

Julius FALCONER

*Death by Aloe-Seed*: extract from Chapter 4

Jane and I were just taking our ease in the late afternoon when there was a visitor at the vicarage, one Joseph Huntriss, with whom I had slight acquaintance. He was an excise officer: an insignificant man, physically, who made up for his lack of stature and noticeable exterior by a somewhat hectoring and forceful manner. On the other hand, he cultivated the style of beard known, I believe, as friendly mutton-chops, with which he hoped, I imagined, to attract people's attention. Be that as it may, he had called to share a thought with me.

'Vicar,' he said after preliminary courtesies, 'I was at the inn last night when you caused your riot.'

'Yes, well,' I countered modestly.

'First I knew of its being you conducting the inquiry into Mr Paver's loss.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, I thought it'd be the commissioner of the peace. You know, one of the proper authorities, as you might say.'

'So you weren't in church on Sunday?'

'Er, no. No, I wasn't. But I think I might have something you might find useful.'

'Ah.'

'Yes, you see, I couldn't figure out how the seeds were taken. I know that little alley-way. I was talking to the Wainwrights about the business, and they told me that the Pavers' garden-gate was locked and their own garden showed no sign of footprints. The aloe-plant was too far from the vennel at the bottom of the gardens to make the theft possible from that direction, so how did the thief do it?' He stopped to create an expectant pause.

'Well,' I commented cautiously, as I felt I was being called on to respond, 'I'd been pondering the same difficulty myself, and I must say I haven't thought of a convincing solution.' No point in pretending to be cleverer than I was: as Solomon so wisely puts it, 'When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.'

'Stilts, your reverence.' He leant back in his chair and looked smug. 'They don't leave footprints, you see, and, if the points are thin enough - metal spikes, for instance - they hardly leave any mark in the ground at all; nothing you'd notice.'

'Yes,' I told him, 'you could have something there. Smart thinking, Mr Huntriss. So how do you see it working?' I wished to encourage him for having come to me with information, however doubtful its value might turn out to be.

'Easy. I'm not talking about circus stilts eighteen feet high, but poles tall enough to raise the walker above the ground. Of course, if he was clever enough, he could've used stilts tall enough to take him as high as the aloe flower-stem, but

your balance has got to be good for that, hasn't it? And it'd probably take quite a bit of practice. Furthermore, the taller the stilts, the fewer steps he'd have to take. But short stilts worn to avoid footprints would've done the job, wouldn't they?' Wishing to humour him, I asked a further question, knowing the probable answer already.

'If he was only a foot off the ground, say, how did he manage to steal the flowers?'

'I think he must have used a pair of shears to which he'd tied long handles. Then he could have snipped the stem off at fifteen feet and caught it as it fell.'

'Yes, yes, I see that. That's good thinking. So let me ask you further, Mr Huntriss, whether you have any idea who might be inventive enough to think that little scheme through.'

'Oh, no, vicar, that's your department. You know the people round here better than I do. I'd just been puzzling my way through one part of the problem.' The man eventually took his leave, and I confess I was grateful to him for shedding light in one corner of the aloe-seed mystery - even though he was an excise-man.