

DIALOG ON A PARK BENCH

Dave was doing well now in his small business. It was not like this two years ago when he was made redundant as part of a “rationalization” program. He had some IT skills and experience and decided to use his redundancy payoff to set up his own on-line marketing business. He had been sensible and not over-stretched himself at the start; he had found a specialist niche, done his homework thoroughly and was now comfortably in profit. It had been hard work, especially during the first year; but he had found satisfaction in being his own boss.

In the summer he was up before six in the morning and in his office well before 7 o'clock. He reckoned that after a hard morning's work, he deserved a lunch break. If there was an emergency his PA could contact him on his mobile; but she never had so far. She and the technician he had taken on last Autumn were more than competent enough to handle most things.

He like to take his lunch in the park near his office. He had a favorite bench that looked out across the valley; he had come to think of it as “his bench.”

Today, he had been held up with an unexpected emergency and was late getting to the park. He was a little put out to find someone else sitting on “his bench.” It was an old man he had seen about occasionally who liked to feed the birds in the park. He was known locally as “Jack,” though no one seemed to know exactly where he came from or what his real name was.

Dave decided he was not going to be ousted from his bench by an eccentric old man. He sat down at the other end and began to undo his lunch box.

“You're late today,” said Jack. “I thought you weren't coming. I hope you don't mind me sitting on this bench.”

“No, no – that's OK,” mumbled Dave; but he was a little irritated at the thought that this old man must have been observing him each day. But then he realized that *he* recognized other faces in the park. ‘If you come every day, I suppose you get to recognize faces,’ he thought.

He felt a little ashamed at being annoyed by Jack's presence; it was after all no more “his bench” than any one else's, and he had been half an hour later than usual. He made an effort to be politer to his companion on the bench.

“I've seen you before feeding the birds,” said Dave. “Do you live around this way?”

“Yes, I suppose so, in manner of speaking,” replied Jack. “I always feed the birds,” he continued. “Of course in the summer they don't really need it, but I do like to see the different birds around me.”

“You really like the birds, I can see,” said Dave. “Do you feed the squirrels as well?”

“No I don't,” he replied with feeling. “There's too many of the pests.”

"Pests?" queried Dave. "Just because they steal food put out for birds? They're cute little things."

"They may look cute," replied Jack, "and if it was just a matter of stealing bird food, I wouldn't mind so much. But they destroy the birds' nests as well so they can eat the eggs *and* the nestlings. To me they're vermin."

"Oh," said Dave, taken back a bit. Then he remembered something he had half read in a local paper recently.

"I seem to remember", he said, "reading recently about someone who claimed to have discovered a new species of squirrel in this park."

"Ah," chuckled Jack, "you mean the *nocturnal squirrels* Mr Smithers fed each evening after it got dark. Those squirrels with the straight tails!"

"Yes, now you mention it, yes, it did say they were nocturnal. But I don't remember the bit about straight tails. I didn't know any squirrels had straight tails."

"Nor do they!" exclaimed Jack, "any more than any squirrels are nocturnal! Both greys and reds feed by day."

"I see," said Dave. "So what had – Mr Smithers, did you say? – what had he been feeding each evening?"

"Why? Don't you know? Nocturnal with straight tails," laughed Jack. "I'll give you a clue," he added. "some people call grey squirrels 'tree rats'."

"You don't mean," said Dave, feeling slightly foolish that he hadn't realized sooner, "that he was feeding ordinary, common rats each evening in the park here!"

"I surely do!" answered Jack. "But we really did have another sort of squirrel here once, many years ago."

"What?" said Dave. "you mean there once were red squirrels here? I thought you only got them up in Scotland."

"There are a few other places," said Jack, "but not many. But I remember once when they were common all over Britain."

"Red squirrels in this park," said Dave, almost to himself. Then, turning again to Jack, he said, "You must have seen many changes in this park during your lifetime."

"That I have," said Jack. "But did you know this has been a park for hundreds of years and for centuries before that was just open land where animals might graze, and people could come and walk or just sit looking at the view across the valley there?"

"No, I didn't," said Dave. "I guess it has never been built on. But are you saying it's never been cultivated in the past? It has always just be open land?"

"That's right," replied Jack, "always open land. But way back in the late Stone Age, they buried people up here."

"is that so?" said Dave, wondering how Jack knew. "I suppose the site's been excavated and the bodies moved long ago."

"No," said Jack. "There's been no excavation. The bodies are still there

way below us. They've been allowed to rest in peace."

Dave thought of those bodies lying below them. He did not find it at all spooky or eerie that they should be sitting above a Stone Age cemetery. In a strange way he found the thought that those Stone Agers were there still enjoying the view that he enjoyed, and the view that so very many other people over the intervening centuries had enjoyed, a comforting thought. He felt, perhaps, intimations of eternity – he was not sure.

A clock striking nearby snapped him out of his reverie and he looked at his watch. He must get back to his office. He turned to say 'good-bye' to Jack, but found to his surprise that Jack had already gone.

Why had he not noticed Jack leaving? 'I guess I was daydreaming as he left,' he thought. Or maybe he had dozed off for a few moments in the hot summer sun; he had had a very exhausting morning.

On his way back to the office, he wondered about the Stone Age cemetery. If there had been no excavations, how did Jack know about it? Should he tell someone about it? Would he be believed on the word of an eccentric old man? Anyway, he was not sure that he would like a band of archaeologists disturbing the tranquility of his park. No, he felt, if they are there let them continue to rest peacefully.

'I wonder if I will meet Jack again?' he thought to himself. 'I should like to'.