

Tales of the Great Unwashed

Ian Brotherhood

“PHEW. WHAT A Scorcher,” puffs Frank.

“That’s easy for you to say. You don’t have to work in it sure you don’t,” intones Joe, wiping his brow with a callused hand.

Frank was once the editor of the *Stewarton Tribune*, and he thinks and speaks in headlines. He dreams still of the perfect attention grabber, the phrase which will stamp itself indelibly onto the collective unconscious.

Joe cannot read, and ascribes Frank’s laconic air to dipsomania. Frank treats Joe (veteran navy with the Roads Department) as an item of genuine anthropological interest—a text-book dunderhead whose existence belies the nebulous concept that there is dignity in labour.

Today *The Great Unwashed* has open doors, the first burst of Summer upon us. It’s as if we’ve never seen weather like it, and little else has been talked of all day. But the subject suddenly changes as Frank buys a round.

“What do you make of this Channel Five then?” moots Joe.

“Video Tuning Chaos Looms,” retorts Frank with a grimace.

“Makes no sense if you ask me. That’s them four channels all on the go, and not a decent thing to watch anyway. There’s the cable telly, and the satellite dishes, and videos on top of that. No need for number five, that’s what I say.” Joe sucks a full half pint of tepid lager through the gap between his three remaining front teeth and wipes his freckled brow again.

“Channel Five Big Turn-off,” says Frank with an air of resignation.

“Anyway, I know a fella who uses a bin-lid to catch the Sky telly and it’s as good a picture as you get with the fancy things. Same shape, and that’s what counts.”

“Man Catches Trash From Sky.” Frank’s eyes light up—possibilities there.

“And what’s the point in the cables, digging bloody great trenches all over and there’s the satellites up there? Why don’t them cable lads ask the satellite fellas to send out the stuff for them and it saves all that sweat. Makes a fine mess of the pavements anyroad.”

“Cable Finally Buried,” moans Frank, before adding, with genuine relish, “Murdoch Makes Feeble Bid.”

Joe immediately warms, his pet topic introduced. “Now, did I tell you I got the man’s autograph?” Frank buries his face, *deja-vu* sweeping over him.

“Bobby Murdoch. A true gentleman. If I’d ever got a hold of Ronnie Simpson that’d be me with all the Lisbon Lions, and there’s not many can say that.”

“Surname Confusion Leads To Argument.”

Bernie “The Bolt” Henderson enters, and I’ve his whisky poured before he reaches the bar. Bernie sells oranges in the precinct and makes more than I do. He greets all present with a hearty belch and relates good tiding.

“Sixteen crates in four hours. That’s a record,” he says with a boyish grin.

“Haven’t heard it. Is it in the charts?” splutters Joe into his lager.

“Man Pushed Too Far,” groans Frank as Bernie shoves a large voddy and coke besides his pint.

“And three bananas. Good margin there boys, that’s sixteen quid just like that.”

“Jazes Bernie, that’s an awful price for three bananas.”

“Bananas Going Like Hotcakes.”

“How about Channel Five then Bernie? What’ll that be about eh?” says Joe earnestly—he loves nothing better than a good debate.

“Well that’s your Nintendo and Sega people cracking up ‘cos it’ll interfere with Sonic the Hedgehog. Whatever’s on Channel Five comes through onto the picture, so you’ll get a shadow there,” says Bernie with authority.

“Interfering with hedgehogs isn’t right.”

“New Channel Runs Over World-famous Hedgepig.”

“Personally, I hope Branson gets it. After all, he lost out with the lottery. He’s come a long way, and all on the back of that Tubular Bells,” says Bernie.

Joe winces. “Tubular Bells? You can get ointment for that sort of thing.”

Bernie warms to the subject. “And that other thing he did that was a great idea, the UK 2000 project, picking up crisp pokes in the park with Maggie Thatcher.”

“Eccentric Litter Scheme Binned.”

Joe pulls strands together in his inimitable way. “He’s your man there, with the bin lids, gets it for nothing with a bit of copper and a brassneck. Give it to him then, and that’s the answer.”

“What worries me isn’t having another channel, it’s what’ll be on it.” Bernie savours the silence as we all ponder the prospects. Frank Frowns, Joe sucks his teeth.

“Personally, I’d like to see the pioneering spirit of Channel 4 carried a stage further.”

“Man Demands Explanation.”

“Minority interests. They need to be more minoritised. I’d make time to watch a programme about brewing your own beer. I mean, there’s millions of folk doing it, why not cater for them?”

Joe makes what he believes to be an expression of intelligent interjection. “Cobblers! next thing you’ll have programmes for glue-sniffers and people who keep toads as pets. You can’t encourage that sort of thing. It’s not right.”

“Vivaria Pointlessly Slammed.”

“It’s a hobby,” Bernie calmly points out.

“It shouldn’t be, it’s a secret.”

“Obscure Beer Recipes Revealed.”

“There’s programmes about how to cook a decent meal, and how to grow plants, how to kayak through the Gulf of Corryvreckan, even how to decorate your toilet. Don’t tell me there’s more people want to know how to do-up their bog than make a half-decent ale.”

“Don’t bring the toilet into this.”

“Storm In A Lavvy.”

Joe Reddens, that famous temper starting to twitch. “There’s folk that dig holes in roads, and others sell bananas, and there’s a blessed few making the beer, and you’d

have them destituting themselves on the telly for what?”

“The enlightenment of the masses.”

“You can’t put mass on telly, it’ll stop folk going, just like the football.”

“Virtual Holy Communion A Step Nearer.”

Bernie snaps. “Mark my words, if we don’t tell them what we want to see, we’ll end up with more soaps and sit-coms. Is that what you want then?”

Joe, aware that a question has been asked, lapses into a doleful silence.

“Bonehead Speechless.”

Joe quietly dribbles onto the bar as the evening sunlight glances through the open door. There will be much quaffing on the proceeds of Bernie’s bananas, and the lads will stay till closing time—and why not? There’s nothing decent on tonight anyway.