



SAGA – behind the scenes

Long Dog Samplers ©

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THE BATTENBURG CAKE

This is the tale of the real origin of my favorite cake – the Battenburg. It's a popular misconception that the Battenburg was created in 1884 in honor of the marriage of Queen Victoria's granddaughter, Princess Victoria of Hesse, to prince Louis of Battenburg. It's a plausible tale of alternating blocks of pink and yellow cake wrapped in marzipan, which grits the teeth but delights the tastebuds, in resemblance of the groom's ancient family crest. All very believable but incorrect because here at Castle Long Dog we know different.

Cast your eyes, if you would please, high up to the top left-hand arch of SAGA where you will see a beautiful young cardinal bird perched on a tree top and a very regal bat flying out above the tower of an ancient country church. This unlikely pair were deeply in love and decided, against the wishes of both their families, to fly off and become secretly wed.

And that's just what they did in 1864, twenty years earlier than the Battenburg royals. There was no fuss, no flowers decorating the pews, no throngs of guests or peals of bells as they didn't wish to attract the attention of the paparazzi and Hello Magazine. So, it was just the happy couple and Parson Turkey who lives on the hill, who were present. That's him partying on the carousel in the bottom row of arches after the ceremony. He was the same guy who performed the nuptials for the owl and the pussycat, he'll marry anyone if the price is right.

Little Princess Cardinal was an incorrigible romantic and just happened to be a good cook too, so she created a special cake to eat after the wedding instead of the mince and slices of quince that pussy and owl went for. And she called her culinary creation their "Bat & Bird Cake". So now you know the truth. Twenty years later that other royal couple, the Battenburgs, gave the name a tweak and claimed ownership.

Now all that remains is for me to tell you the proper way to eat a Battenburg which I learned at my father's knee. Place a slice of cake onto a dainty bone china side plate, take a knife and make two diagonal cuts – first from top left to bottom right and then top right to bottom left. This creates four dainty bite-sized triangles each with a marzipan edge and a tiny triangle of pink and yellow cake.

Next take a pastry fork and pop one in your mouth with your pinky finger crooked. So much more genteel than shoving the whole thing in your cakehole all in one go – la Quill!

And if you've ever wondered where that well known expression "the parson's nose" comes from, just take a look at The Reverend Turkey and draw your own conclusions.

THE MONARCH OF THE GLEN

Storytime today finds us abseiling four rows down from the top on the far left-hand side of SAGA. It's only a half arch really but it isn't half a nice little tale.

The big guy with the antlers is Landseer the Stag who is full of his own importance and has assumed the title "Monarch of the Glen" even though technically he doesn't qualify as a Monarch because he should have at least eight points each side on his rack. But are you going to argue with him? He's known for driving home his "point" and Gillespie the old ghillie still has flashbacks about his encounter.

In the distance on the brae is one of his Majesty's offspring, young Buck Rogers, racing with Lacklan the deerhound pup but for how long they'll continue to play nicely is anyone's guess.

The raven in the magician's hat taking liberties atop Landseer's antlers is Beithir. An enigmatic name which conjures up visions of ancient Celtic fire festivals in woodland clearings or a famous Viking raid. But if I tell you he's a distant cousin of Quill it will come as no surprise to learn that Beithir Fire is Scotland's strongest beer and weighs in at 75% proof thanks to the judicious addition of a slug of mountain dew.

Which just leaves wee Jockey McCockey, a Machiavellian Scottie dog, a true ankle biter and the real power behind the throne. Jockey by name and jockeying's his game, he'll stop at nothing to gain mastery of any profitable situation.

The scene is set, you've met all the characters so it's time for a very short story. It's Thursday afternoon just as the schools are coming out and the whole gang are straining their ears for the unmistakable chimes of Mr McWhippy's ice cream van playing Flower of Scotland at full volume bringing their usual order of – double haggis ice cream x 5 with porridge oats sprinkles, butterscotch sauce and a flake. Bon appetite lads.

THE HANDFASTING

Handfasting is an ancient Celtic ceremony in which the hands of a couple entering into marriage are tied together to symbolize the binding of two lives and up until 1745 it was still a legal act in England.

All very well and good unless you happen to be a giraffe because they don't have hands. But they're not a creature to allow a physical discrepancy to stand in the way of true love so they invented their own form of nuptials called "neckfasting", or wedlock.

The bride and groom giraffe stand neck to neck while they take their vows and if you glance down at their tails you'll see that each one is carrying the key to their heart. Presiding over everything, to make sure all is done correctly, is the "celebrant", usually a symbolically caged bird to remind the couple of the confines they are entering. In this case it's not "the ties that bind" but the "locks without shackles" which are impossible to cut off.

The eagle eyed amongst you will have no doubt spotted the ants and they're not just put there to fill in the gaps, there's a reason for their presence. Giraffe "horns" called "ossicones" are made of hardened cartilage covered in skin and ants like to climb giraffes for sport to see who can "reach the ossi" before they get shaken off.

The leveret hares are full of the joys of spring and it would have been churlish to throw them out of the neckfasting because they symbolize fertility and used to be a gift between lovers. Come on now, who hasn't received the occasional "bunny in a box" when they were footloose and fancy free?

THE ELEVATED ELEPHANTS

Maisie the Elephant packed her trunk
And joined the SAGA Circus
She met another heffilump there
And this is their first performance.

Maisie the Elephant had always been a bit unpredictable so no one in the herd was in the least bit surprised when she suddenly announced that she was off to join Circus SAGA. Maisie loved the life from the word go. The colourful costumes, the camaraderie, the noise, the roar of the greasepaint and the smell of the crowd – all of it!

She hadn't been with Circus SAGA very long before the Ring Master suggested that she teamed up with Ethel, another young African elephant, to form a double act. After much discussion they decided upon tightrope walking as they knew this would thrill the audience because it had never been attempted before by two Loxodonta. They were going to become world famous funambulists and would follow in the wobbly footsteps of Charles Blondin, Karl Wallenda, Maria Spelzerini who walked with her feet in baskets and Bird Millman of Barnum & Bailey Fame.

Weeks and months of arduous training followed coupled with dietary restrictions and a demand for total focus until opening night finally arrived. A drum rolled, the crowd fell silent, and a single spotlight picked out the two young performers on the wire high up in the big top.

They curtsied to each other (as rehearsed), bent down on one knee (as rehearsed), twitched their tails (as rehearsed) and approached each other 40 feet above the ring (not rehearsed) and it was then, at that crucial moment, that the sickening realization suddenly dawned upon them both – elephants can't reverse.

Oh dear, oh dearie me. Bring on the clowns and send for the fire brigade with their big ladder
...

THE CHARITY WALK

Even hairy, disreputable lurchers can have a social conscience and Spliff, the deerhound/greyhound cross, has decided to walk the Norfolk Coastal Path to raise funds for his favorite charity who saved his dam Flame from a life of misery – Norfolk Greyhound Rescue.

Because Spliff's thinking of others and not himself, which is commendable, he's been given an extra window to help support him and his cause.

Spliff's route runs for 84 miles along the east coast of England from sunny Hunstanton to Hopton-on-Sea passing seaside towns and villages, tidal meadows, windswept sandy beaches, pine woodlands, the occasional windmill or lighthouse and plenty of pubs for the odd bite to eat or to lay your head for the night.

Happy landings Spliff, we're all very proud of you.

DR HARNSER'S AIR ACADEMY

Every year the young pupils in Year 5 of Dr Harnser's Air Academy were required, as part of the curriculum, to undertake a long-distance migratory flight across water, under strict supervision, to test their stamina, wing feather development, navigational skills, and readiness to fledge.

This year their destination was the beautiful city of Arras in Northern France with its arcaded Flemish style baroque facades and towering Beffroi. Before the long trip home all the classmates gathered on the rooftops in the main square with their professor to have a group cross-stitch taken.

George, the Head Boy, is seen here presenting his tutor, Professor Beak, with an oak branch for use as nesting material to commemorate the occasion. Smile please.

APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEPTIVE

Ivy the short-sighted octopus has led a very sheltered life. She spends most of her time just hanging out in her den which can only be entered through a small crevice in some rocks. She likes watching daytime television, knitting with eight needles, and tending her small garden of corals. But one day, having watched a program about travel broadening the mind and bringing new experiences, she decided to give it a go and swam off along the coast in search of adventure.

Ivy travelled far and wide gaining in knowledge and maturity as she went but when hitherto unknown feelings of physical attraction and emotion finally struck this inexperienced young female with three hearts, she fell hook line and sinker, hopelessly, helplessly in love with the object of her desire. Were this sampler in colour you'd see that she has even turned a deep pink as her species so often do and even the texture of her skin has changed – she's got goosebumps.

Being very myopic and a little vane too, Ivy refuses to wear spectacles so she thinks her love is a handsome young kraken, one of the fabled creatures from Old Norse legend which live off the coast of Norway. And she's even started showering her love with gifts of fishes as some female octopods feel the urge to do as part of their courtship rituals.

Poor little Ivy, she's in for a nasty shock when she tries to give her "kraken" a kiss and finally discovers that he's really Ula Class Submarine 2027 of the Norwegian Navy out on exercises around the Skagerrak strait.

The guy in the little sailing boat has hoisted more sail and is trying to get out of the way as fast as possible as he doesn't want to get involved and the long-eared owl, who's just been taking a rest on the conning tower having been blown off his migratory course during a storm, is of much the same mind. He doesn't give two hoots about the bizarre infatuation unfolding beneath his feet.

Maybe love will find a way but in Ivy's case it's doubtful. Time to go home little lady and get on with your knitting.

CHAIR YOGA

Angelina Byrd runs the SAGA chair yoga classes. She firmly believes that, with regular attendance, they can help to improve flexibility just like any other form of the discipline. But, as the name implies, it's performed while seated thus reducing joint strain and stress. It's particularly beneficial for seniors or critters that are recovering from sickness and injury.

The sedentary poses differ slightly from mainstream yoga in that cat/cow becomes lazy cow, eagle arms become roosting raptor and downward dog becomes rather risky unless you're well insured and game for a laugh.

Angelina opens her studio doors to anyone who wants to come along and join in the fun be they creatures great or small and over the years she's helped many a little chick-a-birdie with balance problems, crabs with stiff joints, an incontinent sloth who required two chairs, penguins with bad backs and even a racehorse with a torn tendon. She had to have a chair specially made for him.

Then, one fateful day when the circus was in town, the king of the jungle came strolling in as bold as brass, gave a mighty roar to announce his presence, and everyone scattered for fear of ending up in the "dead prey pose". But the stalwart Miss Byrd didn't turn a feather, she used to migrate to Africa each winter when she was younger and was well versed in the ways of the big cats. She simply bid him welcome and carried on as if nothing had happened. And within minutes the feisty feline had become so relaxed that he fell asleep in "purring pussy pose". Bravo Angelina, you're one brave Byrd.

A TALE OF TWO HIVES

As any experienced apiarist will tell you, if you can understand what they're saying under all those layers of protective clothing, is that two queen bees in the same hive never ends well, often in a fight to the death, and this is precisely what's happened in the SAGA bee colony. A second queen has emerged but this one is a bit savvy and has had the good sense to strike out on her own before all hell lets loose.

So, what you see here is Her Bee Highness Ethel doing a spot of high speed hive hunting. Naturally she made a bee line for the apiary agents in town where they have a huge portfolio of properties to suit all tastes and budgets with immediate delivery from stock guaranteed.

Instantly Queen Ethel ruled out the Langstroth hive because it looked too modern and ugly. She didn't want to set up her colony in something modular and soleless but after much buzzing about she managed to narrow her selection down to just two. A modified Warre loosely modelled on the original design of Abbe Emilie Warre, a French monk; and an artisan skep with crenelations, hand woven in straw and bundles of dried grass by "skeppers", a term which derives from the Middle English word for a basket maker.

Which one will Queen Ethel go for? The smart money is on the skep because, as everyone knows, the inside is polished with lemon balm and other bee friendly herbs grown nearby, to keep the bees happy. The Warre just smells of sawdust, creosote, and a slight hint of Stingo when it warms up, not half such an attractive proposition and nearly double the price too.

THE OWNER/OCCUPIER

When I was a child back in the days when, in London at least, we used to have three postal deliveries a day, there was always something popping through our letter boxes to punctuate our daily round. Bills, bank statements, birthday cards, letters from pen friends on air mail paper with exotic stamps, invitations – the list was endless.

There were also the inevitable mail shots, notices of local jumble sales or charity events coupled with the downright “junk”. But there was a third, rather more sinister genre of envelope which dropped on the mat and, as a child, these missives disturbed me greatly.

They were addressed “To Whom it may concern”, “The Resident” and, most terrifying of all, “The Owner/Occupier”. I once asked who all these brown envelopes were meant for and my big sister, who didn’t always have my best interests at heart, told me they’d been misdirected and were intended for the rather odd man who lived all alone in one of the big old Victorian houses further down the road. He used to stand at his front door just looking out for hours on end, motionless and mute. He was probably more to be pitied than feared but to me he was the bogeyman and to be avoided at all costs so the thought of his mail entering our house simply served to fan the flames of my angst and, to me armed with this knowledge, the miasma of despair that hung over his house grew thicker and even more pervasive.

So, there you have it, the extreme left-hand arch on the fourth row up from the bottom is the realm of the sinister “Owner/Occupier”, the stuff that nightmares are made of. Not all SAGA stories are necessarily pleasant ones.

THE SPECKLED HENS

In the Theory of Empirical Knowledge, it states that “The problem of the speckled hen is whether a single immediate observation of a speckled hen provides a certain knowledge of the number of speckles observed.” But if that’s all a bit too deep a proposition to ponder over your first cup of char, or joe, or Stingo, then let’s approach the speckled hen from a literary angle with a George Eliot slant:

“Contented speckled hens, industriously scratching for the rarely found corn, may sometimes do more for a sick heart than a grove of nightingales; there is something irresistibly calming in the unsentimental cheeriness of top knotted pullets.”

Therefore, fear not and take solace from the fact that Doris and Dorcas, the humble spotted hens of SAGA, are there simply to bestow the peace and tranquility that only a bucolic scene can impart. So, breathe, chill, relax and go with the chooks

THE ZEBRA CROSSING

Zebra Crossings were first introduced in the UK in 1951 to make crossing the road safer for everyone following the increasing volume of traffic in circulation year on year since World War II. They comprise a series of black and white stripes painted on the tarmac which were visible to motorists from a distance allowing them ample time to reduce speed and making the pedestrians walking across the street more visible against such a background. These crossings became an iconic part of pop culture thanks to the cover of The Beatles “Abbey Road” album.

Four years later The Guinness Book of Records was first published on an annual basis covering all types of records about our planet and its inhabitants. It is now famous worldwide and has been translated into more than forty languages.

More than half a century or so later, a motley crew of Long Dog first year critters studying at SAGA University decided to make an attempt at the record for the most people/animals on a “zebra” currently held by John, Paul, George and Ringo although the student’s interpretation differs slightly from the original because they will be “riding” a zebra as opposed to “crossing” one.

These are our aspiring record breakers and the subjects they’re studying, in no particular order:

Stripey, the zebra – zoology (animals)

Rufus, the squirrel – dendrology (trees)

Mary, the mouse – mycology (fungi)

Bonzo, the dog – osteology (bones)

Cleo, the cat – Egyptology (ancient Egypt)

Dennis, the monkey – ethology (animal behaviour)

Tiny, the whale – oceanography (the seas)

Leather, the bat – astronomy (celestial objects)

Notion, the figment – nothingology (zilch), he’s just come along for the ride and to boost the numbers.

Good luck guys, nine of you should do it!!

THE PELICAN

Maclaren the pelican spends most of his life in the Danube Delta region of Europe overseeing his very successful fish farm. He concentrates mainly on the breeding and conservation of Beluga sturgeon, and he also has a processing plant where he produces the finest quality no-kill caviar from the roe of the female fishes which he exports all over the world to five star hotels and Michelin restaurants.

Old Maclaren loves his job, what pelican wouldn't, but every year he yearns for something more. He hankers after the calm, solitude, and big skies of the Norfolk Broads so, in late September when all the holiday makers have gone home, Maclaren and his secretary bird Sonja throw a few bits and bobs in his bill and head off for England and the beautiful marshes of East Anglia. A remarkable bird is the pelican because his beak holds more than his belly can!

Maclaren and his bird are both creatures of habit and always stay at Cley Windmill which dates back to the early 18th century and is a well-known local landmark surrounded by reeds and peace. The views over the marshes are breathtaking and the sunsets are legendary. Just Google it if you want to see its beauty for yourself.

The mill also has Wi-Fi which is vital for any international business pelican who wants to keep his beak on the pulse of things, even off duty.

This little cross stitch vignette of the couple relaxing was taken very slowly by an amateur stitcher last summer with a special zoom needle. If you look closely, you'll see that Sonja is wearing crest extensions, they were all the rage with holidaymaking secretary birds last year. Sea air plays havoc with your plumage without them in place to protect those delicate fluffy vanes at the base of each feather.

LORD MERRY & HIS RACING VULTURES

Lord Hugo Merry of Gawdelpus Hall, which lies in The Hundred of Gallow near Little Snoring, Norfolk is just as his name would seem to imply – usually slightly and good-naturedly drunk. He's a real country gent, all tweed hacking jackets, hunt balls and pigeon racing. Unfortunately, a few years back he was thrown out of The Royal Pigeon Racing Association, of which HM Queen Elizabeth II was patron for many years with her own lofts just a stone's throw down the road from Hugo on the Sandringham Estate.

It was rumored that his rather dodgy trainers, Barry of Felthorpe and his half-brother Two Trousers (don't ask), had painted go-faster stripes on all Lord Merry's birds thus breaking every rule in the book but nothing was ever proven conclusively because the birds had molted before the case came to court and the matter was thrown out although it lodged very firmly and forever in the memories of all the other members of the local fancy.

Never one to quit easily, old Hugo simply treated himself to a pair of racing vultures (Skrote on the left and Dongle on the right) that he had spotted on eBay and carried on regardless. Skrote and Dongle proved to be virtually untrainable, they only returned to their loft when bribed with gourmet treats, attacked all the pet cats for miles around and, back in 2019 they took out the entire Red Sparrows Aerial Display Team as it was flying in tight formation over the Clacton Air Show. It was a terrible scandal at the time and yet another black mark was notched up on Lord Merry's increasingly battered escutcheon.

The Drug Squad finally grounded the pair of flying menaces shortly after the Dakkar to Paris Air Race a couple of years back when both birds were found to be carrying drugs in custom-built canisters strapped to their legs.

Nowadays Skrote and Dongle are confined to the Gawdelpus Estate although it's rumored that they still fly beneath the radar from time to time to meet up with Quill and The Great Colin at The Ratte Catchers for their monthly darts tournament which attracts contestants from as far afield as Swaffham in the West and Stokesby Ferry in the east because of the huge cash prize offered to the winner.

THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Roadrunners are curious birds, they're high-speed ground cuckoos with long tails and a rather fetching crest. They symbolize magic and good luck. Their long legs whirr as they zoom along, and they can rocket through scrubland at speeds in excess of 20 mph downhill with the wind behind them.

If you're into performing bird impressions as your party piece just hold your nose and say "meep, meep", it's a real crowd pleaser and no one will mistake it for a robin. There's all sorts of folklore and superstition associated with these friendly birds. The old pioneers believed that roadrunners would lead them back to the trail if they lost their way, the Mexicans called them "amigo" and they even replaced the stork in some cultures as a bringer of babies. Express delivery guaranteed. They even leave distinctive "X" shaped footprints which means they instantly qualify for a place in the Long Dog SAGA stories.

Albert Ferrari is a roadrunner and he's seen here saying boo to Maître D, the goose, in a very heated dispute which seems to be drawing quite a crowd of onlookers. Albert had booked the two yurts for a family holiday months in advance only to discover upon arrival that they'd been double booked by a colony of rabbits who'd travelled down from Canada for a family reunion.

It's inevitable that Albert will come out on top in this dispute and that the bunnies will be told to hop it because no one ever gets one over on an angry bird that can kill a rattlesnake, not even a wily old gander like Maître D.

THE TEA PARTY

Angela and Mrs Marshall are a few flamingoes short of a full flamboyance, they are in fact a mother and daughter pair, but what they lack in numbers they certainly make up for in the extravagantly elaborate way they live their lives.

The girls are an incorrigible pair of hoarders. Anything and everything that takes their fancy, the more exotic and colourful the better, gets dragged back to their little end terrace cottage known locally as Flamingo Towers and there it rests. In piles, in heaps, in mounds and in excess. Fascinators mixed in with sequined clutch bags left over from the 1960s, cheap costume jewelry draped over ruched silk lampshades with tassels, Christmas baubles and lights still flashing intermittently on last year's gold tinsel tree and mountains of old Vogue Magazines some dating back to the roaring twenties if you dig deep enough.

There is only one room in the entire place that is neat, tidy and uncluttered. It's where the girls, all done up to the nines in their best clothes, take tea together out of bone china cups accompanied by crustless sanies and scones with jam and cream which they order from Fortnum & Masons except for the month of December when it's mince pies right up until New Year. All served on mismatched, blue and white Spode plates.

This room is their sanctuary, its hallowed ground, its "the drawing room" where visitors may be entertained, polite conversation can be made and gossip is nearly always exchanged. Angela and Mrs Marshall are a vacuous pair of individuals picking their way on long pink legs through piles of tawdry junk but there's something rather endearing about them nonetheless with their shiny treasures and endless round of afternoon teas. Do you take sugar?

THE OWL TWINS

Big Owl and Twin Brother Owl went to sea
In a second-hand fishing boat
They played gin rummy with their pocket money
Which they stashed in their granny's old coat.
Big Owl looked up at the sails above.
As he smoked a large cigar
"I hope some bugger will give us a shove.
What rotten owl sailors we are, we are
What rotten owl sailors we are.

Twin Owl said to Big Owl "You silly old fool
We should never have sailed out to sea,
The wind's all a flurry, our Ma she will worry
But how do we steer this damned thing?"
They sailed all day and got quite far away
'Till some land at last they did see
And there, made of wood, a huge statue stood
Of a man with a "thing" on his nose, his nose.
Of a man with a "thing" on his nose.

"Wooden Man are you willing for removal by drilling
That thing?" said the statue "I am."
So they told him to wait while they summoned their mate,
The Turkey who wed bat 'n bird.
He arrived with his drill and for good or for ill
Turkey took off that thing on his nose
And hand in hand they all pranced on the sand.
Lit up by the light of the moon, the moon
All lit up by the light of the moon.

ROCK-PAPER-SCISSORS-RHINO-CROC

As a child who hasn't at some point resorted to the finger-flashing game of Rock-Paper-Scissors to settle a dispute or break a tie? It required nothing more than a pair of chubby little hands to take part coupled with the desire to win in an amicable way. Although the latter wasn't always achieved because some kids are just really bad losers.

To keep things simple there are only three possible hand signals. Rock is a closed fist, paper is a flat hand, palm down, with all digits extended, and scissors is a closed hand with the index and middle fingers sticking out like blades towards their opponent.

Once outside the playground adults have pimped things up considerably, as they so often do, and this once simple game now has a "World Association" with rules to rival those of chess. Horizontal scissors in particular is strictly forbidden because it can be mistaken for paper and reversed vertical scissors can get you in a whole heap of trouble.

Now, thanks to Long Dog and SAGA, a new, extended version of the game has evolved called Rock-Paper-Scissors-Rhino-Croc incorporating two new hand signals. Rhino is a closed fist with the middle finger fully extended upwards symbolic of a horn and, for Croc the hand is held on its side with fingers tightly together while the thumb is lowered up and down to simulate a jaw opening and closing. The inclusion of teeth is left entirely up to the imagination of the participants. Rhino beats rock by knocking it aside, it tears paper and blunts scissors but croc always wins because it frightens the crap out of everyone. It's such a powerful gesture.

Crash the Rhino, and Kevin the Croc are disputing the ownership of SAGA Castle in this vignette, and both have valid claims to the fortification. The drawbridge is up, there are armed guards patrolling the ramparts, the Harpy Eagle has flown all the way from Panama to act as referee and it's all about to kick off. May the best kriter win!

And, in case you were wondering, the brumby on the left just happens to find himself in the wrong place at the wrong time and is looking for the nearest exit.

THE FORLORN STITCH

“The Forlorn Hope” is a military term applied to a band of soldiers or other combatants, very often volunteers, who are prepared to form the vanguard leading the way and who undertake perilous missions into unknown territory.

Extrapolate that a little and what you see here is “The Forlorn Stitch”. These brave critters were all prepared to put their little cross stitch bodies on the line and be the first troops to enter SAGA at the bottom left to gain intelligence while simultaneously doing a risk assessment with a view to making this sampler a safe chart for stitchers to visit and enjoy.

Our little detail of critters are a very mixed bunch with a great many stories of their own to tell that would make your tail curl. Captain Shergar of the First Mounted Fusiliers began life as a thoroughbred racehorse but, after his retirement from racing in 1983 he was stolen. The horse thieves demanded a ransom of £2 million for his safe return which was never paid, and rumors were rife as to his fate. I’m delighted to say that after months of extensive cosmetic surgery he has now become Shergar the Donkey, freedom fighter and all-round good guy with a love of stitching.

Captain Shergar’s second in command, a jet-black sight hound nicknamed “The Black Watch” holds the rank of Colour Sergeant in the Seaforth Highlanders and gained his sobriquet because of his steely gaze and ability to spot trouble long before it surfaces.

Corporal Gideon, the young retriever chasing butterflies, is an olfactory specialist and can sniff out anything from unexploded bombs, to drugs, to bacon sanies with extra ketchup.

The bunnies don’t really have any special skills but there’s enough of them to get under the feet of fleeing assassins and bring them crashing to the ground with a thud. Which just leaves Sapper Seahorse, a vital member of the team as he can operate to depths of 30 feet or more and still be combat ready.

Captain Shergar has radioed back to Head Quarters in Castle Long Dog that they’ve just spotted Lord Lucan, a British Peer who disappeared after being suspected of the murder of his children’s nanny and is still on the run. That’s him on top of the Air B&B turret waving a flag so as not to attract attention and with him is his latest squeeze, the Mayor of Bayswater’s daughter who they instantly recognized from her lewd description in an old army song. An extremely hirsute young lady by all accounts.

The good news is that SAGA has been passed as “safe to sew”.

THE YAFFLES

Towards the edges of any sampler is where they're at their most susceptible to showing signs of damage and age and SAGA is no exception. Normally the bottom corners are where "foxing" first starts to appear. Those annoying brown spots are a sure sign that deterioration has taken place over the years. But old age isn't the enemy at work here on SAGA – it's woodpeckers!

There are two saboteur yaffles at work in the bottom right-hand corner. Can you hear them tapping away? Yaffle is the English folk name for the European green woodpecker because of its laughing call but these two certainly won't have the last laugh when they are eventually apprehended and turned over to the sampler police.

These little sods, Jack Eilde and his sister Betsey, are a well-known couple of environment activists who are the leading beaks in the local "let's do it together" group. Their sole intention is to disrupt and delay any project which threatens their natural habitat and they're responsible for a small traffic diversion recently when they finally felled a telegraph pole and also for really annoying our village police constable when they punctured both tyres on his bicycle.

The small squirrel is a rookie reporter called Scoop who is currently working for the SAGA local newspaper, The Cross Stitch Times. He has lofty ambitions and hopes one day to scale the dizzy heights when he reports on the offshore pylons currently being constructed at the Aida Wind Farm. In theory breezes and full on gales blow through the holes and generates power. Next stop war correspondent with the Long Dog Echo.

DENTIST DUCK

We occasionally hear tales of creatures that engage in symbiotic relationships. Oxpecker birds operate a form of mutualism with zebras by removing parasites and flies from their hide in return for a free takeaway. It could be argued that domestic cats and dogs are given all the comforts of home in return for companionship and the occasional spot of pest control, and even the tiny ant, in exchange for some sugary honeydew, appears to safeguard the even smaller aphids from predators.

But it would seem that there is a Dentist Duck who is operating both under the radar and under one of the larger arches of SAGA that never gets a mention. Thus far he's escaped the attention of Sir David Attenborough and his team of researchers, camera men and production crew; he's never appeared in an issue of National Geographic and yet here he is, halfway down the throat of a hippo for all the stitching world to see.

Perhaps it's because he's not very good at his job. He never gets rave reviews in Zoo Dentist Monthly, never receives a "Tooth Fairy of the Year Award" and certainly hasn't starred in a prestigious nature documentary. His nickname is Dizzy, not because it's short for Disraeli but because he's a dental disaster. There's the clue!

Today Dizzy's performing a simple procedure on one of the hippos from the local safari park to remove a bit of plaque and give her gums a quick check. Everything began well. Crab was hanging on by his claw to hippo's bottom to encourage her to keep her mouth wide open. Fox was on standby to relay any necessary instructions. Big goose had a firm grip on hippo's nose as a precaution, so everything was ready for Dentist Duck to enter the oral cavity headfirst. But at that self-same moment so did a large wasp. Hippo gulped and Dizzy rotated and managed to get one of his webbed feet impaled on a particularly vicious self-sharpening molar and became stuck fast.

A small dental assistant climbed the arch to see if she could see better from an elevated position and medium goose said he'd already called the fire brigade and that they'd be along with a hoist and some bolt croppers very soon.

And the moral of this salutary tale is that "If someone shouts "duck" just drop everything and run for your life" because a duck on the ground is not half as dangerous as one in the mouth.

THE SHIP OF THE DESERT

The Three Sisters of Fate, sometimes known as the Moirai, were Greek weaving goddesses and the lesson to be learned from them is that it's best to accept the hand you've been dealt rather than railing against it; live life well and take it as it comes because it's impossible to swerve your allotted path. You know that, I know that, in fact deep down most people know that.

However, there are a handful of creatures who simply won't believe that. They see life as a riddle to be solved and that anything can be changed. And when three such stubborn, like minded krittlers join forces they become a "splinter group" which is precisely what's happened here. Together our intrepid trio are going to journey to Greece to seek out The Fates and ask for a different destiny.

Flinders the Camel, named after Flinders Petrie the Egyptologist, would like to transition from being an even-toed Bactrian ungulate from Mongolia with two humps into an Egyptian Dromedary with just one so he can blend in better with his chums in the desert and he thought that, as he's going to petition weaving goddesses, the present of a new pair of scissors might gain him a bit of sway with the girls.

Rommel, the Desert Fox, and his friend the Desert Rat would like to make a permanent move from the Long Dog Sampler "You Belong to Me" to SAGA as it's more diverse and interesting. And the Horus impersonator would like help to remove the Cobra Crown which has been stuck on his head for years. He's become typecast because of it and would like the opportunity to branch out into Romcoms and Crime Dramas. Netflix haven't done a decent blockbuster about Ancient Egypt and the Pharaohs for years.

It's going to be a long journey of discovery for all of them as Greece is quite a trek from North Africa and already the heat is beginning to play tricks with Flinders' mind by conjuring up the mirage of a "ship of the desert" to mock him hovering just above his head.

Are you guys sure you want to do this? Wouldn't you rather just embrace fate and have an ice-cold beer, not in Alex but in the Cairo Jazz Club instead? They're open now

THE ULTIMATE RIDE

This is The Funfair at the End of the World where all the rides are free because they will probably be your last. Next of kin will be notified.

The most terrifying attraction of all is the Carousel of Death. It stands on the edge of a precipice and it's the ultimate white-knuckle ride as there's every likelihood that you'll fall off eventually as the fairground organ plays ever louder to drown out your screams and everything about you spins past ever faster until you lose consciousness.

This horrific amusement park is the brainchild of Messrs Obediah Grumbridge (left) and Mortimer Pennington, Mort to his friends (right). They're showmen by night and morticians by day or, should you prefer, croquemort (dead biters) by day. They're the stuff that nightmares are made of.

And here, just killing time and waiting for dusk to fall, the illuminations to come on and the terror to begin, are three of the staff having a little relaxing spin on the whirligig.

The Black Swan and her cygnet were sold into service with Messrs Grumbridge & Pennington several summers ago by a Royal swan upper who'd gone rogue and are a graceful and subliminal reminder to move from any position where you feel powerless and at the mercy of external forces, but it's usually too late to escape when hapless joyriders begin to realise this.

The Salamander is a legendary lizard-like creature able to live in fire unscathed and in French folklore he's also attributed with a powerful poison which works swiftly and fatally on everything he touches. So, please don't pet the little reptile, it never ends well.

And then there's our old friend The Reverend Turkey showing his true colours at last. He's the general factotum of this whole shebang; the power in front of the throne and a thoroughly bad egg as it turns out. He may have been the kindly old cleric who married Bat 'n Bird and the Owl and the Pussycat, and who also removed, in a very humane way, "the thing" with his hand drill for the Owl Twins but he has the power vested in him to not only hatch and match but to despatch as well thus making him the perfect business associate for Messrs Grumbridge & Pennington as he can officiate at all their funerals during daylight hours leaving him at liberty to drive the deadly Carousel all night. Gobble, gobble, gobble

THE LIGHTHOUSE ON EILEAN MOR

The Flannan Islands in the Outer Hebrides have always been a place of mystery and superstition. They were named after St Flannan a 6th century Iris Bishop who built a chapel there. For centuries local shepherds would graze a few sheep on the rocky outcrops but would never remain overnight for fear of the spirits rumoured to haunt these remote islands.

On 26th December 1900 a small vessel captained by James Harvey made its way to the lighthouse on Eilean Mor carrying supplies and with the replacement lighthouse keeper, Joseph Moor, on board.

As they drew close and prepared to disembark a terrible sense of foreboding overtook the men. No one had come out to greet them and when they reached the lighthouse itself the door had been left unlocked, there was an unfinished meal on the table, chairs were upturned and there was no sign of the three occupants anywhere. Even the clock had stopped.

A thorough search of the outbuildings and surrounding area revealed no further clues as to the whereabouts of the three men. A powerful sense of menace hung in the air. Captain Harvey immediately sent a telegram to the mainland which was relayed on to the Northern Lighthouse Board's headquarters in Edinburgh appraising them of the situation. If you would like to read that message in full please follow the link <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-Eilean-Mor-Lighthouse-Mystery/>

Upon examination the last few entries in the lighthouse logbook appeared far from normal. On 12th December Thomas Marshall the second assistant wrote "Severe winds the likes of which I have never seen before in 20 years of service. James Ducat, principal keeper very quiet. William McArthur, third assistant has been crying. (And he was a tough brawler of a man)."

13th December "Storm still raging. We have been praying." (Bu no storms had been reported in that area over those dates.)

15th December, the final entry. "Storm ended, sea calm. God is over all."

None of the bodies were ever washed ashore. Over the following decades subsequent lighthouse keepers have reported hearing strange voices in the wind calling the names of the three dead men.

Whatever the reason for this tragedy, something or someone had plucked those three Christian souls from the Eilean Mor Rock on that fateful day more than 100 years ago.

THE END

