

*St Bart's
Christmas Supplement,
2015*



Woof! Woof!

or

Virtue rewarded

a furry tail for Christmas

by

David Norris



It takes me and my travelling companion twelve minutes from Paris Montparnasse to our hotel reception desk, point to point. Twelve minutes *precisely*. Why? Because we always take *precisely* the same route. We both know where the streets narrow down to single file; we both know where we've got to do a zigzag to avoid the bins and sex shops. And we both know the traffic lights to a T at our regular crossing points. That's us in a nutshell. *A 2 B ASAP*.

Us? Well, in point of fact, my travelling companion nowadays is a TravelMate suitcase-on-wheels. We've been trundling along together now for nigh-on ten years. It's a holiday partnership. Steady. Dependable. Not a lot of chat. And something to lean on. What more could anyone ask?

But if you do want to analyse our dynamics. Let's say we each pace the other as we go. I'm the one who usually starts out in front, with my TravelMate following. Then TM will often forge ahead and lead the way to our destination. Normal stuff. In Paris, where we are now, our destination is a little hotel we've got to know inside out. We've already taken refuge from the British Christmas here (at the *Hotel Supermodeste**) three times in a row, which speaks for itself.

...And off we go again - nearly there. Just waiting for the pedestrian light to allow us to cross the Boulevard.

Today, at this moment in time - and funnily enough - there's no traffic at all on the road. Nothing in either direction as far as the eye can see and everywhere very quiet. (All I can think is Formula One's on tv - because usually it's on the roads...) Odd, though really... Still, let's be realistic. It's only three o'clock in the afternoon - and how long's a lunch hour in France ?

Just here waiting for the lights...

And then, out of nowhere, there's this young woman standing next to us - big blue eyes, floaty frock and glittery blondish hair - and all for edging her way out in front of us with the aid of her umbrella - or walking stick or cattle-prod or whatever it is, because as far as I can see it's no more than a glitzy fashion accessory she's wielding. For one thing, it's glitzy-gold with showy little silver spangles running up and down it ! This lady is something else - even for Paris ! And we give her a bit of space. You never know...

So it doesn't surprise me one bit she can't wait to cross the road before it's authorised. Because - lo and behold, she looks over at us with a little follow-me smile and an inviting tilt of the head... she waves her gilded whatchamacallit and steps straight off the pavement. With everything still on red !

At which, obviously, I place a restraining hand on her arm. And as you might have known, she *is* rather a lightweight - in more ways than one -

because I can hardly feel anything there to the touch. *Airy-fairy is as airy-fairy does, evidently.*

Anyway, I don't need to leave my hand in place. My point has been made. and Miss Glitter takes a step back, behind us. Still smiling, though, as if in some funny way it's *us...*

So now I stretch both my arms out - out wide, with my thumbs down - to signify *STOP* to *anybody* crossing, self included. Granted there isn't anybody else here but me, TM and Miss G. But without getting too philosophical, red lights are red lights, and in this situation someone has to be there for them...

* * *

...Only thirty seconds now before we get the green and -

- All of a sudden TM shoots out - off the pavement, onto the crossing !
Without any warning - and without any me !

What do you do ? Well, in this day and age Health & Safety kicks in, doesn't it ? The modern-day follow-up to old-school manners. *First secure your own position; then seek to restore the status quo ante.*

So -

Legs apart, I take a firm grip (having lowered my arms from their previous spread position) and pull back hard -

- And the next second TM and myself are side-by-side again - and no visible harm done to either party - except I feel a twinge in the lumbar region.

Still, I'm thinking about TM darting out in the road. That's the first time that's happened. Which is the last thing you ever want to happen, isn't it ? And then of course Einstein came to mind. First Law of Physics. "*No action without a prior **re**-action...*"

Miss Glitter ! With her golden prod !

And she's still standing there smiling sweetly, I can sense it...

So I keep my eyes on the red light opposite - but with a hand firmly on TM... We don't go in for happenings.

Plus I notice that we've missed our lights. Things aren't exactly going to -

"Woof !"

I don't look at her - I wouldn't want to give her the satisfaction. But making out I've got something in my eye so I'm trying to fold one lid over the other, I twist round a few times and see that, yes, she *is* smiling -

still a *little* smile, more of a sort of twinkle - but definitely bigger than it was.

I turn to TM. Which is when my back tells me I have done something. It's all this turning.

"*Something's going on here,*" I say. "*Somebody just woofed.*". Which was mainly for the benefit of Miss Twinkle, in fact. "*And I'd like to know who.*"

"*Woof!*" came the reply.

I turn round (again !) and point blank - though not quite *looking* at her, I say "*Sorry?*"

'*Sorry*' but with an edge. *Not* sorry, in fact. You know, traditional British sarcasm. Never fails.

Not a flicker.

So this time I point at her and say "*Woof!*" back. And because she's probably not English, I do it twice - slowly. Sometimes you have to fight fire with fire.

Point at her... *Woof!*... Point at her... *Woof!*

Which should have done it.

Except she keeps on smiling.

Could she be Chinese ? Don't they smile non-stop ? And that shimmery stick she's holding... is it some sort of aerial... linked up to somewhere...?

And with all this going through my mind - and checking TM's safe on the other side of me, I notice the *green's gone red*. Once again we've missed the lights.

"Woof!"

- Just when I wasn't looking.

- Right, mademoiselle. I don't know how you're doing it but that noise came from your ankles -

"Go away !" I say - still in English - very loud and very distinct, while staring straight ahead. Because if she is throwing her voice - perhaps bouncing it off the pavement, I'm certainly not playing along. If I'm not going to look at *her*, I'm certainly not going to look at her *voice*!

And I repeat slowly and with a slight hint of menace. "Go. A. Way."

She just twinkles. She even *nods* and twinkles. But that's all part of ventriloquism, isn't it ?

"Woof!"

Then - and it's precisely then - I start to *feel* something. A feeling. At shoe-level. At the base of one of my legs. Something warm.

"Woof!"

Miss Airy-Fairy's still smiling - could be laughing, in point of fact. Whatever she's doing she's also rummaging deep down inside her coat pocket...

- Yes. It's definitely something warm around my ankle region... Warm - *and wet?* *And entering my shoe.*

"Woof!"

And up the little lady pops again, head up out of her pocket and holding two chocolate biscuits in her hand - and promptly stoops down again -

"Woof!"

- and when she comes back up, she's only got one. Still smiling, and brandishing a biscuit. Even her biscuit seems to be smiling...

"Woof!"

Well, I might be standing on one leg, but I'm *not* going to look down. For one thing I think my back's gone.

But in any case, if you do look at - well, anybody, or any living thing - it only encourages them. You've only got to look in a goldfish bowl and all the fish are there in no time, lined up and staring back, mouths wide open.

Or just think of those Saturday morning charity collectors. If your eyes ever meet theirs - even for a second - you're as good as bankrupt ! It only takes one of their '*could-be-your-own-mum*' smiles - and before you know it you're emptying your pockets into their tins.

No. Wherever possible avoid eye contact. Ignore things. Buddha was right.

- Anyway, the *GO* light's up again now and we've got to concentrate on priorities...

* * *

...But on the way over, leaving Miss Glitz behind on the pavement, still smiling - I'm leaning on TM and squelching somewhat, but I'm also pondering recent events...

Could it have been an actual dog ?

Or not ?

Because I'm recollecting that nowadays a lot of street beggars are actually being bred as midgets. Miniaturized up to pocket level. They're trained like that from birth, to get more hand-outs. It's all based on eating less. apparently. Read the *Daily Mail*. One minute they're there - not that you see them - and the next minute they've gone and not a trace...

Well, not quite. They might have weed in your shoe, for instance...

... *Who* or *whatever* - did they push TM into the road *on purpose*? If so, why? We hadn't done anything, had we? We don't do anything. We're on holiday for that very reason. But they do say that being harmless is the worst kind of provocation...

Or - to put it simply - did whoever do whatever it was they did do do it because because they just felt like doing it? Like hippies snapping stockbrokers' braces on the steps of the Stock Exchange. Was it nothing more than self-expression?

But there are *still* people like that around - *Spontainers*. Like people who go about smiling at you without any provocation - like the Lady with the Biscuit... Well, we're *Containers*. There's a place for everything and more often than not it's inside. We don't expose ourselves.

Who knows though? There might be more of *them* than us at this time of year. 'Tis the season - so we keep being told...

Or, then again, *was* it a dog ? Not a dummy. A real dog - and not a very intelligent one. Bumping into TM and then mistaking me for a lamp post. Only natural if you believe in science - as you have to, nowadays. Because apparently we're all just creatures in one single life-cycle - from the humblest flu germ with no IQ at all (so they *say*)... all the way up to Stephen Fry ? All equal parts of Mother Nature's plan, brains or no brains. Which is depressing, in some ways. Take my shoe, for example. Was that all planned ? Because that shoe was an animal once. Doesn't Mother Nature think ? Doesn't she care ? I'm surprised so many people are turning Green...

Or, let's face it, were both events - TM being shoved... my shoe... random and meaningless - in other words, Acts of God... ? Well, as it says in the Bible, *who knows*...

Exactly. We don't know anything. Less, in point of fact. At the end of the day, living things are a closed book, aren't they ? Look at David Attenborough.

- Anyway, I do know where *we're* at, as they say now. TM and me. We're rapidly approaching our hotel. Two shakes and we'll be inside. I say *rapidly* because the TravelMate-and-myself ensemble both tend to speed up on the last lap.

- *And yes - as ever - we're off...*

So let's forget dogs (and dames) out of nowhere. '*Stuff happens,*' Einstein said, '*And what shouldn't happen never did.*' Let's leave it at that.

* * *

... By tradition, *I* open the hotel double-doors - heavy plate glass, and something of a strain today - while *TM enters* first.

Well, the December sun might be glaring down outside but here in Reception it's all low-wattage. None of your flashy fluorescence here. Nothing too hard on the senses. Just that familiar hotel smell. Carpets and old radiators. With a hint of cabbage ? The same as usual - if anything a little more so.

...Yes, and there's the same reception desk - lid down - with the same brown flowers by the bell... And the same pigeon-holes are still there, still empty...

And over yon, the low-lit stairs haven't moved either. (*Joke.*) Four flights and fifty-two steps in store for us, I remember... Still, up aloft (I very much hope) our snug little sanctuary is still there -

- I'm up there again already in my thoughts - at the top of the stairs where the carpet runs out... *TM* tilting where the floorboards dip... me

fiddling with that funny old lock that never seems to want to let us in...
Then getting this shoe off...

...Well, back down here on the foredeck, it's not that easy to see, but nobody *looks* like they're behind the desk yet. We'll wait, though. We usually do. We're not the sort to -

"Woof!"

* * *

Not believing something doesn't mean it's not there, does it ? Often it's the opposite. Like now. And -

"Woof!"

- And TM's moving again. Towards the glass doors. At speed.

- With a dog in pursuit, pushing.

"Woof!"

- And Madame Bidette finally making herself visible at Reception.

"Bonjour, madame," I manage to say, trying to keep a stiff upper lip *and* look over my shoulder at TM sliding away. *"We're just arriving..."*

Except by now TM's outside on the pavement and slipping out of sight. It's the dog that's coming in.

- Personally, I don't discriminate between dogs. *Breed... pedigree... short-haired or shaggy... Lassie fan or Rin Tin Tin... ? Do you think they really know... ?* I leave all that to the Crufties. Though I do notice that size-wise this dog - *that* dog - is small. And smug.

"Woof!"

"So you're back, monsieur," says Madame in her usual no-nonsense manner - and in French, of course, which strikes me yet again as the language of the utterly obvious. *"And not on your own this time."*

I ignore that little dig and put my hand in my pocket for my credit card. It's the first thing she asks for, normally.

What I bring out - and proffer, isn't exactly my Barclaycard. Turns out to be a chocolate biscuit...

"Woof!"

Madame takes the biscuit from me. She lifts her desk lid, bends down and gives it to the dog, rubbing its head affectionately. Making it smugger.

They both look up at me.

"No luggage ?" she asks, her eyes narrow.

"Woof! Woof!" ...

Oh yes, stuff happens, Professor. More than once.

** * **

Well, by the time I'm catching up with TM - with me squishing and limping all the way - both of us are quite a way from the hotel. Thanks to a slope, a wind and a slippery winter frost, we'd found ourselves bearing right - even turning a corner into a small shopping street where we'd certainly never ventured hitherto.

But I'm not that far behind, when abruptly TM stops dead ! Outside a travel ware shop ! *Has to stop* - because progress is blocked by a pavement stacked with luggage.

- And quite a display it is ! Reminding me in a flash of the day I first acquired TM. From a stall in Deptford Market SE13. *EVERYTHING ON XMAS OFFER*, so everything overpriced and overlaid with stardust - and the bloke selling it half-dressed as Santa, and smoking a joint...

Still - no, this is different... This display is something else...

- Not that I'm a great luggage connoisseur. I haven't taken much of an interest from that day to this. You might say my trusty TravelMate meets my needs nowadays. *More-or-less.*

Still. Look at this.

... cruise-ready cabin trunks, panelled and varnished... overnight carry-ons in peach-and-plum tartan... zip-easy bum bags in orange and black... leather-look satchels with silver-look buckles... summer-style beach-bags in red, white and blue... feather-light backpacks with day-glow pink pockets... unisex purses in sepia suedette... heavy-duty hold-alls in camouflage khaki... go-safely bag-straps with luminous stripes...

Strange - but as I get closer...

...to the cabin trunks -

...I'm Cap'n Kidd again, a swashbuckling salt... the terror of our flats... I carry a cutlass made by my dad... an NHS eye-patch over my specs... and this is my treasure-chest, full of pieces of After Eights...

...and the beach-bags -

...the wind's blown the top off my cornet... never mind... next morning there's a heat-wave till dinnertime... then a gale again... never mind... our butties are all right... they're in a towel in mum's bag... egg and cress and sand...

...and those hold-alls -

...there's a mysterious big sack at the foot of my bed... a pillow-case tied up with tinsel... I don't know what's in it... except for a kaleidoscope... a microscope... a diary-and-pen with invisible ink... and a bike...

** * **

- Get a grip !

They don't *do* Christmas over here. The French just have another day off. Stay in bed... watch the soccer... maybe have grandma round to make lunch. No festive flimflam here in Paris, thank you very much. No, we're not at home.

Back in Britain it's 5 pm on Christmas Eve now and the Boxing Day sales are kicking off - and all those last-minute shoppers, they'll be turning into early-bird bargain-hunters ... And in the other stores the fagged-out frazzled staff, they'll be switching the lights off about now, and herding the hard-core shopaholics to the exits... just squeezing them through before the shutters drop down -

Business. As usual.

Buy-buy, Britain !

If you *can* escape it...

Even on Eurostar this morning, nearly every suitcase was plastered with Merry Christmas labels. Laugh-along luggage ! *Everything's* a joke now,

though, isn't it ? Like that big rucksack bumping around on the rack over my head, plastered with artificial snow. Which drifted down onto my sandwiches when we picked up speed...

...And a smart overnight case in quality calfskin across the aisle... even that had a strap studded with little neon lights, winking at me when we got inside the Tunnel...

...Then this other passenger, with his family (blushing non-stop) and he's wearing a big red nose and cardboard antlers all the way from St Pancras to the Gare du Nord. *And reading The Times.*

I ask you...

And the guard says - ? Not a word...

* * *

... Well, it may be Crazy Christmas in Blighty. Cash machines crashing. Mayhem in M & S. And merry old musac where'er you walk... But here's it's normal. Just TM and myself, standing here outside a perfectly normal luggage shop in Paris... Just looking... No pressure... No obligation... No hype... Just weighing things up... As per normal...

...because what you see is never what you get ...all old stock ...all made in China ...don't need anything anyway ...we're not here to go shopping ...

So in we go, with me holding a rainbow luggage strap.

No one in the shop.

Except TM and me.

And no one at the till ?

Except, on closer inspection, there is.

And it's someone we all know.

* * *

I open the hotel double-doors and push TM in first - for our second entrance. Personally I'm feeling, well, ever so slightly *unreal*, after... well, after the travel ware shop... going in... and hopping all the way back here dragging TM behind me. A bit like panto...

Still, back safe now. And all quiet front-of-house.

Except Mme Bidette is behind her desk, smiling at us.

"*Need a pee,*" she says, straight off.

Well, that's nice to know, madame. And since when did *you* ever speak English ? Or smile.

But I smile back, tagging on a few words of cheery English banter. "*Jolly good... Same here.*" Which happens to be true. More so now the subject's come up.

"*Need a pee.*" She puts her finger in the air, still smiling.

Well, why doesn't she just pop upstairs and -

"*Not half !*" I'm getting fairly - *you know* - myself. "*Après vous, madame,*" putting *my* finger in the air now and nodding my head, vigorously. You first...

"*Non !*" Now she's *shaking* her head - and *very* vigorously. "*Non ! Non ! Need a pee.*"

And Madame ducks under the desk -

Oh my - she's not - not here - not in Reception -

- And for some reason I'm trying to push TM behind my back. And keep my shoes out of the way...

But the next moment she surfaces, plonking three objects on the desk top.

A piece of paper. A French-English dictionary. And a dog.

"*Woof !*"

- Same "Woof!". Same dog.

And there they stay plonked - a still life awaiting an artist - while I'm spinning round on the spot and grabbing my TravelMate with both hands...

...But when I looked back again, Madame's busy scribbling on the piece of paper. And the dog's busy nibbling the dictionary.

"*Voilà, monsieur.*"

Without letting go, I shuffle us both up to the counter -

"Woof!"

- ignoring the dog -

"Woof!"

Her message is three little words - *Nid de pie...*

"*Oh yes indeed!*" Cracking on I'm not baffled. "*French, isn't it?*"

"Woof!"

Madame points me to the dictionary and kisses the dog.

"Woof!" And the dog starts nibbling her finger instead.

Nid de pie... I repeat it out loud, flicking through the pages...

Nid de pie... Nid de pie... Nid de pie..

- Chanting, leaning on the counter - hard, and crossing my legs now -

Need a pee... Nid de pie... Need a pee... Nid de pie...

...Which means - *is it ? - what ? - can't be !* - it's only the French for - *a crow's nest...*

"*Nid de pie ?*" says Madame. I wish she wouldn't.

"No," I'm saying. "*A crow's nest...*" Anything to change the subject. And the French accent's back...

Short of any other viable options, I keep it up. "*Ah... the crow's nest... Ah yes...*" Trying to look as though it means something - no, *everything* - to me, while also trying, with my legs still crossed, to cross my ankles too.

"*Yes... oh obviously... the crow's nest !*"

Then, for the first time - and disastrously - Madame Bidette decides to agree with me. "*Oui, oui !*" Shrill. Penetrating. "*Oui, oui !*"

Which does it !

I can still hear her calling after me - "*Oui, oui, monsieur !*" - as I'm half untangling myself -

"*Oui, oui !*" - and frantically hopping upstairs... all the way up there - just.

"*Oui, oui !*"

And in between all the *oui*-ing -

"*Woof! Woof!*", from downstairs.

* * *

However much I blink I still can't believe it - the kerfuffle at the crossing... my shoe (which is still squelching - I'm only wearing because I can't untangle the knot)... the travel-ware shop where I dropped everything and scuttled all the way back with TM in tow...

Not to mention the chocolate biscuit.

Or the dog.

Because the immediate priority is to get used to *not* being up in The Crow's Nest - Madame's name (it turns out) for our previous little nest in the clouds. *Now* we're down here below - in a *boudoir*!

- The door to which opens first-time, it has to be said, and after it lets us in, it closes on its own! And stays like that, without rattling. So no

need this visit for the rubber wedge and the small squirt of WD40 I always bring in my toilet bag. Or the ear-plugs...

And once you step inside here, you don't trip over the bed. In here you *see* them first - yes, *them*. Twins, side-by-side and away from the door - and, to be fair, both big enough for a grown-up.

You have a small table with a top (attached) to put your things on - if you've brought them with you. Plus, if you've brought *all* of them with you - a row of shelves. And should one wish to sit down - in addition to the bed(s) and the floor, there's an actual chair at one's disposal - with legs.

For your added convenience, when you're in bed the bedside lights are within reach and fitted with light bulbs. There's another bulb (also working) hanging from the ceiling and thoughtfully fitted inside a shade. So here light is available. And in case back-up is required, your room also boasts a window, with an outside view and/or a curtain...

And so on...

But.

...If there's one thing I miss about our old room, strange as it sounds, it's the damp patch - the one on the wall slanting over my bed. Yes, of

course, there were other patches dotted around, but it was that one in particular I always found so, well, absorbing.

And always when I was trying to get off to sleep - which I hardly ever managed, with all the various noises that came with the room. The non-stop toilet flush that started again just when you were dropping off...

So I'd point my torch at this damp patch and let my imagination go...

Everybody sees faces and I saw my share. Except I was never *that* certain who they were... Mrs Thatcher ? - or Angela Rippon ? ... Winston Churchill ? - or Ena Sharples ? ... Louis Armstrong ? - or has my torch gone out... ?

...Or I'd see food. Lamb chops often. And boiled potatoes. And once or twice, butter beans. I suppose damp favours anything grey and off-white... But then if my patch had been drying out and had a brown rim round it, I'd see a nice rice-pudding - out of the oven -

- And I was straight back home...

No I wasn't. I was trying to get a bit of shut-eye. But all those morsels looked so good and basic and way-back, they'd set my stomach off rumbling... Which only added to the other sound-effects, so I'd have to flick my torch on-and-off again and return to the faces. Though if my

patch was really wet, I'd only see my own face reflected back at me, very dimly. And I'd give up...

...But that was then. This is now. A new room for us in the inn.

Here we are then, the three of us -

TM, myself and -

"*Your little dog*" - as Madame calls it.

"*Woof!*"

* * *

- *Four* now.

Mme B is in situ. She's on the other bed - and opening a bottle. She's probably thirsty, she's just delivered a folding luggage-rest for TM, and for me a big parcel done up in silver paper.

A new room. A new dog. And now presents.

What did we do to deserve this ? Any of it ?

I take it from her - with a helpless smile. I take it - but I don't get it.

Madame points down at the dog. *Our dog*. Who *does* get it - and jumps up, and keeps on jumping up and down, tearing off the silver paper, while

I'm turning the parcel round and round, being vaguely helpful - for reasons unknown...

Eventually, it's a large basket I'm holding. Inside it - unmistakably - a tibia.

Madame Bidette smiles again and nods. At me - then at the tibia.

Is it - ? A quick look down. No, not mine.

So it could be worse, I'm thinking.

Then I'm thinking - *Oh no it couldn't* -

This tibia is rubber - probably - no, certainly -

Ergo it squeaks.

...So I'm facing a decision. A crossroads decision - one that could change my life forever.

To squeeze or not to squeeze. That is the question.

"Woof!"

One squeeze of this bone and it's -

Squeak!

Fetch!

Good boy!

Squeak!

Fetch!

- a forever of walkies... and talkies... of ear-scratching... head-patting...
tummy-rubbing... nose-kissing...

NO!

No, I will NOT squeeze that bone. Never! I will continue to live in this world - my own world - where I squeeze nothing and nothing squeezes me... Where I walk alone... or walk a suitcase... and never a dog! Where I am my own lord and master - independent ... autonomous... squeeze-free!

- Or? Or - well - on the other hand - should I... ?

- And why am I remembering a Nativity Play at Beech Street Infants, an age ago. Pauline Singh was Mary because her dolly looked the most like Jesus. Billy Williams's mum was a dinner lady so he was Joseph even with his arm in plaster. I was a shepherd in my grandad's sheepskin parka.. We couldn't get any oxen or camels - we were too inner city - so we

brought in all our hamsters, rabbits, cats and dogs from home. Except for me. I couldn't, because our budgie swore...

"Woof!"

...Our teacher said God gave us pets to practise being nice...

"Woof!"

Just one squeeze then... ? ...Just this once... ?

- And then, in the midst of my inner turmoil, there comes a loud knock on the door. And I drop the bone.

"Woof!"

Our little dog picks it up -

Squeak!

And gives it back to me.

"Woof!"

Another knock.

And *pop!* goes Madame B on the bed.

* * *

A blonde, star-spangled fairy stands at the door. Smiling.

As she did at the crossing.

Wearing a swimming costume - a one-piece - made of glitter-bright sequins, with matching high-heels. From her shoulder a broad sash of tiny on-off lights, flashing in alternating red, white and blue. In one hand she's holding aloft her gold-and-silver thingamajig -

As she did in the shop.

- In the other hand a rainbow luggage strap.

"*You forget.*" She's twinkling all over now. On/off - but mainly on.

How - ?

"*I see her label...*" She's twinkling in TM's direction - and TM, reclining on that new luggage-rest, seems ever-so-slightly to be rocking in hers. Which she acknowledges with a wave of her whatchamacallit -

"*Woof!*"

"*Voilà !*" says Madame B - and *Hey Presto !* I'm holding a tray of drinks - two tall glasses, a silver bowl and a bottle of frothing champagne. And I can't see Madame B any more...

Only a soft hand waving her magic whatsit...

Only this iridescent, deliquescent, mythical, mothical queen of sheen... her white-blond hair curled into platinum waves scintillating under the electric light... moist red lacquered lips and dewy blue glistening eyes...

What's happening to me ?

- Oh you're Baby Doll... you're Barbie Doll... you're Brigitte Bardot... You're Angelina... Sabrina... Marilyn Monroe... You're Madonna... Miss Sweden... Pussy Galore... You're Goldie... and Debbie... and Farrah - and more... You're sweeter than Sweetie Pie... You're divinely nutritious... You're the apple of my eye... You're Golden Delicious...

And I'm still blinking and shaking my head and asking myself how the trick works, when *Abracadabra !* the Fairy shimmers up to me, takes a glass off my tray, helps herself to a splash of champagne - and sparkles, straight at me..

"*So... you are the client solitaire, monsieur ?*"

I can't speak... I don't know what to say... So I decide on French. "No... I - "

Am I alone ? I can't think...

"Woof!"

"I ... a dog."

"Oh," she says, widening her eyes and upping the scintillation. "I ... Véronique." And she edges closer.

"Very neek," I mumble, trying to say *very nice* while flashing her a smile *un peu* personal at the same time. I probably needed my torch.

- Or radar. Because as Véronique is edging forwards (she's French), I'm moving backwards (I'm British). She's French.

Now we're so close I'm almost resting my tray on her... chest area, and -

- Either it's a stray bubble from Véronique's champagne catching me in the eye - or me stepping back without looking - or else it's being suddenly nipped on the ankle -

"Woof!"

And then my back folds up -

- and I feel myself falling...

...and clutching anything to save myself...

"*Voilà!*" Must be Madame B.

"*Merry Christmas!*" Can't be TM! Can it?

I can hear laughing - though I can't see anything. Or breathe...

... All I do know is I'm lying down, and I'm underneath something-
something *moving*... I don't know anything else...

For instance -

What's licking my ear - ?

And whispering "*Woof! Woof!*" into it - ?

"*It is Véronique,*" something murmurs. "*On bed together.*"

And I instantly roll off. Onto the floor.

"*But it's only a single,*" I hear myself say.

And then...

And then - *Oh joy! Oh bliss! Oh rapture!*

Oh virtue rewarded!

I feel my shoelaces being undone.

"Woof! Woof!"

* * * * *