

## Chapter 16

*'OK, you win again. I can't take that little creep for one more minute. Take this.'*

*Freddy took the envelope from her, and she tramped miserably out of the room.*

\*\*\*\*\*The envelope had contained a simple invitation.

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*You are invited to an evening of Entente Cordiale*

*at The Mansion*

*7.30 for 8.00pm*

*10th February 2006*

*Black tie and posh Frocks*

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At 7.45 p.m. they gathered outside the gates as they had been invited to do. They had never been to a posh do like this one. They had each interpreted '*Black tie and posh Frocks*' slightly differently.

Freddy was in classic black bow-tie, a white shirt with winged collar, and jet black suit with shiny lapels.

Wilis was dressed the same, except he had taken the term black tie to mean any kind of bow tie. His was yellow.

The two friends shook hands solemnly as they went up to the front door.

Hardy and Chris looked like they had swapped clothes.

Hardy had on a black suit, with vertical white stripes on it, like chalk lines up and down the whole jacket and trousers. He also wore a little black hat on his head. Chris was dressed the same, pinstripe suit and a hat, which seemed to be several sizes too big for him. It perched precariously on his ears. In fact, Chris' suit was much too big for him, the jacket slumping down from his shoulders, and the trousers overhanging his shoes. He moved to the door, and tripped over several centimetres of extra trouser leg. Hardy caught his arm as he fell, and there was a ripping sound. It came from Hardy's armpit, as the tiny jacket which was stretched over his large frame gave way as he stretched to catch Chris. The leaning forward revealed several centimetres of bare flesh between his socks and the base of his trousers.

Clara was in a posh frock.

It was bright red, and stretched from high on her neck right down to the ground. She looked elegant and debonair, and she knew it.

'Wow!' Wil had said, when she first appeared.

Helga had misinterpreted the dress code. Or at least, she wasn't in a posh frock.

'Sorry guys, this is all I have', she said, looking herself up and down.

Her hair was tightly held in a bun at the back of her head. She wore a white blouse buttoned up to the neck, and a black suit, the jacket buttoned three times at the front, the skirt straight and narrow, and ending just above the knee. The same black shoes as before.

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The door opened, and a gentleman, dressed in a similar way to Helga, stood to attention in the doorway.

*'Good Evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to the Entente Cordiale this evening'*, he said officially, *'please proceed to the dining hall'*.

With a grand sweep of his arm, he directed them to the dining room, which was at the end of a corridor. They entered and were greeted by Nicholai and JoJo, one standing at each end of the table. Nicholai was wearing a long black coat, under which he wore a bright white shirt and white bow tie. JoJo was smart and efficient in a green trouser suit.

On the table were three large silver plates, each sealed with an extravagant silver cover.

'Good Evening, my dear friends...', said Nicholai expansively. He sounded like he was about to embark on a speech.

'You have one task left,' interrupted JoJo sharply, 'it starts now. We call it the Bouche Trial. The rules are simple. Each one of you eats one of what is on each plate, then we tell you what you have just eaten. Simple, huh?'

*'Simple...'*, they replied uncertainly.

The boys stood on one side of the table, the girls on the other. A waiter appeared from a doorway, and gradually lifted the lid from the first plate.

On the plate were some thin strips of meat which had apparently been fried in some kind of batter. Hardy went straight for one, picked it up, sniffed it quickly, then popped it in his mouth.

He chewed briefly, then spoke,

*'Nob lad, ginny at rye'*

'Eh? Finish what's in your mouth!', said Wil.

*'Not bad, give it a try'*, repeated Hardy.

They all took one and ate. There were a couple of minutes of silent chewing.

*'Formidable!'*, said JoJo, smiling broadly, 'you have just had your first taste of frog's legs. Now try this'.

They had time only to exchange quick, dark glances about what they had just eaten, before she lifted the second plate with a flourish. Under the cover were six small rocks.

'Rocks...', said Freddy uncertainly.

'No, I know what these are,' said Helga, producing six small forks from her handbag. She picked up a rock, and prised it open with the fork. It fell into two halves. She held the bottom half in two fingers, put it to her mouth and delivered whatever was inside straight down her throat. She gulped extravagantly. She turned a little green.

'You have to do it, it's not so bad', she said, gulping again, 'they're oysters'.

One by one, they followed her lead and managed to down the slippery white flesh. It seemed best not to question it, not to look at it, and not to taste it. Just to down it.

The last oyster gone, the waiter returned to pick up the last dish cover. He waited a few seconds with his hand on the ornate handle. A sly smile played across his lips.

As the lid lifted, there were six loud gasps, and two quick giggles.

Six brown snails lay on the plate. If snails had eyes, it felt like they were staring up at them.

'Let's just do it', said Chris, picking up the shells and handing one to each of them. 'Don't think about it, just suck. One-two-three, GO!'.

They had no option. They each did it. The shells were banged down on the table six times. Six big gulps. Five slight shivers as the contents slid down. A broad smile from Hardy to JoJo. He rubbed his stomach in a satisfied way.

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JoJo leant over to Nikolai and whispered something briefly into his ear. He cocked his head to one side as he listened. He smiled.

'Well done, well done,' said Nikolai carefully, 'you have succeeded in winning round our continental colleague with your commitment and your courage. 'Waiter, please bring on the main course'.

The waiter disappeared briefly, returning moments later bearing a huge silver tray laden with red and yellow boxes, and large cardboard cups with straws sticking out through small holes in the top. He threw the boxes roughly onto the table.

They all laughed, and talked and talked as they enthusiastically attacked the food.

*'Bon Appetit!'* said JoJo as she tucked into her *McFrites*.

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