



BIRD BRAIN

Guy Kennaway



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Acknowledgements

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About the Book

Poacher turned gamekeeper may be one of the oldest plots in fiction, but in Guy Kennaway's achingly funny new novel it is given a sharp and playful new twist.

Life was always difficult for Banger Peyton-Crumbe, an antiquated, misanthropic blood-sport obsessive, but it gets considerably worse when he is killed in a shooting incident and returns to earth as... a pheasant. A pro-shooting pheasant at that. Banger's long-suffering family think his death was an accident, but his gun dogs, who witnessed their master's demise, know it to be murder.

To Banger's astonishment he finds himself reincarnated as his old quarry, one of thousands of birds reared for local shoots. It's not all bad though - there's food, a warm bed and hens aplenty. He adapts quickly to his new life, and is able to advise his new friends on the best way to avoid an early death.

But avoiding the guns turn out to be the least of Banger's worries when he discovers in a scrap of newspaper the terrible truth of his accident. Navigating a range of obstacles, from foxes to well-meaning children to blundering animal rights activists, he embarks on an epic journey back to his ancestral seat in an attempt to rectify the many mistakes of his life, and confront his murderer.

About the Author

Guy Kennaway's books include *One People*, a novel, and *Sunbathing Naked*, a memoir. He lives in Somerset.

ALSO BY GUY KENNAWAY

Sunbathing Naked
One People
I Can Feel It Moving

Bird Brain

A Novel

GUY KENNAWAY



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

This is a work of fiction, and any similarities between the human characters and living people are coincidental. For the animal characters the situation is different. I have mercilessly plundered the characters and actions of my many animal acquaintances and I am sure that Tosca, for a start, and Sunshine, were she still with us, would complain bitterly about their treatment in the book. However, as no animal has to date mounted a successful libel or defamation action in the British courts, I am confident that there is nothing they can do about it.

Part 1
Man and Beast

A Right and a Left

IT BEGAN FOR Basil 'Banger' Peyton-Crumbe the day he died in a pheasant-shooting incident. On that chilly January afternoon, Banger's half-brother William, who had been shooting next in the line, was the first to get to his body. William splashed through the puddles of the woodland track and halted unsteadily where Banger lay splayed out on his back. Blood oozed from his mangled head and pooled around the paws of his brown and white Springer Spaniel Jam, who sat beside four dead pheasants staring at his master, wondering if anyone would get angry with him if he gave the delicious-looking wound a good lick. The rest of the shooting party continued to discharge snap shots at pheasants that curled and skimmed across the narrow gap in the fir trees.

'Help! Quick!' shouted William. 'For God's sake! Over here!'

Slowly the Guns ceased their shooting, and the men in tweeds and studded rubber boots with zips up their sides strode towards where William knelt beside his half-brother.

'What the, what the, what the hell happened?' gasped the first.

'I'll call an ambulance,' said a younger man, reaching for his phone.

'And call Idris. Tell him to call the whole thing off,' said William. Idris was Banger's gamekeeper, a stout man with wispy white hair and a red face, who right then lumbered through the branches of the spruce, and swore at what he saw.

'Oh no, oh no. I don't believe it,' he uttered. 'Is he ...?'

William nodded, too choked with emotion to talk.

A handsome chocolate Labrador called Josh padded towards the corpse. 'What seems to be the hold-up?' he asked, but of course none of the men standing over the body could hear what he said, as humans can't understand the speech of animals.

Jam chuckled. 'Direct hit on self. Don't much fancy trying to drag that to the game cart. Fat arse.'

'What happened?' asked the keeper.

'His gun must have exploded. Look.' William pointed to the mangled firearm that lay by Banger's side. 'I told him to stop using that thing.' The big man started weeping. 'He's got a perfectly good Holland and Holland I gave him three years ago.'

'But he loved that one,' said Idris. 'His good friend, it was.'

'Let me have a look at it.' William reached for the gun.

Idris said, 'Best not handle it till the Police have had a look.'

'I think it's fairly obvious what's happened,' said William.

'All the same, sir,' said Idris, 'I'd best give them a call.' He extracted a phone in a grimy plastic cover and dialled a number, turning away from the group as he began to talk.

The men were left to stare at the corpse as wisps of mist furred silently in the tops of the spruces. William took off his tweed jacket and laid it over his half-brother's torn head. No one said anything. The wood fell quiet around them. A pheasant clucked, somewhere, and there was a rustle as three beaters emerged from the undergrowth,

knobbed sticks and muddy flags in their hands, head-to-toe in filthy rain-proofing, dogs shimmering around their legs, looking like the remnants of a peasant army. They stopped dead, gasping and murmuring when they saw their fallen employer. The game cart drew up, its trailer festooned with scores of dead pheasants tied in braces. The driver got out of the Toyota pick-up.

‘Lift him up here. I can run him to the Maelor,’ he said.

‘I’m afraid it’s too late for that,’ said William. ‘Anyway, there’s an ambulance on its way.’

‘Has someone tried to resuscitate him?’ asked one of the beaters, who turned out to be, under the greasy hat and grimy rain-proofing, a woman.

‘No point, I’m afraid, half his head is missing,’ said William.

The shocked group stood staring at the stout, booted legs sticking out of the checked cowl. The shattered bone and gore of Banger’s shredded hand stuck out of the bloodstained sleeve of his old shooting suit. The garment was made of a bluey grey, thorn-proof tweed, and had encased Banger on shooting days for over twenty years, without once making a trip to the dry-cleaner.

‘Well, it’s how he would have wanted it,’ said William quietly. ‘In the field, a bird cleanly dispatched on the drive, with his faithful dog at his side.’

Jam, the dog described as faithful, looked up. ‘Not a moment too soon for me.’

‘You didn’t like him?’ Josh the Labrador asked.

‘He was a selfish oaf,’ said Jam. ‘He wasn’t pleasant to me, but you should have seen how he treated his own flesh and blood.’

An hour later the Guns were back at Llanrisant Hall, the gloomy house where Banger and his forebears had dwelt for hundreds of years, and were drinking lukewarm tea. Neither food nor beverages were ever served hot in Banger’s dining room, situated as it was about four

hundred yards of icy corridor from the basement kitchen. The Guns tried to get as close to the fire as they could without seeming plainly selfish, and now steam rose from William's damp trousers as he placed his well-rounded bum towards the flames.

The distant clang of a sprung bell announced Constable Powell, who entered the dining room with a gust of chilly air. He was a tall, grey-haired man of about fifty, with kind eyes and a neat moustache. Constable Powell was in the company of Buck, an eight-year-old German Shepherd, the station police dog. Buck glanced at the room full of men, and took a sniff of the cordite, cigarette and damp tweed. He knew that they were only investigating an accident, but he was dismayed that Constable Powell appeared so deferential. In Buck's opinion, Constable Powell lacked the natural authority of a successful officer. It was one of the reasons the man had been passed over so many times for promotion - that and the fact that he was the worst copper Buck had ever worked with, painful as it was to admit. The Detective Inspector, a man called Dave Booth who had once kicked Buck, and who was twenty years younger than Constable Powell, never sent them out if it was anything demanding or tricky, much to Buck's annoyance. The last time Buck had seen a dead body was when old Dai Hughes committed suicide by drinking weedkiller. It was an open-and-shut case; the Paraquat was by his bed in his crumbling farmhouse. Buck had gone with Powell to Dai's funeral. Powell loved funerals - he never missed a trip to the cemetery - and always took Buck with him. Dai must have drunk a lot of Paraquat; three years after they buried him there was still nothing growing on his grave. Buck dreamt of more interesting police work; he saw himself leaping out of a burning house with a swaddled infant dangling from his mouth, or taking a bite out of the buttock of a man with a pistol in his hand.

In the dining room the situation was somewhat embarrassing for most of the Guns, none of whom apart from William knew Banger particularly well. They had been invited only because of their skill with a gun or their ownership of good shoots, and were now faced with the task of thinking of something appropriate to say when a virtual stranger has died. They were not up to it; for these men shooting overrode everything else in importance. One of them even said quietly, to another, 'That apart, obviously, it was a damned good drive, didn't you think? How was it up your end?'

'Pity we had to stop really, but I suppose it couldn't be helped,' replied a red-cheeked young man.

'Not certain Banger would have approved,' said a third. 'As a result we had a record low bag. Only a hundred and twenty-nine pheasants, two woodcock and a pigeon. A hundred and thirty-two in total.'

'Well, a hundred and thirty-three, including Banger,' said the red-cheeked young man. 'I'm sure he would want to be added to the bag.' He guffawed, and then suddenly stopped.

Constable Powell cleared his throat to get their attention. He kept his cap in his hands as he spoke, and looked overawed in the company of men whom he knew to be landed gentry and titled aristocracy. Buck couldn't bear to watch, and slipped away to make some inquiries of his own. He understood the importance of following procedure.

'Obviously it is for the coroner to finally decide, but from my initial investigations this looks to me like a tragic accident. You see, more and more of you sportsmen are using the twenty-bore gun, and it's easy to get the cartridges confused if they get mixed up in the bag.'

Banger had not been a twenty-bore man. Old-fashioned in every regard, he had remained faithful to his old cheap Spanish AYA twelve bore, a gun he had had since childhood, and which had been burnished silver from the

use and the care he had given it over the fifty years he had been raising it to his shoulder. He had once proudly estimated that he had dispatched over forty-one thousand pheasants with it.

Constable Powell had managed to look into the twisted gun and see the offending cartridge: it was a twenty-bore Eley number 8, called 'High Pheasant'. He had checked Banger's pockets and cartridge bag, and inspected the belts and bags of the other Guns, but neither of the two men who had been using twenty bores that afternoon had been loading Eley High Pheasant, much to their relief.

Constable Powell went on. 'At some point during the first drive after lunch, Mr Peyton-Crumbe must have felt in his cartridge bag and accidentally, in the heat of the moment, put a twenty-bore cartridge into his right barrel. There have been one or two reported cases of this happening - one in Malpas last year, I remember, on the Collins's shoot. A Gun lost his right hand and half his arm as a result. Lucky for him his shotgun wasn't as old as the firearm in question here. I have checked Mr Peyton-Crumbe's bag and there are three other stray twenty-bore cartridges in there. Maybe on a day's shooting on another estate someone mistook Mr Peyton-Crumbe's bag for his own and dropped them in between drives.'

'I don't think that very likely, Constable,' said Idris. 'When Mr Peyton-Crumbe went to a shoot I always loaded for him, and I never let the bag out of my sight, I can assure you. I don't believe he would ever have loaded a twenty-bore shell accidentally either, he was too careful a man for that, he was.'

'Quiet, Idris, let the officer talk,' said William.

'We can't know how the cartridge got into his bag,' Constable Powell conceded. 'That is for the coroner to decide. But in the heat of the moment, in the middle of the drive, Mr Peyton-Crumbe can't have noticed the cartridge slip through the chamber, into the barrel and lodge itself

halfway down the sleeve. He closed the gun, took aim, fired the first barrel, it went off, and then pulled the second trigger, which just clicked. He then opened his gun - I hypothesise - removed the first, used cartridge, and noticed the empty chamber. He must have imagined that he had forgotten to load it. Had he had a glass of wine at lunch?’

‘Yes,’ said William, ‘but he wasn’t drunk. My brother was always safe.’

‘No doubt,’ said Constable Powell, ‘but for some reason he didn’t look down the barrel before he loaded another cartridge. From the moment he closed his gun, with one cartridge in the left chamber and another caught in the barrel ahead of it, that gun was transformed into a lethal bomb, a bomb that eventually went off in his face, killing him.’

‘The rum thing is that Banger didn’t get much shooting on the last drive,’ said one of the tweed-encased men. ‘So he wasn’t really ever flustered by the “heat of the moment”, as you called it. I was standing down a peg from him and could hear.’

‘He got enough sport to merit pulling that second trigger. That was all it took,’ said Constable Powell. ‘A right and a left, I believe it’s called.’

Bottom Dog

IN THE BASEMENT of the house, Buck padded along the underlit corridor towards the unmistakable sound of Springer Spaniels in conversation. Instinct stopped him at the worn door to listen.

‘How was the shoot?’ Sunshine, Jam’s elderly mother said from where she was lying beside the range. Buck could see through the gap an old dog with rheumy eyes and a long tufty coat in which mud and general dirt had coagulated satisfactorily.

‘I’m afraid your mate Banger’s a goner,’ piped Jam.

Sunshine lifted her head from the flagstone. ‘What? What? What do you mean?’

‘On the drive after lunch, Mum. Kaput. Not even a runner.’

Sunshine, who knew Jam was a bit of a joker said, ‘Please, what’s happened to Banger?’

‘His gun exploded in his face, the grouchy old bastard. I yelled, “Good shot!” Never done that before, but this was a special occasion. It’s the first day’s shooting I’ve enjoyed all season.’

Buck nosed his way round the scratched kitchen door, savouring the pleasing aroma of the woolly socks that dangled on the rail of the Aga.

'Evening all,' he said, smiling at his allusion. When the D.I. wasn't around, Constable Powell sometimes took Buck home, and one night they had watched some classic episodes of 'Dixon of Dock Green' on Bravo.

'Hello, Buck,' said Sunshine, struggling arthritically to her feet. They knew each other well. There were a hundred reasons why a country policeman would need to see the owner of the local estate, and Banger was always happy to get a couple of tumblers off the shelf in the gun room and fill them with his home-made sloe gin while he and Constable Powell fulminated about public access, country litter, travellers, joyriders and the general falling apart of the world. The dogs, at their feet, conversed on their pet subjects - a piquant crotch they had recently got a good sniff at, a sweet arse they had given a good licking to - and swapped tall stories about the best places they had ever pissed. The friendship between Banger and Constable Powell had grown out of the menace of poaching, but by the year 2009 there were too few poachers to worry about. The River Dee, which snaked through the Llanrisant Estate, once alive with sleek wild salmon, was empty of fish, and the price of salmon, now farmed in every Scottish loch, had plummeted, making a virtually impossible activity utterly futile. The kind of lads who in the old days spent the night trying to lift silver fish from a dark river for the fun of it were now pissed up on lager doing doughnuts in Somerfield car park. As for pheasants, there were so many put down and shot in the Berwyn Hills of North Wales, some estates would pretty well pay you to take them away. But this didn't stop Banger sending Buck and Constable Powell off in the police van with a brace of birds draped on the front seat. He always disappeared into the darkness of the game store with its rows of birds hanging on nails, and felt around before making his choice.

'These will roast well in another week.'

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Constable Powell. ‘Are you sure you can spare them?’

‘It’s a pleasure to give them to someone who knows what to do with them. People nowadays can’t be bothered to pluck and draw a bird. Easier to buy a frozen chicken at the supermarket. I’ve even seen men refuse a brace after a day’s shooting. Sewers.’ He shook his head and handed the brace to Constable Powell. ‘Get your wife to roast these.’

Buck winced. Constable Powell’s wife had recently run off with the town’s taxi driver. Derek the Taxi, an old friend of Constable Powell’s, had been carrying on with Mrs Powell behind the constable’s back – but flagrantly in front of Buck – for months. When Powell was sent out to get the takeaway, Buck had had to watch Mrs Powell and Derek the Taxi snogging on the sofa, only untwining when they heard the key in the door and Powell’s happy voice announcing his return. Constable Powell just hadn’t noticed what was going on. Noticing what was going on was not Constable Powell’s forte. Buck had taken it upon himself to see his friend through the divorce.

‘Give the bones to Buck,’ Banger had said. ‘They say you shouldn’t but that’s rot. Never seen a dog harmed by pheasant bones yet.’ Buck knew he’d get more than the bones: Constable Powell always put carved breast, gravy and game chips into his bowl when they ate roast pheasant.

Now Banger was dead, and the police dog faced the two Spaniels in the old man’s kitchen.

‘Did you see what happened, Jam?’ Buck asked the younger dog.

‘We were standing on the drive in the wood, that one where that terrier laid that lovely fragrant pair of turds last time we were out last year, Mum, you remember. I got a roll in them and spread it in that woman’s car. Smelt gorgeous. She went beserk.’

‘Justin’s Wood.’

'That's it. The drive started, the birds started coming over as usual. Banger took a high curling pheasant on his left - quite a good shot, I admit - though it did land halfway down a near-vertical slope and I had to fight some other bugger's grasping Lab for it. Then he went for a lower one bending away to his right with the second barrel, but when he swung at it there was an almighty explosion in his face. I dived for cover and only looked up when the smoke cleared to see it had blown the bastard backwards off his feet. He kicked a bit, and snuffed it. Half his head was gone. It smelt great - nitro, burnt tweed, singed human skin, blood, oh, and death, lots of it.'

'They found a second cartridge lodged in his choke barrel,' said Buck. 'That's what did the damage.'

'Where is he now?' asked Sunshine.

'They took him off in a human game cart with a flashing light', said Jam.

'So I won't see him again ...' moaned Sunshine, wobbling slightly.

'Good riddance,' said Jam. 'I fetched and carried all season for that shit. Hardly ever said thank you. Had this mad idea that I enjoyed it. Never gave me a chocolate, like some humans. At lunch today he left me sitting in the back of the freezing Lanny while he went inside and scarfed meat pie and trifle. He stunk of lamb kidneys and claret when he came back. It made me sick when William gave a little speech about the special bond between Banger and me. What a bond - Banger stood there blasting pheasants out of the sky while I ran up hills and down ditches, in and out of streams, through gorse and brambles to find the damned things and bring them back. I chased a runner five hundred yards this morning and what did I get in return? "Good boy." That's not sufficient reward, I am afraid. It wasn't teamwork, it was slavery. Goodbye, *au revoir*, ta-ra chuck, nighty-night. Well done, that man who did it.'

'It was an accident,' said Buck.

'No it wasn't,' said Jam, 'no way. Someone fixed his gun. They put the cartridge in the barrel. I was there.'

'Who was it?' asked Buck.

'Who cares?' said Jam. 'They put him down. He was old, stiff, deaf and losing it. That's what happens.'

'Not with humans,' said Sunshine. 'They don't put humans to sleep.'

'Or when they do,' said Buck grimly, 'it's called murder.'

The door opened and Griffiths came in with a basket of logs. He was seventy-eight, had worked for two generations of Peyton-Crumbes, and was emaciated, wiry and bent with age.

'What are you up to, Buck?' said the old man. 'Commiserating with Sunshine, are you, eh?'

'Just asking a few routine questions,' said Buck, but of course Griffiths couldn't hear.

The old man put down the basket, and went to kneel by Sunshine.

'Hullo, old girl,' he said, ruffling the burry hair on her head. 'This is a sad day indeed. We'll all miss him, won't we? Stubborn bugger that he was.'

'Er, excuse me,' said Jam, 'not me. I will not miss him for one. And I can think of a few others who won't miss him, too.' Still, Jam could see there was a patting going for the asking so he trotted across and forced his head up under Griffiths' hand. 'Budge up,' he said to Sunshine, pushing her out of the way.

'Do you want a bit of a fuss made of you, too?' asked old Griffiths, who smelt agreeably to Jam of decomposing food and stale urine. Griffiths was so slow and so blind it was easy to get a generous lick of his face, so Jam ran his tongue over the aged folds of skin around his mouth, relishing the subtle aromas of bacteria, tobacco and stale luncheon meat.

When Griffiths had stood up again - an operation that took the best part of two minutes - and had heaved the logs

out of the kitchen, Buck turned to Jam.

'Listen, you scamp, who did you see tamper with Banger's gun?'

'It's human stuff. What does it matter? Who cares? He's dead.'

Jam lived close to the dead; every week throughout the shooting season he ferried scores of freshly killed birds to where Banger stood on a carpet of spent cartridges. There were always dead crows and weasels dangling on the fences, and invariably the gorgeous stench of a decomposing sheep on the air. You could pick a rotten ewe up from half-a-mile away. Some scents were like filaments of wire, twisting in the air, but a dead sheep gave off thick wads of smell that almost knocked you over with their enticing combinations of septic flesh and fox piss, and Jam loved to nose at the green meat with flies buzzing round his ears. Death was nothing special to a dog. Just the next thing after life.

'It matters to me. I want to know,' said Buck, trying to fluff up his mane.

'I didn't see who it was, but it happened,' Jam said.

'What precisely do you mean?' Buck asked.

'I was left in the Lanny at lunch, along with all the weapons and cartridge bags. Not that they cleared a space for me to lie down. Someone opened the back door, took Banger's gun out of its sleeve, fiddled with it and resleeved it. And he put something in Banger's cartridge bag.'

'Who?'

'I didn't see.'

'How could you not see?' Sunshine asked.

'I was dozing. My eyes were shut, but I smelt it.'

'What did you smell?' Buck asked.

'Bottom,' said Jam.

'Oh for goodness' sake, you puppy, grow up,' Sunshine said. To the police dog she explained: 'Sorry. He's always been obsessed by that kind of thing.'

'No, I smelt bottom, human bottom.'

'How could you have? In the back of the Lanny at lunch-time? It's impossible,' said Sunshine.

'The accused entered the Land Rover backwards with his trousers round his knees,' said Buck. 'I can't see that standing up in court.'

'Well, it's what I smelt,' said Jam.

'Do you know whose bottom it was?' Buck asked.

Jam shook his head. 'But I'd know it again if I smelt it. It was the kind of bottom you don't forget.'

Buck started on another tack. 'You are certain it was the first time Banger used his second barrel after lunch that it exploded?'

'I think so,' said Jam.

'Thank you, Jam. I might just go back up to see what's going on.' The German Shepherd turned to the door.

'I'll come with you,' said Sunshine.

'Wait for me,' said Jam.

'Not you,' said Sunshine. 'You smell too much, they'll only throw us out. Lie there and give yourself a clean. And do your bollocks and bum - they're a disgrace. I'll tell you if anything interesting happens.'

'If you don't mind, Sunshine,' said Buck, 'I will ask Jam to come with us. Time for an identity parade. I want you to see if you can identify the person who opened the back of the Land Rover. Use that nose of yours to give each posterior a good sniff. I'm told it's very good.'

Sunshine, Buck and Jam padded up the worn stone staircase into the upper hall, and along the chilly dark corridor towards the voices.

As they came into the dining room, Constable Powell said, 'Ah, here's Sunshine, Mr Peyton-Crumbe's favourite dog. Probably looking for him, poor girl. Hello, Sunshine! They're amazing, these old dogs, they have a sixth sense that something is up.' He reached for a piece of fruit cake and bent down to feed her.

Sartorial fashion was crucial among the shooting fraternity, where a restrained dandyism was *de rigueur*. There was often a direct relationship between the garishness of the get-up and the ability of a Gun, and as all of Banger's guests were masters of the art of shooting, when the thick coats and boots of the field had been removed and left at the door of the Hall, some subtle but significant displays of colour were visible at dog level. Jam moved amongst the monogrammed slippers, suede loafers and soft velvet shoes, with their worsted, plaited and knitted knee socks, each its own carefully picked shade, and each bearing its own tufted coloured garter, and had a good sniff at the tweed behinds, one by one.

'Any of them ring a bell?' Buck asked.

'I can't smell a thing with this cigarette smoke and gunpowder stench,' Jam said. 'Can you?'

'I'm afraid I have an impaired sense of smell,' Buck admitted. 'Well, I am what they call smell-blind. I can smell things but get confused between some scents. Banana and vanilla are two, and leaves and wood are another pair. It's not that uncommon.'

'Don't you have trouble in the police force?' Sunshine asked.

'Not any more, now I'm on the beat, but I admit it held me back earlier in my career. I used to be in the Drugs Squad. After only three months I was seconded to Heathrow Airport,' said Buck. 'Terminal Three Arrivals, a big promotion. On my second day I let through a woman with a suitcase full of fresh marijuana while busting a businessman for possession of three pencils. My paws barely touched the ground. I was drummed out of the squad and nearly out of the force, but luckily PC Powell saw me at the pound and asked to adopt me at Llangollen.'

'Sorry,' Jam said, after completing a circuit of the room. 'Nothing doing.'

William looked down at Sunshine and sighed. 'I don't know what we'll do about her,' he said, stuffing a Gentleman's Relish sandwich into his mouth. 'One of us might take on Jam, he's such a good worker, but that old bitch is well past it, poor girl. Might have to have her put down, unless Victoria takes her.' Victoria was Banger's forty-year-old daughter, who lived in a house full of pet dogs on the estate.

'Go back downstairs, but don't stray too far,' said Buck to Jam. 'I may need you to answer some more questions.'

'So you really think one of these killed Banger?' Sunshine said.

'If Jam is to be believed, and it looks that way, it is very hard to think that Banger would have made such a mistake,' said Buck.

'Yes, he wasn't like that,' said Sunshine.

Buck sighed. 'Well, but there's bugger all I can do about it.'

'Mmm,' agreed Sunshine. 'The affairs of humans are not to be meddled with by the likes of us.'

'It can be very frustrating,' said the German Shepherd. 'Last year there was a burglar at large in Llangollen. Every cat and dog in town knew who it was, but it took the police four months to make an arrest, and even then they got the wrong man. But that's how it is. I love Constable Powell, but how often does he get hold of the wrong end of the stick? Everyone at the station laughs at him behind his back ... well, some to his face. Horrible to see. He's not top dog, he's nowhere near top dog at the station. He's bottom dog, even below me. Sad, eh?'

'Talking of Victoria,' said Constable Powell to William, 'may I ask you to break the news to her?'

'Of course,' said William.

'Not a very nice job, I'm afraid, sir,' said Constable Powell.

‘Yes, but I think it would be best coming from me. I’ll go and see her right away.’

William conducted Constable Powell to the front door. Buck studied his velvet slippers; they smelt of perfume. Sunshine padded behind to get a pat and a little cuddle from Constable Powell, who bent down to stroke her when she gave him her most hammy tragic whimper.

‘It’s as if the poor girl knows, isn’t it?’ said the constable, giving her a rub. ‘Uncanny.’

Buck jumped into the back of the van and went forward to listen to Constable Powell at the mesh. The constable often bounced ideas off Buck. As soon as they were on their way down the drive and through the big gates, the policeman first did what he always did when alone with Buck: gave his nose a good picking. Then he said, ‘The clue, my dear Watson,’ that was Powell’s little joke, ‘is in the fact that it occurred on the first drive after luncheon ...’

Buck stared at the human. Had he actually worked out that the circumstances were suspicious? Had he noticed, as Buck had, the crucial fact that the gun was unattended for an hour before it blew up?

‘That was when the deceased partook of the alcohol that caused him to make his misjudgement. The proof of this is a near-empty flask of his home-made sloe gin I found in the pocket of his shooting jacket. I know how strong that stuff was. Case closed. Death by misadventure. Tea and crumpets back at the station?’

Buck looked at his friend. This was exactly why Powell had been passed over for promotion all these years. Lovely man, but hopeless at police work. Buck allowed himself to dream: how would it be if he, Buck, were to solve the murder, right under the D.I.’s nose, here in Llangollen? Think what that would do for Powell’s reputation and career. But Buck knew that he was no more likely to affect the investigation of this case than one on the television. When Constable Powell shouted at the detective on

'Midsommer Murders', 'He didn't do it, you tumptie, you're arresting the wrong suspect!' Buck looked at him in the eerie TV glow and thought, That's what it's like being an animal - we can shout till we're blue in the face, but the show goes on.

His Master's Boots

THE SHOOTING GUESTS soon left, shepherded by William onto the gravel drive. Despite the tragedy, the gamekeeper hung around for his tips. Why make things even worse than they already were? On shoot days he wore a waistcoat with eight pockets so he could tuck the tips away, apparently indifferent to the size of each. Back in his cottage in the woods, he would count the contents of each pocket to see who had given what. The cars eventually drew away, leaving William and Sunshine standing in the gathering gloom, the wet air now transforming into a motionless rain that beaded their coats with glistening damp and shrouded the upper turrets and ornamental battlements of Llanrisant Hall.

Sunshine was expecting William to drive straight over and break the news to Victoria, and she was determined to go with him if she could. If she was around when Banger's daughter heard about the tragedy, Sunshine might catch her at a particularly sentimental moment and inveigle herself into Victoria's household by looking really pathetic. She could put on her limp - Victoria was a sucker for the limp - and the shakes, though she didn't want to overdo it, as that could end up with Griffiths, and the shovel that he had used to dig the grave for Bomber, Sunshine's long deceased father, or a Cluttons situation. Cluttons were the