

THE SIREN

The trouble with a story like this is that I simply can't use it. If I tried my editor would boot me straight out of his nasty little cigar-stinking office.

You might think I'm speaking metaphorically here, but I'm reporting this accurately. He would literally kick me, right up the back of my bottle green corduroys. Or worse, up the front.

I'm the lowest of the low at the Ripton Bugle; a Cub Reporter - although I prefer to think of myself as more of a Venture Scout - I go where others fear, or simply can't be bothered, to tread. And last Wednesday morning, the local Magistrate's Court beat was just such an assignment.

There was but one case on the list: non-compliance with a noise abatement notice, contrary to section 80 subsection 4 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. And I was there with my lined pad and stubby little HB pencil to report it.

Frankly, Mrs Pond's corpulent one-eyed, duck-murdering yobbo of a cat is worthy of more column inches - and usually gets them too.

'All rise.' George Grindle, the cadaverous Justices' Clerk issued the instruction as a kind of veiled threat. He peered around the room like one of Mervyn Peak's sinister illustrations, daring anyone to defy him. Margaret Tilley strode in briskly followed by the shuffling figure of Ralph Ringrose. They now took their seats beneath the ancient device of Lion and Unicorn accompanied by the full majesty of the law. Actually, to be honest Ralph Ringrose seemed a bit seedy for a JP - but I'm reliably informed that he may have spent a little too much of the previous evening beneath the device of the Crown and Anchor. He compressed his temples between thumb and forefinger, looking as though he might spew at any moment. I held my pencil at the ready. But sadly no such

luck. Although from my privileged position in the press box I did manage to hear a sharply whispered exchange: 'For God's sake Ralph, you reek of stale alcohol.'

'And you reek of self-righteousness old love.'

Grindle now handed up a sheaf of official papers which Tilley merely shuffled and Ringrose pretended to read. I took the opportunity to make a quick pencil sketch of the defendant.

Melvin Hubbard, a man in his late seventies stood ramrod straight in the witness box, eyes fixed firmly ahead, arms clamped to the seams of his brown suit trousers; almost certainly an old soldier. He sported a carefully clipped pencil moustache while his luxuriantly kinky iron-grey hair swirled across the crown of his head like a half-melted ice-cream cone.

I examined my sketch; a doughnut with two currants and a couple of chocolate swirls. Yeah, well...I never said I was any good at drawing.

But I'm good at following stuff and writing it down, so...

At this point Grindle kicked off the proceedings by addressing Hubbard: 'Melvin Hubbard, you have knowingly ignored a legally constituted noise abatement notice...'

And so on. You get the point.

Melvin Hubbard replied, 'Yes I did,'

Ringrose breathed a sigh of relief.

'I admit my guilt,' Hubbard continued in his old-soldier kind of way while I scribbled away in my ace young reporter kind of way.

You could tell that Ringrose was keen to wrap this whole thing up as fast as possible and get off for a hair-of-the-dog, or werewolf, or whatever it was that bit him the

night before. But I was hoping that this old soldier would get his day in court; I was eager to hear more.

Grindle continued, 'Mr Hubbard, you have on sundry occasions ignored a non-compliance with a noise abatement notice, contrary to section 80 subsection 4 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990?

Hubbard agreed with a clear and dignified, 'Yes sir. Guilty sir.'

And that's where the story should have ended. And so it would have done for most reporters.

Except.

I'm the investigative journo from the Ripton Bugle, in the bottle green cords - the one who stays and sees things through to the bitter end. So I sat tight.

And that's when Hubbard made his request, still staring straight ahead.

'Permission to address the court in mitigation, sah?'

I couldn't have been more pleased. I could smell a story here.

A panicked looking Grindle scuttled up to the bench where there was a hurried, whispered conversation between the clerk and his two magistrates.

Ringrose shook his head irritably before gazing over at me. He briefly acknowledged my presence before conceding. 'Very well,' he sighed.

Now there's a man who understands the power of the press.

The stern Margaret Tilley put on her pince-nez and gave Hubbard the kind of stare that would make lesser mortals quail. She indicated a dark green contraption on a tripod to the left of the bench. It appeared to be a fan of some sort with a large crank.

'Mr Hubbard, is this your device?'

‘It is, your ladyship.’

Margaret Tilley treated him to a wintry smile. ‘Ma’am or Mrs Tilley is quite sufficient.’

‘Very good Ma’am.’ Hubbard drew his chin further into his chest. ‘That there is a 1939 H.F.Muller Air raid siren, Ma’am. Best there is. Not many of ‘em left, neither.’

Ringrose grunted, with amusement perhaps or simply exasperation. ‘And that siren is the...ah...offending item?’

‘It is, sah.’

‘If you’d be so kind Mr Hubbard, perhaps you could explain to this court why you consider it necessary to set off a World War Two air raid siren on a regular basis?’

Hubbard paused for a fraction of a second, while his eyes scanned the court. ‘On account of my wife, sah.’

Ringrose clutched his temples once again.

‘Your wife?’ repeated Margaret Tilley gently.

‘My wife.’

‘Would you care to elaborate?’ Tilley asked.

‘No, Ma’am, I would not.’ At this, Hubbard gazed up at the heraldic device above the bench. ‘You’ll have to speak to my wife.’

Margaret Tilley was clearly taken aback and a murmur began to ripple around the courtroom.

Grindle approached the bench and there was another brief whispered conversation before the clerk marched purposefully back into the body of the courtroom, gown billowing behind him like a small black cloud.

I watched transfixed as Grindle led a wizened, bird-like woman into the witness box.

Like her husband she also possessed a trim pencil moustache but unlike Melvin Hubbard her hair was thin and lank and she wore a kind of housecoat with pink roses on it. I felt for her up there, her frail hands twisting her lace hanky into a nervous knot.

‘Are you Mrs Ena Hubbard?’ Margaret Tilley asked with some sympathy.

The woman nodded slowly. I remember thinking that she was about to break down, she looked so forlorn up there.

‘Kindly answer the question, are you are you not Ena Hubbard?’ bellowed Ralph Ringrose. It was clear that the JP had lost all patience and needed aspirin and coffee badly.

Ena Hubbard raised her eyes. I could see now that I’d been mistaken about her. There was a core of steel inside this woman. No, not steel, titanium. She gazed back at the magistrates, hands on hips, eyes blazing fury. ‘Well, who else would I be?’

I’d never heard anything like it and frankly, I hope I never will again.

The shock of that voice coming from such a tiny source – like a gigantic vulture scraping its talons across a blackboard. I had to force myself not to duck.

And now the woman wouldn’t shut up.

It was as though they’d accidentally tripped some kind of switch and sent Ena Hubbard off into a spin of self-righteous fury.

‘...all I ask is that he put up a couple of shelves, but no he’s too busy with his pals at the Rotary...’

She was unstoppable. Like a thousand chickens being strangled one after another. I'm not joking, I'm prepared to swear that she didn't take a breath for at least six minutes. '...so I says, Melvin, Melvin Hubbard you are not going out until...'

Ringrose slumped, holding his head in his hands. The severe and implacable Margaret Tilley sat catatonic as jelly and appeared to have lost the will to live.

Grindle did his best, poor man, but eventually even he had to admit defeat and ended up cowering behind the bench with his gown over his head. It was lucky I had the presence of mind to get to the air-raid siren when I did - nothing else would have blocked out that horrific unearthly screech.

I can still see Melvin Hubbard standing there in the dock, straight as an arrow, a small half-smile on his face as I turned the crank faster and faster. Mitigation, I think would be the technical term.

End.