsters. “So you fell in the blue dye, Bill. And then your friend here -?” She looked doubtfully at another hamster whose head was dyed red, whose front body was dyed white and plentiful rear portions were dark blue. Suddenly it came to her: “Of course, you must be Gordon Bleu!” The French hamster bowed deeply and twirled his red whiskers - “A votre service, ma chere madame,” he promised.

Mrs D. looked in some dismay at the two remaining hamsters, who were shivering slightly, as if cold. Hardly surprising, since both had rather radical Mohawk haircuts, a thin stripe of fur running down the centre of their heads and along their backs, leaving on either side close-shaved saggy pouches and - well, rather fat - folds of pink skin. “Look, why don’t you all come inside now? I think it’s going to rain, and your friends here seem to be a bit cold.”

Without waiting for a second invitation, the six hamsters tumbled in through the door, the two with the mohawk haircuts leading the way.

Once everyone was in, and some emergency provisions had been made and consumed, Mrs D. quietly asked Broccoli Bill who the two mystery hamsters were.

“Skinny humans know nothing!” he scoffed, rather ungratefully, given the amount of watercress he had put away in the previous two minutes. “That Haricot Bert and Riddle Dumble. Long-lost brothers,” he reminded her.

Shocked, Mrs D. stared at the two rather unhappy hamsters. Certainly, they looked very much alike; and - I suppose - if you imagined that the thin line of fur extended over all the pink skin, it could be Bert and his brother. She was unable to restrain herself: “But what on earth possessed you to shave off your fur like that, you poor boys? Look - you’re freezing cold!”

Haricot Bert nodded mournfully, while Riddle Dumble sneezed once and twice. “Thought was good idea,” confessed Bert. “Very trendy. Like Bill. Cool.”

“Cold not cool,” muttered Riddle, sneezing again.

Mrs D. got up and rummaged in the chest in the hallway, finally unearthing a pair of woollen gloves. “You put these gloves on this instant,” she ordered, “Before you catch pneumonia!” She slipped the gloves

on, one over each of the two hamsters. Gratefully, they snuggled inside and promptly fell asleep.

Mrs D. looked sternly at Broccoli Bill. "What on earth do you think you're up to?" she wanted to know. "You don't look like hamsters, you just look plain daft!"

Bill's blue fur stood slightly on end. "Hamsters no daft," he said argumentatively, "Hamsters trendy. Hamster fashion is new rock roll." He paused. Mrs D. said nothing but waited. "That sort thing," he ended lamely.

"Just look at yourselves," said Mrs D. "Two poor hamsters with hardly any fur, freezing to death. One hamster looking only as if he had fallen in a bowl of blue dye. One hamster looking like a French cake-decoration, one like a fairy on the Christmas tree and the other whose toe-nails could do with a good scrub! You don't look like proper hamsters at all," she scolded. Bill washed his blue whiskers vigorously. His companions suddenly realised that their toes needed a thorough and very particular cleaning.

It was Gordon Bleu who finally spoke first. "Mais madame, eez tres - ow you say - eez tres moderne! Amsterz sont a la mode, n'est-ce pas?"

Taking some encouragement from this, Haricot Bert's muffled voice came from inside his glove: "Hamsters have fashion. Hamsters have photo-shoots."

“Photo-shoots!” exclaimed Mrs D. “What kind of people do you think want to print pictures of six daft hamsters? You’re not thinking of *Hello* magazine, now, are you?”

“Ello will be verr verr fantastique,” murmured Gordon.

“Loads dosh,” agreed Teddy Parker.

“Top Pops,” suggested Gothic Perkins. “Parkinson. Blue Peter. All that stuff.”

“Hamsters now called *S Ham 6*,” announced Broccoli Bill, finding his confidence again. “Ham 6 mean six Hamsters,” he explained gravely. “S mean Sexy,” he added in a low voice.

Mrs D. burst out laughing hysterically, much to the terror of all six sexy hamsters, who retreated rapidly under behind the sofa, gloves and all. “What a bunch of silly hamsters you are,” she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. She rocked with laughter for a few more minutes. “Look,” she said after a while when she had calmed down, “Come out and talk to me - come on...”

Slowly the members of *S Ham 6* emerged from their hiding places, little eyes bulging, ears erect and ready for any sudden noises. Broccoli Bill looked suspiciously at Mrs D. “Humans too noisy,” he said. “Hamsters have nerves.”

“I’m sorry, Bill,” said Mrs D., stroking his over-filled check pouches. “I didn’t mean to laugh at you. But

don't you know that the glossy magazines are only interested in slim models these days. Slim and sporty. And it has to be said that a good-looking hamster is not - well - slim..."

"Hamsters not sporty," agreed Haricot Bert, decisively.

"Hamsters not slim," was Bill's strong opinion. "Slim is skinny," he stated unequivocally. "Humans skinny, no pouches."

"Sporty very tiring," was Gothic Perkin's view.

Riddle Dumble sneezed and fell asleep.

"But perhaps," suggested Mrs D., "Perhaps you want to become slim and sporty? You know, to get the photo-opportunities and so on? A big 20-page spread in Hello - *S Ham 6*® at work and at play, swimming, tennis, that sort of thing. Loads of dosh there," she thought.

There was a long pause while all the hamsters polished their whiskers, looking nervously at each other.

"Of course, it would mean no more chocolate drops, no more broccoli and lots and lots of training," she went on enthusiastically.

Under his red and blue, Gordon Bleu turned quite pale. Broccoli Bill suddenly realised that his rear paws had not been cared for in weeks.

"Starting today," she suggested.

Haricot Bert popped his head out of his glove. “Hamsters is fashion victims,” he announced in anguish. “All Bill’s fault!”

“Not my fault,” argued Broccoli Bill, “Humans left blue dye out. Was accident waiting happen!”

“Daft hamster shouldn’t poke nose in bowl then,” replied Haricot Bert, advancing on Bill with his glove trailing behind him.

Mrs D. thought it was time to intervene. “Boys, boys!” she said. “I think it’s time for a snack, don’t you? Then maybe I can help you get that dye off? What do you say?”

“Hamsters have snacks,” was the general consensus. After that, no one could care, and although Broccoli Bill seemed like a photographic negative of himself when as much as possible of the blue dye had been washed out; and Gordon Bleu seemed to be perpetually blushing; and although Bert and Riddle found it rather awkward to manoeuvre in the gloves in which Mrs D. had fashioned leg-holes, they were at least warm. Patty was instantly less Gothic, and Teddy no longer tripped over his extensions at every corner. A much happier set of hamsters left the house and climbed aboard their saucer with its newly-tinted windows, took off, crashed about blindly in the foliage and then swept up into the sky.

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