

Little Mister Poonlop's Seventh Holiday



by J D Lowe

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Little Mr Poonlop's Seventh Holiday

to Zoë, Chloë, Adam and Madam (my kid sister)

by J D Lowe

Chapter 1

The cheerily chirping little birds told little Mr Poonlop it was a fine day in early spring. So little Mr Poonlop got out of his little bed, put on his little dressing gown and went over to his little bedroom window.

He opened his little curtains and looked out into his little garden. It was indeed a lovely sunny day. Not very warm but lovely. Well, quite chilly actually but at least it wasn't raining. Little Mr Poonlop said it was all right anyway and I said he couldn't expect me to write much better weather at that time of year.

So after little Mr Poonlop had been to his little toilet and washed his little hands, he went down his little stairs to his little kitchen and put his little kettle on. He cut two slices of bread from his little loaf and put them under his little grill. Then he opened his little fridge and took out a little bottle of milk.

Let's just stop for a moment.

By now you may have just noticed that everything in Mr Poonlop's life is ... well, a bit on the small side. I don't know if you're fed up with hearing the word "little" yet but I know that Mr Poonlop is. And I'm certainly tired of writing it.

So, from now on, just take it for granted that everything in this story is little, unless I say it's big, and I promise I won't keep using that word all the time.

Okay?

Where was I? Oh, yes ...

Mister Poonlop was just about to make a nice little (Oops! Sorry!) cup of tea, when there was a tap on his front door. In fact there were two taps on his front door, one marked **hot** and the other marked **hot**.

You see, unfortunately for Mr Poonlop, when his house was being built, the architects had a rather jolly office party. At this party, some of them had a bit too much to drink and started behaving in a very silly way. They decided it would be great fun to mess around with the plans for Mr Poonlop's new house.

That was why Mr Poonlop had to turn on the light switch in his airing cupboard to make his shower run and why he had two hot taps on his front door.

Now I've explained all that to you, Mr Poonlop can go and answer the door, because there was also somebody knocking on it.

Chapter 2

Mr Poonlop opened the door and found his friend Sid standing there. Sid was knocking at the door because he had some post for Mr Poonlop. He had some post because he was a postman.

'Hello, Sid,' said Mr Poonlop.

Now, Sid had to knock at the door to give Mr Poonlop his post because, although Mr Poonlop's house had three letterboxes, two of them were on the roof and the other was in the cellar, thanks to those tiddly architects. Mr Poonlop didn't mind this because it gave him a chance for a chat with his friend whenever there was any post for him. And that was why Sid was so surprised this morning when, straight after saying, 'Hello, Sid' to him, Mr Poonlop added, 'Sorry! Can't stop!'

He grabbed the pile of envelopes from Sid's hands and ran back into the house, slamming the door behind him and leaving the poor postman staring at two hot taps and a loo-roll holder.

Please do not think that Mr Poonlop is in any way a rude little man. It's very early in the story and I do want you to like him. He really is very nice indeed to everyone he meets and to all the furry little animals.

Yes, and birds and fish and reptiles and ... look, he's nice to everything, all right? He was too nice to complain about all the silly things the builders did to his house, so he's hardly likely to be nasty to his friend the postman, is he?

No: I'm afraid it was all my fault.

The truth is that Mr Poonlop had to rush back into the kitchen to rescue his toast from under the grill, where I was writing flames all over it. He had trouble seeing his way to the stove too, because I was also writing lots of steam from the kettle, which had boiled nearly dry. But he managed to turn everything off and blow out the flames.

Instead of toast he now had two pieces of warm charcoal and there wasn't enough water in the kettle for a cup of tea, so he cut himself two more slices of bread and refilled the kettle, muttering about mean-minded authors who make life difficult, just to get a cheap laugh (I think he meant me).

With the kettle back on the stove and two new slices toasting under the grill, Mr Poonlop settled down to look at his post. He was quite excited to get so many envelopes. Unfortunately, as he looked through them, he sighed with disappointment.

'Bill ... Bill ... Bill ... Bill ...,' he said, as he looked at most of them.

He gathered them together and took them straight to the house next door.

'Here, Bill; these are yours,' he said to his neighbour (it's a good job that you're a young reader, because that is a very old joke!), 'I grabbed them off Sid by mistake because I ... Oh, no!' With that, he ran off home, leaving poor Bill looking very confused.

Mr Poonlop cut two more slices of bread, threw two more pieces of charcoal in the bin and filled his kettle once again. He opened his back door to let out the smoke and steam, sat on his doorstep and looked at his garden.

He looked at the chimney, which was in the middle of his lawn, upside down. This wasn't just the architects' fault. Of course they hadn't helped by instructing the builders to fix it to the roof with cheese spread instead of cement, but you couldn't blame them for the high wind that actually blew it off. It had been embedded in the grass all winter and this was quite worrying because it meant that every time Mr Poonlop lit a fire all the smoke went into the middle of his garden.

'That's another thing I ought to get fixed this Spring,' he thought; and he went back into the kitchen to have another go at making his breakfast and reading his post.

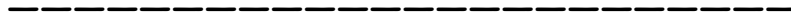
Chapter 4

So little Mr Poonlop got dressed and ...

'What happened to Chapter Three?' he asked me.

'Good point,' I replied.

Sorry about that ...



Chapter 3

When he went back inside, Mr Poonlop found that the air had cleared and I had written him a nice pot of tea and two slices of golden toast. I'd even written hot, melting butter over them. I hadn't opened his letters or read them though, because people prefer to do that for themselves.

Most of the envelopes contained junk mail. In fact, due to a slight spelling mistake, one of them contained gunk mail and poor Mr Poonlop had to wash his hands after opening it, muttering to himself about stupid authors who ought to get a dictionary (I think he meant me).

There was only one real letter, from his Auntie Mildred in Cornwall.

The letter asked Mr Poonlop how he was keeping, told him his Auntie was fine, told him the weather in Cornwall was fine and that Auntie Mildred's dog, Wibble, had gone missing for three days but had turned up safe and sound four days later.

Then it told him that the weather in Cornwall was fine, asked how he was keeping, asked how the weather was where he lived, told him that Wibble had gone missing for a week but then turned up the day before and that his Auntie Mildred was fine.

...

Then, on page nine, it told him that his Auntie was fine, that the weather where he was was fine, asked him how the weather in Wibble was keeping and told him that his dog, Cornwall had turned up for three days but then gone missing.

His Auntie Mildred had always been a bit forgetful. In fact her name wasn't Auntie Mildred but she'd forgotten what it was years ago. Mr Poonlop couldn't remind her either because he had no idea who she was at all.

He didn't mind though because she'd also enclosed a card and a ten pound note for his birthday. In fact, being so forgetful, she'd actually enclosed five cards and four ten pound notes. He

couldn't help but smile — it wasn't his birthday! In fact, Auntie Mildred's cards were exactly one year late.

After reading that, he was about to throw the other mail in the waste bin, when he realised that one of the items was a travel brochure. Idly he flicked through its glossy pages, showing exotic locations, sun-kissed beaches and happy, smiling holidaymakers.

And he realised that a holiday was just what he needed.

Before we start Chapter 4 again, this might be a good time to explain something about this story.

As I'm sure you know, to make books for young people sound more interesting than they ever really are, the titles are always about the biggest, the best, the first and so on. You know the sort of thing: "The Littlest Fairy", "Annabelle's First Chicken Sandwich", "The Best Bottom in the World" or "Jimmy's Longest Worm".

So obviously I wanted to call this story, "Little Mr Poonlop's First Holiday".

But then Mr Poonlop said that was terribly unfair. If this was to be his first holiday, then he must have been a very sad little man who never had one before. I said that we could just pretend but he said that if I wrote that it was his first holiday, then it would be true. In fact he said that if I called it "Little Mr Poonlop's First Holiday", he would refuse to be in the story and that would have made it very difficult for me to write and even worse for you to read.

So, after a lot of arguing, we agreed that he had been on six holidays before, mostly to the seaside, where he'd had a wonderful time - and I could call this story "Little Mr Poonlop's Seventh Holiday"

Chapter 4

So little Mr Poonlop got dressed and went out into Acacacacia Avenue, the street on which he lived. The road was supposed to be called simply Acacia Avenue but town planners sometimes have office parties, just like architects.

At the end of the street he turned left. Then he turned left again and walked back along Acacacacia Avenue to his house. He had just noticed that I had written a differently coloured sock on each of his feet. He went indoors to change them, muttering to himself about authors who waste their characters' time with silly little tricks (who do you think he meant?).

Then he left the house again, properly dressed. He was wearing warm clothing, including a cardigan and a jumper, because I'd written quite a nippy day. He didn't have an umbrella because I'd promised not to write any rain — even though I do make a few silly things happen to Mr. Poonlop, I never fib to him.

So he had no umbrella. On the other hand, he did have a glove. In fact he had a nice warm woolly glove on each hand. As you already know, it was a chilly morning in early Spring and this will seem perfectly sensible if you live on that soggy island called Great Britain. I do and so does Mr Poonlop, who was now standing, snugly dressed, at the number 37 bus stop. If you live anywhere else, you might think of Spring as the time of year when the weather starts to get warmer; but in Britain, Spring is the time of year when the weather starts to stay cold.

While I'm telling you this, perhaps you'd like to know why this place is called 'Great' Britain. Lots of people who live there think it's because it was once the owner of a great empire or because industry was invented there or just because it's a great place to live, despite the cold weather and the rain and the badly run trains and buses and stuff. But even though it has been a very important country in the history of the world and can be a wonderful place to live, the name has nothing to do with that at all.

It's called Great Britain because some people came to live here, hundreds of years ago, from a part of France called Brittany, which was getting rather too crowded for their liking. And when they came here looking for a bit of peace and quiet, it reminded them of their own home. Perhaps this was because it was always cold and wet and miserable. The only difference was that it was bigger. So they called it Great Brittany to distinguish it from the smaller Brittany they'd left behind.

Eventually the letter Y got rusty and fell off the end. But most of the people stayed here anyway and, as the years went by, others came to join them from all sorts of places and they all became Great British people and invented pots of tea and cricket and fish and chips and grumbling. And of course they invented holidays, so they could go to other places where the weather was nicer — but where they could still find things to grumble about.

In fact, little Mr Poonlop was grumbling at that very moment about stupid authors who waffle on with boring history lessons instead of writing about buses coming to take him into town. So I apologised to him (and to you — sorry!) and, at the next moment, a number 37 bus hurtled round the corner. With a loud squeal of brakes, it skidded to a halt at the stop and opened its doors. Mr Poonlop got on and, while he bought a ticket to town, I had to apologise to all the other passengers for making the bus go so fast and stop so suddenly. Some of them were quite shaken and rather cross with me.

So, as Mr Poonlop sat down, two young people with jolly, smiling faces skipped onto the bus. They were dressed in bright yellow jackets and shocking pink trousers, so that looking at them made Mr Poonlop feel quite cheerful but also made his eyes hurt.

Instead of buying tickets, they each produced a water pistol from their jacket pockets and squirted the bus driver with lemonade, which made all the passengers laugh. Then one of them handed the driver a large red spotted handkerchief so he could mop his face. As soon as he was dry again, he started the bus and drove into town — at a more sensible speed.

Meanwhile the two jolly people danced up and down the bus, pulling funny faces, making silly noises and every now and then stopping to offer sweets, drinks and bags of crisps to the passengers. Soon everybody on the bus was a lot happier, so the jolly two pointed their pistols at the driver again and shouted, in a jokey way, 'Stop the bus now, or we squirt!'

The driver laughed loudly but did as he was told and opened the doors before they even told him to. Then they squirted him anyway and leapt off the bus. 'Bye, bye!' they called and everybody waved to them as the bus continued on its way.

'You're mad!' said Mr Poonlop, smiling. The people sitting near him had no idea who he was talking to. But we know, don't we?

Chapter 5

In the centre of town, Mr Poonlop got off the bus, struggling with a heavy bag which was full of sausages. Seeing him struggle, Mr Poonlop got up to help him.

'Thank you Mr Poonlop,' said Mr Poonlop.

'It's a pleasure, Mr Poonlop,' said Mr Poonlop. 'In fact, I might as well get off here, myself.'

He had just noticed a row of shops right by the bus stop which included just what he was looking for. So, saying goodbye to the bus driver, the passengers and the other Mr Poonlop, he walked into the Estate Agents.

'Hello sir,' said the agent, Stephen Spratwarbler.

'Hello Mr Spratwarbler,' said Mr Poonlop. He had never met the man before but he could read his name on a plate on the desk. Mr Poonlop thought it a bit strange for a man to have his name written on a plate. He also thought what a good thing it was that there was no food on the plate to stop him reading the man's name. In fact Mr Spratwarbler had eaten his last baked bean and raspberry jam sandwich only a few minutes before, just in case anybody came into the shop. There were still a few crumbs and blobs of tomato sauce on the plate but they were not enough to stop anyone from reading the name of Stephen Spratwarbler.

Now you may have noticed that I got rather stuck in the last paragraph and went on and on with a rather silly idea about a "nameplate". While I was doing that, Mr Spratwarbler patiently gestured to Mr Poonlop to sit down and asked how he could help.

'Well,' began Mr Poonlop, 'I'd like to go somewhere different, preferably a bit warmer and sunnier.'

Immediately, the helpful Mr Spratwarbler took a sheaf of papers from a drawer in his desk. He selected one and put it in front of Mr Poonlop. It showed a picture of a nice little house, with a pretty garden full of rose bushes.

'I think this could be just the thing for you,' said Mr Spratwarbler. 'It's on the South side of town, it has two lovely large bedrooms and it costs just forty thousand pounds.'

'Forty thousand pounds?!' exclaimed Mr Poonlop. 'Is that for a week or a fortnight?'

'No, no! That's to own it, of course,' explained a very confused Stephen Spratwarbler.

'I hadn't meant to buy a place,' said Mr Poonlop, 'and I was hoping to go somewhere more interesting than the South side of town.'

'Oh, you want to rent somewhere. And a bit farther afield?' asked Mr Spratwarbler, which meant it was Mr Poonlop's turn to be confused.

'I didn't want to stay in a field anywhere,' he said. 'I don't fancy camping very much.'

'No, no, no,' said Mr Spratwarbler, Mr Spratwarbler, Mr Spratwarbler. 'I mean, you want to set up home in a location at a greater distance from here.'

'I don't want to "set up home" at all,' cried Mr Poonlop. 'I only want to stay somewhere nice for my seventh holiday.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Mr Spratwarbler, with an exclamation mark and a big smile. 'I understand now. You must be little Mr Poonlop.'

'Yes, I am,' admitted little Mr Poonlop, because he was.

'Then I know exactly what's wrong,' said Mr Spratwarbler, because he did. 'You want to book your seventh holiday but you've come to the wrong place. You've come to Spratwarbler and Glupp, Estate Agents. We sell and rent properties for people to live in, particularly in this area. You should have gone into Trubble-Free Travvle, next door. They are travel agents.'

'Oh dear, I am sorry,' said Mr Poonlop, quite embarrassed.

'Please don't be quite embarrassed, Mr Poonlop,' said Mr Spratwarbler. 'It's not your fault. It's some silly author who keeps getting these things mixed up.'

And he was right. I do sometimes say Estate Agent when I mean Travel Agent. I often say crossword puzzle when I mean

jigsaw puzzle. And I nearly always say artichoke when I really mean to say artichoke. It can be quite a problem. Not only have I had to write all this about Mr Poonlop wasting his time in the wrong shop but, because I just happened to write it while Mr Glopp was out of the office, I've had to keep writing Mr Spratwarbler's much longer name all the time. My hand is getting tired.

But at least Mr Poonlop and Mr Spratwarbler parted as good friends. Mr Spratwarbler said he hoped Mr Poonlop had a really wonderful seventh holiday and Mr Poonlop said he hoped Mr Spratwarbler would sell his lovely two bedroom-house with the nice garden on the South side of town really soon.

Then Mr Poonlop went out of the shop and through the next door to visit the Trubble Free Estate Agent.

'TRAVVLE Agent,' chorused Mr Poonlop and Mr Spratwarbler, loudly.

Chapter 6

The woman in the travel agent didn't have any sort of plate with a name on it but she did have a small badge on her chest which had the word **BADGE** on it. Mr Poonlop decided that this was not her name but just another of my silly jokes. She didn't guess who Mr Poonlop was when he announced that he wanted her to help him book his seventh holiday but she was very nice anyway. In fact, I'm only letting people be in this book if they are nice. She asked Mr Poonlop how soon he was thinking of taking his holiday. When he said that he wanted to go as soon as he could, she suggested that he try a skiing holiday.

'There's still plenty of snow on the higher Alpine slopes and especially in some of the East European resorts, which are jolly good value. And the skies are lovely and clear too,' she told him enthusiastically.

'But it's still quite cold, isn't it?' suggested Mr Poonlop. 'I assume it must be or the snow would have melted.'

'Well, yes, it's cold enough for snow but you'd be wrapped up nice and warm. And it's a very active holiday,' she added, wishing she could go skiing soon. 'Lots of exercise — you'd hardly feel the cold at all. Then you'd spend the evenings by a log fire, eating and drinking with all the other skiers.'

'I don't know,' said Mr Poonlop, shaking his head. He explained to her that I was often heard to say how strange it was that so many people should wait until the weather at home got even colder than usual, only to spend lots of money to go somewhere colder still.

'That's easy to explain,' said the assistant, who would rather have been in a ski resort than behind a desk at Trubble Free Travvle. 'It's so they can enjoy the company and playing on sledges and, most of all, the skiing.'

She was getting quite excited just talking about it but Mr Poonlop told her that another thing I often said was that I couldn't understand why people should pay good money to be

pulled all the way up a hill, only to slide or even fall straight down it again.

'Well sir,' said the assistant with a bemused look, 'your author sounds a bit of an old misery-guts to me. I really think you ...'

Before she could say another word, I changed the subject. I also changed the assistant and Mr Poonlop suddenly found himself sitting opposite a pleasantly smiling grey-haired gentleman who was asking Mr Poonlop just how far afield he was thinking of travelling.

Mr Poonlop was about to say that he didn't want to stay in a field at all, when I remembered that I'd already done that joke and it wasn't very funny the first time. The man continued.

'The reason I asked,' the man continued, 'is that, whereas in other countries the Spring is the time of year when the weather starts to get warmer, here in Britain it's when it starts to stay cold.'

Mr Poonlop told him we'd already done that joke too.

Carmelia Spilsby sped down the hill in her bright green ski outfit. Going over a bump, she flew through the air but came down perfectly on her skis, just in time to execute a perfect side slip and turn. She slid to the left to avoid a couple of slower skiers, before stopping neatly a few yards from the ski lift that was waiting to take her back up the mountain.

This was fantastic! Only a few minutes earlier, she'd been sitting at her desk in Trubble Free Travvle Agents, talking to a pleasant little man with a rather miserable author and now here she was on a lovely ski slope in bright sunshine. And she had a free all-day pass for the ski lifts. This was much more fun. She didn't see the huge hairy monster with big, pointed teeth creeping up behind her, holding a blood-stained axe. Neither did anybody else, because there wasn't one.

By an amazing coincidence that only happens in books like this, there was no such monster creeping up behind Mr Poonlop either.

There was however a pile of travel brochures on the table, between him and the grey-haired gentleman, that was getting bigger and bigger all the time. Mr Poonlop just could not make up his mind. All the places in the brochures looked really interesting, really picturesque. And all the hotels looked nice and clean and had all the facilities he could wish for.

But the trouble was, all the places, all the hotels, even the happy, smiling faces by the pools — they all looked the same. So the more brochures Mr Poonlop saw, the harder it became to make any decisions. Even when he looked at more exotic locations in more distant lands, he couldn't choose which one was right for his seventh holiday.

He really did want to make this a rather special holiday, especially as you were going to read all about it, which just goes to show what a kind, considerate little fellow he is. But there were so many wonderful choices that he was totally confused. And there was something else bothering him too, even though he couldn't think just what it was.

The travel agent knew though.

'Sir,' he said, ...

And then he climbed onto his chair and said it again.

'Sir,'

He was standing on his chair in order to see Mr Poonlop over the huge pile of brochures.

'Sir,' he repeated, looking down at Mr Poonlop, ...

After all, for all he knew, when he was sitting down Mr Poonlop could have left the shop and gone for a cup of tea.

'If your author would be so kind as to let me continue,' he said, politely but firmly, 'I was going to say that I think I know what's bothering you.'

'Oh good,' said Mr Poonlop with a sense of relief.

'Yes sir,' continued the agent from over the pile of brochures; 'I think your problem is that you don't really want what we in the trade call a package holiday at all.'

Chapter 7

'Excuse me one moment,' said Little Mr Poonlop to the travel agent. Then he asked me why I'd started a new chapter when he was still sitting in the same travel agents, being told what the same problem was by the same pleasantly-smiling, grey-haired gentleman as he was in Chapter Six.

I explained that although I normally do end a chapter at a change in the story, I thought Chapter Six was getting a bit long. I remembered all those times people had said to me 'One more chapter and then bed.' I didn't want to cause any trouble in your family by writing a chapter that might take all night to read.

Mr Poonlop was quite happy with that explanation, so he apologised to the travel agent and asked him to continue.

The agent pointed out that Mr Poonlop probably wanted a different and interesting holiday, perhaps with a few surprises. So a package holiday, where everything was planned out for him in advance might be a disappointment.

This worried Mr Poonlop, who said that he wasn't interested in anything risky or dangerous but the agent pointed out that even a package holiday could be a disaster if things went wrong. He hinted that the most dangerous part of his holiday was what his author might write for him (yes, he meant me).

Mr Poonlop assured him that he had every confidence nothing really unpleasant would be written for him. The doors of the shop clattered open and five men dressed as cowboys with big black hats rode in on horses.

'Arriba! Arriba!' they shouted and fired their guns in the air, causing flakes of plaster to fall from the ceiling and land on the pile of brochures. Then the cowboys laughed and rode back out into the street.

'I see,' said the gentleman, flicking plaster from his suit and hair. He began to take the brochures off the desk so that he could sit down and still see Mr Poonlop but, as he did so, a huge pink and blue spotted lizard strode into the shop. It stood there, lashing its scaly tail from side to side, staring at Mr Poonlop with flaming red eyes that glowed like the very fires of Hell. It opened its long, powerful jaws to show row upon row of sharp pointed teeth.

'Excuse me,' it said, 'I was thinking of buying a house in this area. Have I come to the right place?'

'No, no, no,' said Mr Poonlop, Mr Poonlop, Mr Poonlop. 'You want the shop next door — Spratwarbler and Glopp. They're estate agents.'

'Thank you so much, my good man,' said the lizard. 'I've a feeling you and I share the same author.' And with that he left.

When Mr Poonlop turned round he saw that the travel agent was once again facing him across an empty desk.

'I think I see your point,' he said. 'I don't doubt you'll have a safe holiday, though I'm glad I won't be with you. Now, if I might make a few basic suggestions ...'

'Oh please do,' Said Mr Poonlop. 'Though I think, after all that, we'd better start another new chapter.'

Chapter 8

Poor Mr Poonlop. He left the travel agent more confused than when he went in. It's nice to have choices in life but sometimes that just makes it harder to make up your mind. If the agent had just told Mr Poonlop he could either go to the seaside in Italy for two weeks for one hundred pounds or have his legs chopped off in a coal mine in Siberia for two thousand, it would have been an easy choice. But, as well as these two ideas, the man had suggested about twenty three more.

He wasn't trying to confuse Mr Poonlop, not at all. He just wanted to give him some idea of how easy it was to put together a holiday, even if you arranged all the different bits for yourself. He even promised he could help with the details — once Mr Poonlop decided how he actually wanted to spend his seventh holiday.

The nice man had also used his computer to print out some useful numbers: how much things might cost and how long it would take to get from Acacacacia Avenue to various interesting places; and how much the food or a hotel room might cost. Actually, he'd tried to use his computer to do this but computers never seem to do quite what people want. What he had really printed was a street map of the capital of Outer Mongolia and the menu from the Chinese take away in Rhododendron Drive, just round the corner from Mr Poonlop's house. This was not much use, so he'd written down the information, with a pen, on the back of the paper. He'd even given the pen to Mr Poonlop as a gift. It had a picture of the Tower of Pisa on it that leaned over just like the real one, whenever you tipped the pen slightly to one side. It also had the phone number of Trouble Free Travvle printed on it, so that Mr Poonlop could call if he had any more questions.

But all this only helped Mr Poonlop get slightly closer to a decision, so the agent advised him to read some guide books.

'There's a very good series called "Wary Wanderers", written especially for nervous or inexperienced tourists like yourself,' he

said. 'I think the writers are a bit scared to try out many of their ideas, so I don't know if you can trust everything they say but it may help. There's a different book for each country or popular destination.'

Mr Poonlop looked worried.

'You look worried, Mr Poonlop,' said the nice man. 'By the way, perhaps you and your author would like to call me Cedric, as that's my name today.'

'Thank you, Cedric,' said Mr Poonlop. 'I'm only worried because now I have to look at a lot of books before I can decide where to go!'

'Oh no,' said Cedric, reassuringly. 'I was about to say that they also do two very helpful books about interesting holidays called 'The Tentative Tourist' and 'The Terrified Traveller.' Either of those should give you an idea and then you can look at the right book for the area. We don't have a copy here but I know they have them both in the library down the High Street. It's just past the bus station, you know.'

And that's how Little Mr Poonlop found himself in the street that bright spring day, wondering how much longer this book would be before he went on his seventh holiday.

Chapter 9

Poor, poor Mr Poonlop.

'That's worse than the start of the last chapter,' complained Mr Poonlop.

'Oh yes,' I said, 'Sorry. I must have gone back a few pages by mistake.'

Mr Poonlop looked suspicious but he carried on down the street, past Spratwarbler and Glopp and past Mrs Trepannick's Cornish Nasty Shop. Mrs Trepannick was dyslexic. That means she wasn't very good at seeing words when they were written down. She certainly couldn't read a word as funny as 'dyslexic'. She made very nice Cornish Pasties but not many people bought any because of the sign in her window. People who knew her were very sorry for her but they didn't like to embarrass her by telling her that it really said Cornish Nasties. Mr Poonlop suggested that I could do something about it, so I said that if he bought a nasty from her on his way home from the library, I'd give her a nice new sign while nobody was looking.

Mr Poonlop thought this sounded fair. He was pleased for Mrs Trepannick because, as I keep telling you, he really is a very nice little man.

And that's also why he was very concerned by the sight of a little old lady struggling with a suitcase at the coach station. The case looked very heavy indeed and the poor lady had nobody to help her.

'Can I be of assistance, Madam?' asked Mr Poonlop, very graciously.

'Oh, thank you so much, young man,' said the lady in a relieved voice. 'My bus is about to go and I need to get this case into the luggage hold. The driver was in such a hurry, I told him I'd manage while he checked the tickets. It's the Local Little Old Ladies annual outing, you know, and I'm the Secretary of the Local Little Old Ladies Association so trust me to be the last one

to turn up — any road, he's got on the bus and he'll be closing the hold and driving off any minute so I really have to ...'

Mr Poonlop smiled and took the handle of the case in his hand. This made the little old lady stop talking just long enough for Mr Poonlop to speak without being rude and butting in.

'Leave it to me, madam,' he said. 'I'll put the case in here while you get on the bus. Tell the driver I'll bang twice on the side when it's stowed away and you're ready to go.'

'Oh, thank you ever so much, young man,' cried the Secretary of the Local Little Old Ladies Association. 'It's so good to meet somebody who's polite and helpful these days. I don't know how I'd have managed without you. I'd have had to get the driver back off the coach and I think he was already getting a bit fed up with me though I was only a few minutes late and we've plenty of time to get to ...'

Mr Poonlop didn't hear where the lady wanted to get to because she got on the bus at that moment, still chattering away. At the same time, he was struggling with her heavy case, wondering what on earth she could be taking on holiday that weighed so much.

'Maybe she collects cast-iron models of famous sandwiches,' I suggested.

Mr Poonlop didn't think I was being very helpful. As he finally slid the case into the hold, he grumbled that only a character written by me would be that strange. Then he stood up, panting.

But the case would not go in far enough for the door to close properly. Another one behind it was blocking the way. So it's lucky that Mr Poonlop is a little man, because he could easily crawl inside and move it. He knelt down behind the second case and shoved it on top of another one. Then he gave the Secretary's case a quick tug and it slid nicely into the gap.

Unfortunately, it also bumped into yet another case, on top of which a cardboard box had been precariously balanced.

The box slipped sideways and fell off.

'Clunk!' went the front edge of the box and:

'Clonk!' went the back edge that followed it.

'Oh dear,' thought Mr Poonlop. 'I hope nothing's broken,' and he tried to push the box neatly to one side so he could get out.

Oh yes, I forgot to mention that the driver heard the clunk and clonk noises too.

'Ah,' he thought, 'that's the signal. At last!'

And he pressed the button to close the doors and started up the engine of the coach.

Chapter 10

Poor, poor, poor Mr Poonlop.

Yes, he was right to be suspicious, wasn't he? But it was too late for that. Horrified, he tried to clamber over the box and the old lady's case but it was no use. He shouted out but he couldn't be heard over the engine of the coach.

So, where was I, you might be asking? How could I let this happen to Mr Poonlop? Well, if you must know, I was trying to be as nice as him, by keeping an eye on the Secretary of the Local Little Old Ladies Association. I wanted to make sure she got safely to her seat. Anyway, I don't like to interfere too much in Mr Poonlop's life, especially when interesting things might be happening to him. You wouldn't like it either: it could make this book very boring.

Little Mr Poonlop didn't think being trapped in the luggage compartment of a noisy coach was very interesting at all. With the doors closed, it was almost pitch black in there and with all the noise of the traffic there was no point in shouting or banging on the ceiling.

But Mr Poonlop is not the sort of little man who panics. He decided the best idea was to wait until the coach left the town, when things might be a bit quieter. Then he could make some noise and attract the passengers' attention. I suggested that he could use one of the Secretary's cast-iron sandwiches to bang loudly on the walls but apparently that idea was still not very helpful.

So to try and make things a bit easier for him, while Mr Poonlop's eyes got used to the gloom, I wrote a few soft cases and hold-alls among the luggage for him to rest on and make himself comfy,

I don't know why they are called hold-alls. You can't possibly get all the things in the world in them at once! Some of them are too small even to be called hold-lots. Many things have confusing names. A shop near me sells sandwiches with bacon and eggs and

sausage in them and calls them "All Day Breakfasts". But they never last me all day. I can eat one in less than five minutes. But when I complain, they don't give me my money back. In fact, they ask me to leave the shop and never go there again.

Mr Poonlop thought that my silly complaints about sandwich fillings were inconsiderate at a time when he was in such a bad fix. I don't know why. He agreed with me when I complained that it was wrong to sell tiny chocolate bars by calling them "Fun Size". We both thought that a fun size bar ought to be about the size of a baby elephant.

But he still complained that his current situation was more important than any food labels and I'm sure you'll agree he was right. So I let a bit more light into the hold and made sure that the coach was running on special fuel that smelled of flowers, instead of that nasty petrol stuff. Mr Poonlop said that made things a bit better and he settled back on the hold-a-bits, to wait as patiently as he could for the next chapter.

In fact he was so tired from moving all that luggage around that he fell asleep before we got there.

Chapter 11

Little Mr Poonlop is not a motor mechanic. He isn't an engineer of any sort. He doesn't even own a car. But he does know the basic principles of motorised transport. In particular, he knows that, when a coach is going somewhere, the wheels on the bus go round and round.

The members of the Local Little Old Ladies Association knew it too. When Mr Poonlop woke up from his little nap that's what he could hear them singing. They seemed very happy to tell the whole world, through their cheery song, that not only did the wheels on the bus go round and round, but that they did so all day long.

Not quite so accurately, they also sang that the bell on the bus goes ding, ding, ding. Mr Poonlop didn't think that the bus had a bell at all. He was pretty sure it had a horn and didn't doubt that the little old ladies were right that it would go beep, beep, beep, if the driver had reason to press it. But all in all, he assumed the song was not meant to be a truthful account of what was happening. So, however many times the little old ladies informed him that the wipers on the bus go swish, swish, swish, he didn't believe it was raining. After all, I'd promised him that it wouldn't.

The little old ladies finished their jolly song about all the things that might happen on a bus. Then they sang it again. In fact they sang it lots of times but eventually they got a bit bored and stopped.

Not for long.

Mr Poonlop didn't believe that five hundred green bottles had ever been standing on a wall. But he had to admit that if they had and if one green bottle had accidentally fallen, that would have left exactly four hundred and ninety nine green bottles standing on the same wall. He had to admit that the little old ladies were good at arithmetic, as they sang their song in which one bottle after another accidentally fell. It didn't seem to worry them

that a large amount of broken glass would be piling up at the bottom of the wall. And nobody seemed to care what sort of accident might be causing all these bottles to fall off the wall, one at a time. After all, thought Mr Poonlop, after only a few bottles had accidentally fallen, he'd be trying to find out why, so he could prevent the rest from doing the same.

I thought Mr Poonlop was beginning to take the jolly songs a bit too seriously but he told me that, in his experience, these were exactly the sort of thoughts that went through the mind of anybody trapped in the luggage compartment of a long-distance coach beneath a lot of little old ladies singing endless songs about wheels and bottles.

I don't think he was a very happy little man just then, so I promised he'd be getting out in the next chapter which would follow immediately.

Chapter 12

Two hundred and eighty seven bottles were still standing on the wall when the little old ladies of the Local Little Old Ladies Association suddenly stopped singing and started chattering excitedly. Even better, the wheels on the bus stopped going round and round and the driver turned off the engine.

Mr Poonlop felt quite excited too.

'The bus must have stopped so the little old ladies can go for a snack or stretch their legs,' he thought. 'Maybe if I start banging and shouting when they've all got off, somebody will hear me and open the hatch.'

But he didn't need to bang or shout at all. Only a few seconds after the bus stopped, the driver pressed the button to open the luggage compartments. Mr Poonlop scrambled towards the doors to see a number of very surprised-looking little old ladies.

'Oh, it's a stowaway!' shouted one.

'Help, help; he's been at our luggage!' cried another.

'Fish tanks! Fish tanks!' yelled a third, for no apparent reason.

'Oh, it's a stowaway!' shouted the first one again.

'Clap him in irons!' yelled the fish tanks lady, getting even more confused.

Then Mr Poonlop saw a familiar face.

'No, ladies,' said the Secretary of the Local Little Old Ladies Association: 'it's that nice little man I was telling you about — the one who helped with my luggage.'

'Tie him up! Throw him overboard!' cried the fish tanks lady, excitably.

'No, no, Emily,' said the Secretary to her excitable friend.

'He's a very nice little man. I'm sure he means no harm.'

Mr Poonlop tried to explain what had happened but the ladies didn't seem to want to listen.

'If you wanted to come with us you only had to ask,' said the Secretary. 'You could have sat on the coach in a comfy seat instead of hiding in there.'

'Yes, we've been singing lovely songs,' said Emily, who immediately started to sing about five hundred green bottles again. Some of the other little old ladies led her away by holding a packet of fruit shortcake biscuits in front of her nose.

'What's going on here?' demanded a man's voice. It was the driver, who had come to help the little old ladies with their cases.

'We've found a stowaway,' shouted Emily from behind the bus but she didn't finish the sentence because one of the other ladies stuck a fruit shortcake into her mouth, so that what she actually said was, 'We've found a stowmmff.'

The Secretary of the Local Little Old Ladies Association began to tell the driver, whose name was Bill, the whole story of how Mr Poonlop had helped her with her luggage. To make sure that she didn't miss anything out, she started by telling him what time she'd got up and what she had for breakfast. Bill didn't really want to hear all that again, so he smiled politely and led Mr Poonlop to one side.

'Perhaps you'd like to tell me a shorter story,' he said.

'It's very simple,' said Mr Poonlop, because it was. 'I was putting her luggage in the hold when another case fell down and went "clunk - clonk".'

'Clunk - clonk?' repeated the driver, to make sure he'd heard correctly.

'That's right, "clunk - clonk"', confirmed Mr Poonlop, 'and you must have thought that was me banging on the side of the bus, because the doors closed and you were on your way. I tried banging again but the little old ladies were having such a lovely time singing their songs that I couldn't make myself heard.'

'That's terrible,' said Bill, angrily.

'Why did you say that angrily?' asked Mr Poonlop.

'I didn't,' replied Bill. 'That's my name: Bill Angrily. Your author just wrote it down wrong. He's obviously a bit careless, if he lets you get stuck in a luggage hold.'

Mr Poonlop explained that he didn't really mind because I'd been looking after the Secretary of the Local Little Old Ladies Association at the time. Then he asked the driver when he might get a lift back to town and how far away they were.

The answer astonished him so much that, before I could tell you what it was, the chapter came to a sudden end.

Chapter 13

'Paris? But that's in Franceland,' said Mr Poonlop in a voice full of shock and panic.

'That's where I usually look for it,' said Bill Angrily, unhelpfully.

Luckily for Mr Poonlop, he suddenly turned into an eagle and flew back home, soaring majestically over Picardy and the English Channel.

Unluckily for Mr Poonlop, that was only a dream I had. In reality he was still standing in a coach station in Paris.

'But what are we doing in Paris?' he asked.

'This is the first stop on the Local Little Old Ladies' Association Spring Holiday Coach Tour,' explained Bill.

Oh dear,' said Mr Poonlop, because he couldn't think what else to say. Then he thought of a useful question and asked Bill when the bus would be going back to England. He didn't like the answer.

'Not for two weeks,' was the worst bit. 'I did say that this was the first stop on the Spring Holiday Tour. Tomorrow we go on South to Orleans. I hope they can think of some new songs by then.'

Mr Poonlop sympathised with Bill but was beginning to feel even more sorry for himself. It was late in the day and getting dark, just like it did back home. He should have been back home four hours ago, looking at books about travel, and yet here he was, stuck in a foreign city, with no idea what to do.

I told him not to worry.

Mr Poonlop worried anyway. He told Bill he was worried.

'Your author is right,' said the driver. 'There's no point worrying. There are plenty of ways to get back to England. You can probably get a different coach back on a ferry or you could catch a plane. You can even go by train nowadays, through the Channel Tunnel.'

That made Mr Poonlop feel a bit better. All he needed to do now was find the quickest and cheapest way to get home. He asked Bill if they had travel agents in Paris. I offered to help but he was scared I'd send him to an estate agent again and because he didn't speak much French he'd end up with a house in Paris. Sometimes I think he doesn't really trust me to get things right.

The coach driver said that all the travel agents would be closed at that time but he thought his bus company might be able to help. He suggested that he would ring their office in Paris and then he and Mr Poonlop could have a nice cup of coffee while they waited to see what could be done.

So he and Mr Poonlop sat down and had a nice cup of coffee at the coach station café. While they were drinking it, a young woman in a smart blue uniform bounced over to them on a pogo stick.

'Bonjour, M'sieur Poonlop, bonjour, M'sieur Angrily,' she said, bouncing up and down by their table. 'I am the Paris representative of Tregetour Trips and I am calling myself Fleur de Malle.'

'Hello,' said Mr Poonlop and the driver, their heads nodding as they watched her bounce.

'Have you any news for us, Fleur?' asked Bill.

'Oui,' said the woman, which is French for 'yes'. 'I have some of the bad news and some of the good news for Petit M'sieur Poonlop. Which would you prefer to hear firstly?'

'I don't mind,' said Mr Poonlop, 'but I would prefer you to stop bouncing up and down on your pogo stick.'

Mr Poonlop didn't want to be rude but his neck was getting tired. He wondered if French people usually bounced up on down on pogo sticks when they were at work.

'Of course, if you prefer,' said Fleur, as she stopped bouncing. 'It is easier for me also. We French people are not usually bouncing up on down on pogo sticks when we are at work but your author thought this chapter was getting rather dull, so he made me to do this for fun.'

'Anyway,' she said when she sat down and got her breath back, 'I am very sorry but we cannot get you back to England this evening.'

Mr Poonlop looked crestfallen.

'Please do not look crestfallen, Mr Poonlop,' said Fleur. 'Please to let us at Tregetour Trips help you to pick up your fallen crest. Please to stay in Paris tonight as our guest.'

The way Fleur spoke made Mr Poonlop smile but he was still not happy. Because he only left home to go to the shops, he had not brought any pyjamas or a toothbrush or even much money — and he was a bit worried if his house would be all right.

'You must not worry please,' said Fleur de Malle. 'We have checked with your author that your house will be all right and we would like to give you a present of a toothbrush and a special pair of pyjamas of Paris. And we will pay for your food tonight also. We hope this is to make you feel better after your difficult journey, especially because you only got trapped by being such a nice man.'

Mr Poonlop blushed and said it was very nice of them. Mademoiselle de Malle blushed because she had made a long, sloppy speech in English and Bill Angrily just smiled and drank his coffee. The young woman continued.

'Now this chapter is already too long, so I must, how do you say, "hop it." I have here vouchers you can use to get a free dinner in Paris and for your hotel and the transport in town. I will see you tomorrow with your breakfast.'

She said goodbye to Mr Poonlop in the French way, kissing him on both cheeks, before bouncing away on her pogo stick.

Mr Poonlop blushed again.

Chapter 14

Paris is a fascinating place. In 1853, under Napoleon III, a man called George had redesigned the city and Mr Poonlop told me not to start another of those history lessons. He even suggested that I don't always know what I'm talking about. You might think that was a bit cheeky but he was probably right. I think the best facts are the ones you make up for yourself.

Anyway, since he was stuck in a strange place, he wanted to have a look round. First, Bill took him to the hotel where the Local Little Old Ladies were staying. Luckily for Mr Poonlop, they had a spare room on the very top floor. This meant Little Mr Poonlop had a lovely view over the rooftops of Paris.

The room was very nice. There was a comfy bed, a chair, a television and a wardrobe and also a large bucket full of cheese. Mr Poonlop was wondering if all French hotel rooms contained a bucket of cheese when there was a tap on his door. No, the hotel was not built like his house; this time I mean that someone was tapping on his door. When he opened it he saw a very small chambermaid in a black uniform who giggled and said something in French. Mr Poonlop tried to tell her he didn't understand French but she just kept talking and giggling. She came into the room and picked up the bucket. Then she put a small chocolate mint on Mr Poonlop's pillow, pointed at the bucket and then at the mint, and finally, talking and giggling all the time, left the room, taking the cheese with her.

Mr Poonlop was confused. He said it was lucky that I spoke good French, if things like that were going to keep happening. He asked me what she had been saying.

He looked rather worried when I told him I had no idea because I don't speak much French either. But when he'd had a wash, eaten the chocolate mint and unpacked his nice new pair of pyjamas of Paris, he felt ready to explore anyway. He went down in the lift to the hotel foyer.

Bill had already gone. He had to take the coach to a garage to have it refuelled and checked to see that the wheels would still go round and round all day long — and that there were no green bottles under the seats. But, when he got to the foyer, Mr Poonlop heard a familiar voice.

'Ooh, it's the man who lives under the coach.'

'Hit him!' shouted another familiar voice. 'Lock him in a cupboard with some badgers!'

'No, no, Emily,' said the Secretary. 'I told you: he's a very nice little man. Hello, Mr Poonlop. I hear you're staying with us tonight. Would you care to join us for the evening?'

The Little Old Lady explained that they were going to have a nice meal of brown soup and then go out to a show, where they could sing lovely French songs like *Les Roues du Bus Tourner en Ronde*. She thought it only fair to warn him that they were going to have a late night and might not get to bed before nine o'clock.

Mr Poonlop thought it was very nice of them to offer but he thought they might make too much fuss over him. Maybe he was also scared that Emily would want to tie him up and throw him in the river.

So he thanked them but told them he wanted to go and explore Paris on his own. He said he hoped they had a really lovely evening and went to hand his key in at the desk. The receptionist handed him a large envelope.

'This is for you, Petit M'sieur Poonlop,' he said. 'Your author asked us to prepare for you a good map of places you should see and places for where you can eat good. Have a bon evening.'

Mr Poonlop knew that 'bon' meant 'good', so he said 'merci', which means 'thank you'. He walked out into the 'rue' which means 'street' and was happy to find I'd written him a very pleasant Parisian spring evening. Even though he was still worrying about how he could get back home to plan his seventh holiday, he was determined to make the best of a bad job.

Chapter 15

Paris is a busy place. Mr Poonlop lives in a quiet street called Acacacacia Avenue in a small town. It has only one main shopping street and, even though that can get pretty full on a Saturday afternoon, I'd never written nearly as much traffic or as many people as Mr Poonlop was surrounded by now. He felt a bit lost and very confused. Or maybe he was very lost and a bit confused, I'm not sure.

It could have been worse: people dressed in black cloaks could have been throwing small crabs at him from upstairs windows but they weren't. He might have been there with no money and nowhere to spend the night but he wasn't.

The hotel and the bus station were on a busy road all right but they weren't in the centre of Paris. They certainly weren't on his list of interesting places to see. He knew this because he'd already peeked inside the envelope. The first thing he saw was a piece of paper which said, 'Do not look in this envelope yet. You are not in an interesting place. Sit down in a little café and decide where to go next.' This seemed like a good idea, especially as he was standing by a quiet café called Le Bar Plaisant, which seemed a nice name. He went in and asked for coffee.

'Café?' said the large man behind the counter.

'Yes, I know,' answered Mr Poonlop. 'I'd like a cup of coffee, please.'

'Café,' said the man again, with a smile but without a question mark.

Mr Poonlop was getting confused. He knew he was in a café, so why did the man keep telling him?

'Au lait?' asked the man. This confused Mr Poonlop even more. It sounded like the man was saying 'Olé', like an excited Spaniard.

To save him from his confusion I wrote a very helpful customer, sitting at the counter.

'No, M'sieur Poonlop,' said the very helpful customer. 'Café is French for coffee and 'au lait' means 'with milk'. Is this what you want?'

'Yes it is. Thank you very much,' said a relieved Mr Poonlop. He did get a bit worried when the very helpful customer said 'Oui' to the assistant. He nearly said, 'no, no, I wanted coffee' but then he remembered that 'oui' means 'yes'.

While the coffee was being made, the very helpful customer asked Mr Poonlop if he could help in any other way, so Mr Poonlop said he would be grateful for any advice about how to spend his evening and especially where to eat.

'Certainly M'sieur. Your author has written a fine spring evening I would recommend you to stroll by the river and then take a sunset trip to the top of the Eiffel Tower, the most famous landmark of Paris. You can go easy by the Metro — the trains under the ground.'

Mr Poonlop thought that sounded like a good idea. He was not going to be in Paris very long and he could see the whole city from there. I didn't like it so much. I told him he would have to go to the top without me. I'm scared of heights, you see, and the top of the Eiffel tower is three hundred metres above the bottom. That's about one hundred and sixty of me all standing on each other's heads and I'm getting dizzy just thinking about it. But Mr Poonlop didn't seem to mind. In fact I think he felt happier to be going up without me. He didn't think I was going to be much use to him in Paris; especially if he was going to go high up in the air. At least he was grateful that I'd written a very helpful customer to help him.

'I don't speak French,' he told the customer, 'and my author doesn't speak much either, but I need to find somewhere good to eat tonight. Do you know a good restaurant where they speak English?'

'Better than that ...' replied the man but went back to drinking his coffee.

'Better than that ...?' repeated Mr Poonlop after a long pause.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said the very helpful customer, 'I forgot to finish what I was saying. Oui, I know a very special restaurant where some of the waiters speak English. But if you like you could be my guest for I go there this night.'

'Is the food nice,' asked Mr Poonlop, 'and will they be open later?'

'Ah yes, M'sieur. Restaurants in Franceland stay open later than in England. But this is a very special place. It is open when others are closed — and sometimes closed when the rest are open. It is friendly and serves food like your mother used to make — but only if your mother was Madame Celestine du Foudre of 37, Rue d'Alsace in Toulouse.'

Mr Poonlop said that she wasn't but the very helpful customer said it didn't matter. He walked with Mr Poonlop towards the Metro station, turned round and ran back to the café because he'd forgotten to pay the bill, came back to Mr Poonlop, ran back to the café because he'd forgotten his jacket, walked home and finally ran back to the Metro station because he'd nearly forgotten all about little Mr Poonlop.

'I am sorry, M'sieur,' he panted. 'I am rather, how do you say, absent of the mind sometimes. Anyway, here is where you catch the train and you must get off at the station called Invalides. Then you will see on your map where to walk to the big tower like you have in the Blackpool, yes? And I think you will arrive just in time for the next chapter.'

Chapter 16

Mr Poonlop got out of the train at the station called Invalides. At first he couldn't tell where he was or which way to go but then he noticed that someone had written a big sign opposite the station that said 'River: This Way ->'. So he went this way and found the river. By the river another sign said 'Eiffel Tower, That Way <- '. Mr Poonlop thought it was very helpful to have large signs in English. I think he guessed who put them there. Can you?

The Spring evening was indeed lovely as Mr Poonlop strolled along beside the river. He almost forgot to worry about when he would ever get back to England to start planning his seventh holiday. The River Seine sparkled in the evening sun and people in large glass boats waved to him as they passed. He even thought he heard a loudspeaker on one of the boats telling passengers, 'on your right, you are now passing Little Mister Poonlop, who has come to Paris by mistake'. Then everybody on the boat waved to him and fell over, because the captain had been waving too, instead of watching where he was going. But no one was hurt and they all laughed and waved to Mr Poonlop again when they got up.

Paris is a busy place but it's also very romantic. On the river bank Mr Poonlop could see many people walking along holding hands. A young man on a bridge showed Mr Poonlop a box of hands and asked him if he'd like one to hold for only two Euros. Mr Poonlop said 'no, thank you.' He told me he thought that was a very sick joke, so I crossed it out.

On his left, Mr Poonlop could already see the Eiffel Tower but when he looked up at it he also saw a bird flying straight at his face. Before he had time to duck, it hit him on the nose and fell at his feet, still fluttering its wings. Mr Poonlop looked down, rubbing his nose, and was relieved to see it was only a toy bird. Hitting his nose had not even broken it — the bird or his nose. As he looked at it, a young man came running up to him.

'M'sieur! M'sieur!' he cried. 'Est ce que vous allez bien?'

'I'm sorry: I don't speak much French,' said Mr Poonlop. 'I'm here by mistake.'

'Ah, oui,' said the young man, 'just like Petit M'sieur Poonlop?'

Little Mr Poonlop said that he was Petit M'sieur Poonlop and the man seemed impressed.

'My bird, she hit your nose. I am so sorry. Are you all right?'

Mr Poonlop said he was fine. His nose was a bit sore but no damage had been done and the toy bird seemed to be all right too. The young man said that he sold toy birds to tourists. He assured Mr Poonlop his birds were very strong but also not at all dangerous. He said they were great fun to fly, especially for the young peoples and wondered if Petit M'sieur Poonlop would care to buy some for any young relatives back in Britain, perhaps? Mr Poonlop said he might but thought he should go up the tower first and maybe buy some when he came down.

'Okay, if you wish,' said the young man. 'My name is called Abdul and you must promise to find me and my birds if you want any. And because I am very sorry that this bird hit you on the nose, you must keep it as a gift from Abdul. It will bring you luck while you try to get home and plan for your famous holiday.'

Mr Poonlop thanked Abdul profusely (no, Abdul Profusely was not the man's full name, we only did that joke with the bus driver). He shook hands with him and asked where to go to get into the Eiffel Tower. Abdul was pleased to help and directed Mr Poonlop straight to the next chapter.

Chapter 18

If you're paying attention, you might have noticed that Chapter 17 is missing. Before we start Chapter 18 properly I'd better explain.

In Chapter 17 Mr Poonlop went up the Eiffel Tower, met some very nice people, had a snack in the café and saw wonderful views of Paris, as the sun went down and the twinkling lights came on all over town. One or two very funny things happened to him too, one of which was even a bit scary, but when he came down again everything was fine.

The trouble is I can't tell you much about it. I didn't go up with him because I don't like heights. Even looking at pictures of high places makes my legs tingle and my head go all dizzy.

Mr Poonlop told me he went to the top in a small lift and that made me feel even worse. He said that the guide explained that this tower was one of the first places to have that kind of lift, which was invented by a very clever man called Mr Otis. Apparently he made them so that even if the cables broke they couldn't plummet to the ground.

That might have made Mr Poonlop feel safe but it made me feel ill, so I just told him I was glad he'd had a nice time. He said he hoped it wouldn't spoil the story for you if I couldn't write about it.

So do I. I'm very sorry.

Chapter 18

'Thank you so much,' said Mr Poonlop.

'It was my pleasure to be able to help,' said Angelique. 'Now we are back at the ground, I think you will be all right. And your author can help you as well, perhaps. It was fun, what happened, no?'

Mr Poonlop agreed. He asked me if I knew how far Abdul's bird had flown from the top of the tower but I didn't even know that he had dropped it.

'I know it went to the North,' said Angelique, 'but I did not see how far.'

Mr Poonlop introduced me to Angelique and told me that she was from Geneva in Switzerland and that she had tried to help him get the bird back when he dropped it at the very top of the Tower. Apparently, she was on holiday in Paris for a few days and she spoke very good English. She and Mr Poonlop kept talking about the wonderful views of night-time Paris from the top and how the bird was lost even though one of them had leaned right out through the rails but just thinking about this made me dizzy.

Mr Poonlop wondered if Angelique might like to join him for dinner.

'I am meeting a very helpful man in a very special restaurant,' he said. 'I'm sure you could come along too.'

Mr Poonlop also wanted to find Abdul. Even if he couldn't join them for dinner, he would like to hear all about the adventure with the bird. And Mr Poonlop wanted to buy another one. But he couldn't see him anywhere. In fact all the souvenir sellers had packed up their birds and cards and miniature Eiffel Towers and gone home for the night. This was because it was getting late, and this reminded Mr Poonlop that he was feeling tired and hungry, so he looked at the next piece of paper in his envelope.

It told them to go to the Metro station by the Tower and get a train to St Michel Notre Dame, so they did.

When they got out on the island in the river, they could see the famous cathedral. It looked very impressive with the floodlights shining on its ancient carved stones.

The very helpful customer from Chapter 15 looked very impressive too, because one of the lights was shining on him, even though he wasn't carved from stones hundreds of years ago.

'Ah, M'sieur Poonlop,' he cried; 'and you have found a friend. You are just in time. Come look at the island with me then we will go eat.'

Mr Poonlop didn't want to spend long looking at islands, he wanted to look at some nice food. But there was no need to worry. They walked past the cathedral and almost immediately found themselves on a small bridge over the river. They went through a busy area of shops and restaurants, which the very helpful customer told them was called Les Halles, the old market of Paris, then down a quiet side street and through the door to the next chapter.

Chapter 19

The restaurant was very lively. In a narrow room were two rows of tables, all very close together. The walls were covered with crazy pictures, paintings and posters and the waiters were all very jolly. They seemed to know the very helpful customer too.

Mr Poonlop saw the menu written on a blackboard in French which made him slightly worried.

'I hope you are not slightly worried,' said the very helpful customer. 'I am a very helpful customer, so I can help you to understand the menu.'

'Merci,' said Mr Poonlop in polite French, 'I hoped you would. But what really worries me is that I feel silly calling you a very helpful customer all the time. I don't know your name.'

'Ah, I see,' said the very helpful customer. 'Unfortunately, I do not have a name. Because your author was in a hurry to write somebody to help you in the café, he did not find time to give me one. I do not even know what I look like!'

Mr Poonlop and Angelique laughed. So did the people in the restaurant. For a while everybody was telling the very helpful customer what he looked like but this didn't help him much as they all had different ideas. And they all told him in French, which didn't help Mr Poonlop at all. Of course, if I don't tell you, it's up to you what he looks like, isn't it? But it still didn't help Mr Poonlop with what to call him.

'Well, since I don't yet have a name,' said the very helpful customer, 'you can call me whatever you like. What French names do you know, M'sieur Poonlop?'

Mr Poonlop replied, 'I can't think of any, myself,' but, in the noise of the restaurant, the very helpful customer couldn't hear him clearly. He thought Mr Poonlop had said, 'I can't think of many, Marcel,' so they decided that his name could be Marcel. Everybody in the restaurant thought this was excellent and they all stood up and shouted 'Bonsoir, Marcel!' and drank a toast to him.

No, they didn't drink slices of toast! They drank their wine to show they were pleased for him. Come to think of it, that sounds a bit silly, but it's what people do. Eating toast is never done as a sign of respect or congratulations but I don't know why.

Anyway, Mr Poonlop and his new friends settled down and had a big meal with lots of chips and salad and drinks. Everybody in the restaurant was very merry and soon they all knew who Petit M'sieur Poonlop was and wished him luck getting back to England. They all had wonderful ideas for where he should go on his seventh holiday too. The trouble was that all their ideas for holidays were different too, so Mr Poonlop was just as confused as when he'd left the travel agent that morning.

After his meal, Mr Poonlop felt very full and very tired but the people kept singing jolly songs. No, not songs about buses or bottles. These were in French, so I'm not sure what they were about but there were a lot of them. There was even one especially for Marcel, called the Marcel-ays (if you're unlucky somebody will explain that terrible joke to you).

By now Mr Poonlop was very keen to go back to his hotel and sleep, so Marcel asked a waiter for the bill.

'Bill is M'sieur Poonlop's neighbour, M'sieur,' said the waiter. 'I cannot get him for you.'

The very helpful customer explained that he wanted to pay for the food. The waiter said he knew and was only joking. He also said there was no need to pay because Tregetour Trips had already paid for Mr Poonlop; and all the other customers wanted to pay for his new friends.

They were all very grateful. Angelique said she was very glad she had met Mr Poonlop and hoped her author would write such nice adventures for her. Marcel said maybe there was a book in Switzerland called 'Angelique's Best Holiday'. Angelique kissed Mr Poonlop and made him blush again and then she kissed Marcel for his nice idea. The three of them tried to say thank you to the other customers but, every time they started to speak, everybody clapped and cheered (maybe they wanted to avoid any boring speeches). So Mr Poonlop and his friends just bowed a few times and went out into the night.

Though he'd had an enjoyable evening, Mr Poonlop was very tired. And even though he now had a name, Marcel was still very helpful. So he insisted on taking Angelique and Mr Poonlop to their hotels in a taxi. On the way, they passed all sorts of interesting things and places and people but they were too sleepy to take much notice. You're probably sleepy too by now, so we can say good night to Mr Poonlop as he goes to bed. We'll see him at breakfast very soon.

Chapter 20

The hooting of cars and lots of banging told little Mr Poonlop it was a busy day in Paris. So little Mr Poonlop got out of his hotel bed and got ready to go downstairs for breakfast. At least he didn't have to make his own, and he could have a shower without having to go into an airing cupboard, but I don't think he was feeling very grateful. He was just hoping he could go back home soon.

When he got to the hotel dining room he found Fleur de Malle from Tregetour Trips waiting for him. A waiter asked if he would prefer French croissants or English toast (which they promised not to burn). But Mr Poonlop was not very hungry after his big meal last night, so he just had a slice of melon and a cup of coffee.

Fleur told him he should be able to return home in the afternoon: 'We have arranged for you to join in a coach of French dairy farmers who are going to England to laugh at your cheeses.'

Mr Poonlop was very fond of English cheese but he was too polite to say anything. He hoped I wouldn't either because he was keen to get home and start planning his seventh holiday.

'I know you must be keen to get home and start planning your seventh holiday,' said Fleur, 'but I hope you will have a nice morning in Paris. I would suggest you to go on the River Seine, which is very interesting. There are many boat trips and your envelope has a free ticket for any you might choose.'

Just then Mr Poonlop heard a strange rumbling noise. It was getting louder and louder. Other people eating their breakfast began to look around. They also began to look worried, as the floor was beginning to shake. All of a sudden, Mr Poonlop heard a scream and he knew what was coming.

'It's him! It's the man who lives under the coach! Nobody eat the cornflakes, he's poisoned the milk!'

'Hello, Mr Poonlop,' said the Secretary of the Little Old Ladies Association, who had all just come noisily into the room for their breakfast. 'Did you have a nice night? We had a lovely time. Don't worry about Emily, she drank a bit too much hot chocolate. We went to a lovely show and we stayed out till nine thirty but that's only eight thirty in England, or is it ten thirty, I can never remember but anyway we're on holiday so ...'

I don't need to write any more about Mr Poonlop's breakfast do I? Let's go and see what happened when he got to the river.

The sun was shining brightly on the water when Little Mr Poonlop arrived back at the big cathedral where he'd met Marcel the night before...

What?

Yes, he was very polite to the ladies and wished them a pleasant journey. But he's at the river now.

There were quite a few different boat trips to go on and it was quite hard to decide which ...

What now?

Of course he was very nice to Fleur and thanked her very much for her help. I've told you before, everybody in this book is nice, even the farmers who want to laugh at English cheese. I just thought you'd get bored by all the goodbyes and stuff so we skipped all that. Now where were we? Oh yes ...

While I was explaining all that to you, Mr Poonlop had missed the 'Gateau Bateau' (which means Cake Boat) but that was probably a good thing, as he wasn't hungry yet. He still had time to catch the 'Chateau Bateau', which went to some castles, but they seemed to be far away and he wanted to be back in time for the cheese coach. And he didn't like the sound of the 'Splateau Bateau' one bit.

In fact he thought he should avoid any boats with silly names. I think he thought they might be things I'd made up. Sometimes I don't think he trusts me. He decided the best idea would be to go on a tour named after the river itself, so he showed his special token to the crew member of a nice, normal-looking boat with big windows and comfy seats.

'Ah, oui, le Petit M'sieur Poonlop!' said the man. 'Please welcome on board our little ship. Poop! Poop!'

The man seemed rather jolly but a bit odd. Mr Poonlop was a bit worried but, as the man had eaten half of his ticket and gone 'Yum, yum!', he decided he might as well get on the boat. He sat down to wait for the trip to begin. The boat was due to sail at the beginning of Chapter 21, which was lucky, as it meant he didn't have long to wait.

Chapter 21

As soon as the chapter began, the boat pulled away from the river bank and set off downstream. It was only slightly worrying that the boat was going backwards and kept bumping into things but Mr Poonlop assumed it would turn round soon enough.

Then a voice started to say something in French. Mr Poonlop didn't understand any of it but then the message was repeated in English — and he didn't understand much of that either.

'Lady and gentle things, please welcome on this leaky bucket,' it began. 'For your own happiness and long life, notice how we are for safeness. No rabbits must be called Daniel on the outside seats and burning of newspapers is not allowed in any case. When I tell you about the city, it is to enjoy your tripping. I will tell you it all in French, Ingle and Germish, so listen awfully for your tongue.'

Mr Poonlop didn't know whether to laugh or jump off the boat into the river, but he decided he should just relax and look at the view. He liked all the old buildings and the tree-lined streets and it was more peaceful away from the busy traffic.

Except when the boat hit a wall and made everybody jump.

'On your left is the right bank and on your right is the famous Left Bank,' said the loudspeaker, 'and the bit we have just hit is the island in the middle called Island of the City. Everybody who lives there is called Jacques and, by law, must change their socks three times a day. Now your captain will turn the boat around and go forward. On your right is now the right bank and on your left is the famous Left Bank, where live many famous artists and which is famous for making teddy bears.'

Mr Poonlop thought this all sounded very strange, especially when the man's voice started singing strange songs in a high-pitched voice and going, 'Poop-poop!' or shouting 'Zut, alors!'. He asked the passenger next to him if this was normal but suddenly realised he was talking to a stuffed chimpanzee in a top hat. So

he tapped on the shoulder of the person in front and asked if he spoke English.

'Ingle? Yes,' said the passenger and, when he turned round and said, 'Can I be helping?' Mr Poonlop could see he was wearing a big, red clown's nose.

Mr Poonlop was taken aback by this. In fact he was taken three rows back, so he had to walk back to his seat, muttering about stupid authors who do silly things at difficult times.

'Er, is all this normal on a Tour of the Seine?' he nervously asked the man with the red nose.

'No, no, no, no, no-diddley-no-no,' said the man in a really deep voice. 'But you have come on a tour of the Insane!'

'Oh dear,' said Mr Poonlop, 'that sounds rather ridiculous.'

'It is, it is, it is,' said the man. In fact he kept saying it until the young woman next to him broke an egg on his head to shut him up.

'I must apologise for my father', she said.

'There was no need,' Mr Poonlop assured her. 'And you did not have to do that to him on my account.'

'Do you have an account?' asked the woman. 'How do you intend to pay?'

'No, no, I just meant you did not have to break an egg on your poor father for my sake.'

'No, that is all right because this is not my father. I am apologising for my father who has missed the boat. I do not know this man at all.' And she started laughing.

'Let me explain,' said the man with the red nose and egg hair; 'it is a very bad joke, this 'In-Seine' Tours, but it is more fun. Many people get bored being told the Eiffel Tower is 320 metres high and the lifts are safe or that the Cathedral of Notre Dame was built in 1330. On these tours, what they tell you is very silly and utter rubbish; but the buildings and the bridges look just as good. Sadly though, because the captain is a bit crazy, we do bump into a lot of oof!'

He did not mean to say 'a lot of oof!' but, as he was talking, the boat hit another bridge.

'And over there,' said the captain, 'you can see Petit M'sieur Poonlop from England, who is in Paris by mistake.' And everybody on the boat waved to a confused man on the bank.

Mr Poonlop knew the captain had got it wrong because the man on the bank did not look anything like him. Just then a woman in a bright green bikini and swimming goggles came round checking that all the tickets had been half-eaten, so Mr Poonlop told her about the captain's mistake.

'Ah, oui, I know,' she said. 'He says this every day when we pass this place. Sometimes the person, he wave back. Maybe one day the captain is right.'

Mr Poonlop nearly told her that he was the real Mr Poonlop (because he was) but then he thought they might do something really embarrassing if they knew. Luckily, the woman didn't ask how he knew the captain was wrong on that particular day; she just went on checking tickets and making a loud flapping noise with the flippers on her feet.

Chapter 22

In all good books, the sandwiches arrive in Chapter 22. If any of the other books you read do not mention sandwiches in this chapter, you should go back to the book shop or library and complain.

The captain was saying that if you made 200 life-sized models of Petit M'sieur Poonlop out of hard English cheese and stood them on top of each other and then stood the real M'sieur Poonlop on top, he would be level with the top of the Eiffel Tower. As he told them this, a man in a yellow suit walked by, throwing a paper bag to each passenger. Mr Poonlop opened his. It contained a large sandwich in a long French baguette, a small bottle and a little chocolate animal that looked like a reindeer. Nervously, Mr Poonlop asked the people in front of him what everything was.

'Well, M'sieur,' they both said in chorus, 'the baguette, it contains the pieces of fish, the piece of soft French cheese and the spread of apricots, with a little mustard and tomato ketchup to make it even crazier. The drink, he is made from bananas and old socks and taste like the dishwasher.'

Mr Poonlop felt a bit sick. He didn't want to ask about the chocolate animal but the man with the red nose told him anyway.

'The animal is a chocolate moose. The pudding man, he wants to make a nice creamy pudding called a chocolate mousse but he cannot spell the words properly so he make this. But it is very nice chocolate.'

Mr Poonlop was relieved to hear that. Even so, he was too hungry to be satisfied with a small chocolate animal. Even even so, he didn't fancy a sandwich of fish, cheese and jam, even even even with mustard and ketchup. Nor did he want a drink of banana-flavoured dishwasher. So, while nobody was watching, I crossed out the sandwich and the drink and wrote him some nicer ones: his favourites, in fact — a ham and custard sandwich and a bottle of furtleberry juice. And if you've never tried furtleberry

juice, you're missing a treat. In fact, it's so special, people try to keep it a secret. They might even tell you I made it up just to fool you. Don't listen to them. If you can't see it in the shops or cafés, all you have to do is go to the counter and shout 'I want some furtleberry juice, please!' very loud, three times. Then the law says they must give you a bucket full of it. And a straw. A bendy straw.

Mr Poonlop asked if I could get back to the story now, because the boat was turning round a funny long island which the captain said was called The Alley of the Signs, even though he couldn't see any signs on it, only a small model of the Statue of Liberty, who, the captain insisted, was called Denise (when he crashed into her he said, 'Pardon, Mam'selle'). I started to explain that it was really called the 'Allee des Cygnes,' which meant the Alley of Swans, but Mr Poonlop said he was more worried about getting back in time for the coach of French dairy farmers, so he could get home to plan his seventh holiday.

So while he ate his sandwich and his very tasty moose, all washed down with a very good furtleberry juice, I helped the captain drive the boat faster (and straighter) to the next chapter.

Chapter 23

So Little Mr Poonlop arrived back at the island quite quickly. In fact the captain had to tell the passengers everything rather quickly in three languages, so Mr Poonlop now knew there was an old railway station on one side of the river and a big loo on the other, both full of famous paintings by the captain's mother.

But Mr Poonlop was distracted from the commentary by the sight of someone bouncing along the river bank on a pogo stick. Sure enough, when he got off the boat, Fleur de Malle was there to meet him. He wondered why she was still on the pogo stick.

'You are probably wondering why I am still on the pogo stick,' she said. 'It is because I enjoy it so much, your author, he says I can keep it. It is very good exercise and great fun.'

'I am sorry you have been with the Insane Tours. I should have warned you, they are a bit strange. You should have gone on the Gateau Bateau because with them you get the free cake.'

'But I am here with the bad news,' she said, after Mr Poonlop told her he'd had an interesting trip anyway and now knew much more about Paris, including exactly how many kangaroos lived on the Island of St Louis. In fact, Mr Poonlop was starting to get used to things going wrong, so he didn't sound too worried when he asked what the bad news was this time.

'I am glad you do not sound too worried, Mr Poonlop,' said Fleur, 'but I am afraid you will not go home today. I am also afraid of snakes with big fangs that live in my toilet, but this is not a problem for you. For you a toy bird is a problem.'

'A toy bird?' said Mr Poonlop, in surprise.

'Pour moi?' he added, in French.

'A problem?' he gasped, in the very nice café I'd just written around him. I added a nice jug of hot chocolate to calm him down, so Fleur could explain.

Oh yes, perhaps I should write some for Fleur too. One more jug of chocolate, extra hot milk and a cup, in fact. Fleur was surprised to see them but she poured herself a cup before beginning to unfold her sad story and a happy map.

'On this map you can see where the coaches come in to collect French people to laugh at other countries,' she said. 'For instance, the wine growers like to go to Germany and the pop singers to Belgium. Only the people who design cars have nowhere to go.

'As you know, a party of dairy farmers was due to go today to laugh at your cheeses, especially the ones in your supermarkets.'

Mr Poonlop said he remembered. He was too polite to say that he did not think it was a nice thing to do. He wanted to know why he could not go home to plan his seventh holiday yet — and most of all he didn't want me to start going on about how good English cheese can be or how boring some mass-produced French cheese

...

So I won't.

'Yesterday,' said Fleur, when she was sure I'd be quiet, 'the farmers are meeting at a pavement café in the Champs Élysées, which is the main street of Paris. They are drinking and talking happily. But suddenly one of them is hit on the back of the head!

'He thinks it is the farmer behind him. He thinks this man is jealous of his cheese. So he turns round and the man just smiles at him. The first farmer thinks this is very rude, so he punches the other man on the nose.

'This upset the farmer, because he has done nothing. He thinks it is very very rude to be hit on the nose for nothing, only a friendly smile. He thinks the man must be jealous of his cheese. So he hits the first farmer over the head with a wine bottle. Empty, of course.

'The first farmer's friends, they think this is not very nice, and the second farmer's friends are also unhappy to see their colleague punched in the nose, so they all start to hit each other with the fists, the bottles, the chairs and the waiters.'

Mr Poonlop asked Fleur if she knew how the fight had really started. She told him that an English tourist had seen what happened. A toy bird had flown down from the direction of the Eiffel Tower and hit the first farmer on the back of the head.

'Stop, stop!' shouted the Englishman. 'He did not hit you! It was only this toy bird!'

But the farmers did not understand English, so one of them thought the Englishman was trying to cause more trouble because he was ashamed of his own cheese, and poked him in the eye with a baguette.

Mr Poonlop didn't like the sound of this.

'I don't like the sound of this,' he said. 'I wonder if the bird was the one I dropped off the Eiffel Tower?'

'I do not know,' said Fleur. 'We have it at the office if you wish to see. But for you the problem is now that the farmers are not going to England today.'

'Oh dear,' said Mr Poonlop. 'Is anybody badly hurt?'

'No, not really. The Englishman has had all the crumbs removed from his eye. Some of the farmers are a bit bruised but they are all friends now. Only a few of them needed to go home and lie down or have a mug of hot chocolate. But they have postponed their visit to England until the autumn. Until then they will just laugh at pictures of English Cheese in magazines.'

I told Mr Poonlop that I thought this served them right for wanting to laugh at other people's cheese, but he thought I was being unfair, especially as some of them probably had quite bad headaches by now. And he was thinking he would never get home to start planning his seventh holiday and that it was maybe my fault. But if he hadn't gone up the Eiffel Tower and dropped the bird (when I wasn't even with him), it wouldn't have happened. So it can't be my fault.

Can it?

'What can I do now?' he asked Fleur.

'Do not worry M'sieur Poonlop,' she replied. 'We have a plan for you. First, you will start a new chapter ...'

Chapter 24

'... then we will present you with this special token for the train that goes beneath the sea to England. You will get a special first-class seat with free drinks and sandwiches. And a free journey from London to your town.'

Mr Poonlop was very grateful and asked Fleur what time the train left Paris. He was scared he might miss it or that the wheels would fall off for some silly reason.

'Do not be scared that you might miss the train,' said Fleur, 'or that the wheels will fall off for a silly reason. That is why your ticket is special. You can turn up at the station of the Paris-North at any time tomorrow and you will have a seat on the next train to England. There is one every hour and tonight we have arranged a nice hotel for you on this island.'

'But if the train is full ...' began Mr Poonlop, sure that things would keep going wrong.

'Do not be sure things will keep going wrong, M'sieur Poonlop,' said Fleur. 'Your author has promised that there will be a seat for you. Best of all, you can take your time to get there, see more of Paris if you wish, and all your meals tonight and tomorrow will be paid for by Tregetour Trips. You are only here because you are such a nice little man so we want to make everything nice for you. And of course we hope you will consider Tregetour Trips when you are planning your seventh holiday.'

Mr Poonlop hardly knew what to say and I hardly knew what to write, so he just said he was very grateful and even sorry to have caused Fleur any trouble, not to mention the French dairy farmers.

Fleur didn't mention them. Instead she asked if there was anything else he might wish to see but Mr Poonlop said he would like to get home as soon as he could. All the same, he was glad there was no need to hurry.

'Perhaps I might suggest that tomorrow you go to the station on the number 47 bus,' said Fleur, pointing across the river. 'It leaves from just over the bridge there. You can see a little more

of our city through the windows. And you cannot miss your stop because it is finishing at the station. Then there are many signs to the train for England, so your author does not have to put up any extra ones.'

Mr Poonlop felt very relieved at all this. He really wanted to get home to have a good rest and some hot, buttered toast. Fleur showed him to his new hotel.

Some people find good-byes difficult or embarrassing. Especially Mr Poonlop, when French people kept kissing him. He's quite a shy little man, so I won't write about this one.

Mr Poonlop watched Fleur de Malle bounce off across the bridge on her pogo stick and went back into the hotel.

Chapter 25

Little Mr Poonlop was really pleased that he would soon be going home. He was enjoying himself in Paris but he asked me if I could write him a nice, uneventful evening and an early night.

So I did.

Chapter 26

The next morning, Mr Poonlop crossed the bridge ...

What?

It wasn't a very interesting night.

You want to know what happened anyway?

Oh, all right.

Chapter 25 (continued)

He went up to his room which was even nicer than the other one, had an even nicer shower and then got dressed and went for a walk by the river.

Yes, that was nice too.

He went to a café on the island and had French sausage and chips with a big bottle of the finest furtleberry juice. Afterwards he even had a plate of French cheeses. No, he didn't laugh at them. In fact he quite enjoyed them.

Then he went back to the hotel, where he found an even nicer pair of pyjamas and an even bigger chocolate mint. No, there was no bucket of cheese this time. Soon he was fast asleep.

He woke up to a much quieter sunny morning, a lovely view of the river and the cathedral, and a nice breakfast on his balcony.

Is that all right? Can he go for his bus now?

Good.

Chapter 26

The next morning, Mr Poonlop crossed the bridge just in time to see a bus approaching the stop.

The bus slightly confused Mr Poonlop.

No, it didn't ask him to do any hard sums and it didn't have an invisible driver. Nothing silly like that. It was just that, in the excitement of finally being on his way home, he couldn't quite remember which bus he wanted. The bus was a number 74. Did Fleur say that, or was it 47? Of course we know. If you've forgotten, you can peek at chapter 24 again and see. But Mr Poonlop didn't have a copy of this book because I was still writing it.

But he is a clever little man, as well as a nice one, so he asked the driver if the bus went to the station. Unfortunately, the driver didn't understand English. Fortunately one of the passengers did.

'Oui, M'sieur. Do get on board,' he said. So Mr Poonlop did just that.

'I think you are Petit M'sieur Poonlop,' said the passenger, pointing to an empty seat by his side.

'So do I,' said Mr Poonlop, and he pointed at the seat too, so as not to seem rude.

'No, no, please to sit here,' said the man. 'We are friends, I think.'

Then Mr Poonlop realised it was Marcel, the very helpful customer I had written for him when he arrived. Of course he was not easy to recognise because I had never described him, but soon they were talking happily. Mr Poonlop told Marcel all about his adventures and the problem with the French cheese farmers and Marcel pointed out various sights on the way. It was very interesting for Mr Poonlop to see places like the Louvre Art Gallery and be told sensible things about them, so I won't bore you with any of it.

'So, M'sieur Poonlop,' said Marcel, when they were on a road with no interesting buildings, 'you are going back to England?'

'Yes,' said Mr Poonlop, nodding.

'To plan your famous seventh holiday?'

'Yes,' said Mr Poonlop, smiling.

'You have enjoyed your stay — even though it happened by mistake?'

'Yes, thank you,' said Mr Poonlop, politely.

'But now you return home.'

'Yes,' said Mr Poonlop again.

'Today.'

'Yes,' said Mr Poonlop, patiently.

'On the coach.'

'No,' said Mr Poonlop, calmly.

'Oh dear,' said Marcel. 'Then why do you go to the coach station?'

'The coach station?' laughed Mr Poonlop. 'No, I am going to the train station. I am going on the train under the sea to London.'

'Oh I am so sorry. You are on the wrong bus!'

Marcel explained that when Mr Poonlop asked for the station, he thought he must mean the coach station, where they first met.

'For the train station you should have waited for the bus number 47. This is the number 74.'

'Oh dear,' said Mr Poonlop, who couldn't think of anything else to say. Marcel was very embarrassed and concerned for Mr Poonlop.

'Today I think I am being a very unhelpful customer!' he groaned. 'I am afraid your author will have to cross me out from this book!'

Mr Poonlop thought that would be a very silly thing to do and I agreed with him. He assured Marcel that he didn't mind at all. His ticket would allow him to catch any train, so there was no hurry and no worry. And it was so nice to see Marcel again and be shown more of the sights of Paris, that he was really quite glad that he'd got on the wrong bus.

'All the same,' he said, 'it would be very helpful if you could tell me the best way from here to the train station.'

'Of course,' said a very relieved Marcel. 'Let us get off the bus at the end of this chapter.'

So they did.

Chapter 27

Chapter 26 ended at the bottom of a steep hill with what looked like a windmill at the top.

'The thing at the top of this steep hill, the thing that is looking like a windmill,' explained Marcel, 'is a windmill. If you have no hurry for your train and are not afraid of the steep walking, there is a big white church with wonderful views of Paris at the top. I will walk up with you, if you do not mind. And then it is easy to go down the other side of the hill by some beautiful steps to your station. Your train station.'

As I had written another sunny day, Mr Poonlop thought it seemed like a good idea. He asked Marcel if he lived at the top of the hill.

'I do not know,' replied his friend. 'Your author did not write any details for my life. I must live somewhere, I suppose, but I do not know where.'

Mr Poonlop thought this was a bit sad but Marcel assured him he didn't mind. He was sure he lived somewhere nice. All the same I wrote a very pleasant flat for Marcel just at the top of the hill but away from the bit where all the tourists went. I made sure it had a sweet balcony with great views, because he had been such a very helpful customer. Marcel was delighted.

'I am delighted with this very pleasant flat,' he told Mr Poonlop.

In fact, he was so excited by it that he invited Mr Poonlop to visit him for a coffee right away. But little Mr Poonlop was keen to see the big white church with the wonderful views of Paris and to walk down the beautiful steps to the train station, so he could get home to plan his seventh holiday before I ran out of pages. So he promised Marcel that he would come and visit him one day and tell him all about his holiday. And he insisted that Marcel should visit him if he was ever anywhere near Acacacacia Avenue.

When they got to the windmill, Marcel was in a hurry to go and see where he had been living, so he showed Mr Poonlop which way to go through the quaint back streets. He told Mr Poonlop that the area was called Montmartre and that he would soon find a charming square full of artists. After that he should go to his right round to the front of the big white church. From there he could see the wonderful views of Paris. That would bring him to the start of the next chapter, where he could find the beautiful steps down towards the train station.

Mr Poonlop was very grateful for Marcel's company and all the help he had given him. They shook hands and Marcel hugged Mr Poonlop. Then he hurried away to see his flat, while Mr Poonlop set off through the quaint back streets. Sure enough, he soon came to a charming square, surrounded by bars and tourist shops. He stepped over one of the bars but he didn't buy any tourists and he told me I was being silly again so I stopped. As Marcel had said, the square was full of artists, selling their paintings or drawing pictures of the tourists. There was a young man with a pointed beard, wearing a striped tee-shirt and a black beret. He was sitting at an easel and Mr Poonlop thought he looked like a real artist, so he went over to have a look. By his seat, he had a board showing pictures he had drawn of a famous pop singer.

What do you want to know? Who was the pop singer? I'm sorry but I'm not sure.

I have an idea though. You can help me write this book. Think of your favourite pop singer. If you don't like any pop singers, think of somebody else. A sportsperson maybe or an actor; or someone who is famous for making soup. Anybody, a man or a woman (it will be funnier if it is a man). Now, I will leave five gaps in the story where you or someone with neat writing can put in the name you've chosen. Then you can carry on reading the story. Okay? When you've got the name written in five times, we'll do the last sentence again. Go.

By his seat, the young artist had a board showing pictures he had drawn of _____. Now he was staring at a young woman who had sat down on the stool in front of him and occasionally scrawling on his drawing pad with coloured chalks.

After a while, he sat back and looked at the picture with a very satisfied expression. Then he lifted it off the easel and turned it to show to the woman.

'Et voila!' he said. 'It is finished. It is brilliant. What do you think?'

The picture was very good indeed but the woman was not pleased. There was one slight problem.

'That's not me!' exclaimed the young woman. 'That's a picture of _____!'

'Of course,' said the artist. 'I can only draw _____.'

'But I assumed you were doing a portrait of me,' the poor woman replied. 'That is what I was paying for.'

'No, all my pictures are of _____,' said the artist. 'You can see that from my board.'

'You're crazy,' she complained, getting very annoyed. 'If you were only drawing _____, why did I have to sit here while you stared at me for three hours?'

While this argument was going on, Mr Poonlop noticed that another young man with a pointed beard, black beret and stripy shirt was staring at the side of his head and waving a pair of scissors in the air. This rather frightened Mr Poonlop. He thought this might be a friend of the artist who didn't like people listening to his arguments. And even though I had said only nice people could be in this book, Mr Poonlop was worried in case a not-so-nice person had sneaked in, maybe while it was being printed. After all, nice people did not usually approach strangers while waving scissors in the air.

So Mr Poonlop started to edge away from the scene. But the man with the scissors followed him, still staring intently at his head and cutting little pieces off a small square of black card. Mr

Poonlop moved faster but the man quickened his pace too. He was staring so hard that he kept bumping into people and falling over chairs but still he followed Mr Poonlop.

He shouted something at Mr Poonlop. It sounded like he was calling him 'Silly' and 'Wet'. This convinced Mr Poonlop the man was crazy. Maybe he was from the Insane River Trip company. Mr Poonlop started to run out of the square but the man still followed him. As he ran, he continued hacking wildly with his scissors at the piece of card, which was now a very strange shape indeed.

At last Mr Poonlop left the square and the man gave up following him. But Mr Poonlop ran a bit further just to be safe. In fact he ran so far he came to the big white church which was just where Marcel said it would be, and bumped into the start of

...

... Chapter 28

He also ran into Angelique, the Swiss girl from the Eiffel Tower, who was coming from the other direction.

'Ouch!' she said. 'Be careful M'sieur. Oh, it is you, M'sieur Poonlop!'

Mr Poonlop apologised for bumping into her and then he said hello and asked how she was. Angelique said she was fine but Mr Poonlop was worried when he saw that she was holding a small piece of black card like the man who chased him out of chapter 27. But as she didn't seem to have any scissors, he asked her what it was.

'What is that piece of black card?' he asked. 'A man with a piece like that was just chasing me, waving some scissors and calling me "silly" and "wet".'

'Oh no, M'sieur Poonlop,' laughed Angelique. 'That was a man trying to make your *silhouette*! He wants only to cut the shape of your head in the card. Look.'

And she showed Mr Poonlop her piece of card which looked just like her face from the side.

Mr Poonlop felt a bit silly. He also muttered something about authors who ought to write things people say more clearly. Even Angelique knew who he meant. But be fair. Her author speaks French, so it was easier for her. Anyway, when Mr Poonlop told her all about the poor man running after him cutting a very messy shape out of his card, she laughed again.

'It is a good job you do not have to look like the picture he is making,' she said, 'or you would now be a funny, squiggly shape and I would not recognise you!'

Mr Poonlop laughed too, though he thought it was a very strange idea.

'At least I have had some exercise,' he said. 'Also I have been lucky to meet you again and now I am where Marcel told me I would see the wonderful views of Paris.'

Mr Poonlop thought gas had always existed but he was too polite to say anything. And he thought it would be too boring if I told you all about French scientists from 200 years ago. And I'd probably get it all wrong again. So I won't.

Robert Charles continued.

'And with this gas he made the first flight in a gassy balloon. And next week we are having the anniversary of his endings, so we will go up in a balloon just like his, except ours is a bit more purple, because that is your author's favourite colour. Would you like to inspect it? It would be an honour for us both.'

Mr Poonlop said he would be delighted, introduced Angelique, ate a packet of biscuits, played a jolly tune on a small guitar, jumped up and down three times and carved a model of the balloon out of a bar of soap.

Actually he only did the first two of those things but I got carried away. Mr Poonlop said I *ought* to be carried away. What he did do was go down the steps to say hello to Charles Charles and look at the balloon. After all, he knew he could get to the station at any time and I would have a train waiting for him.

'Would you and your friend like to look inside our basket, M'sieur Poonlop?' asked Charles Charles.

Mr Poonlop said yes and he and Angelique climbed the little steps and jumped inside. It was certainly a very comfy basket with plenty of room. There were cushions, a small wine rack, even cartons of furtleberry juice and a hamper full of sandwiches.

Charles Charles asked his guests if they would like to help tying on the ribbons and bananas.

'The ribbons, they are red, white and blue, for the flag of Franceland and for the Great Britain also,' explained Robert Charles from outside the basket.

'And the bananas?' asked Angelique. 'Why are they?'

'Because I like bananas,' answered Charles Charles.

'He likes them very much,' confirmed his brother. 'In fact he has the largest collection of bananas in the whole of Franceland.'

Mr Poonlop smiled. He did not laugh out loud, because he was not sure if Robert Charles was joking or if Charles Charles was crazy. Or both. But he started to tie the bananas to the basket anyway.

Suddenly, there was a gust of wind from the East which blew the end of the chapter towards them and made the basket sway. Mister Poonlop was reaching for a piece of rope to attach his banana to and he grabbed on to it to keep himself steady.

It was not a good piece of rope to grab.

Chapter 29

As Mr Poonlop took hold of the rope, another gust of wind made the basket sway even more wildly.

The swaying of the basket made Mr Poonlop sway.

The swaying of Mr Poonlop made him fall over. He was glad he was holding onto the rope.

The falling of Mr Poonlop made the rope come loose. As the balloon untied and started to rise into the sky, Mr Poonlop stopped being glad he was holding onto the rope and started being rather sorry about it.

So he let go of the rope, which was another mistake, because now there was nothing connecting the balloon to the ground. As the balloon started to rise, Charles Charles lunged for the rope but he was too late and it fell out of the balloon and just missed hitting Robert Charles on the head. Charles Charles was not happy because he even dropped one of his bananas over the side.

Down on the ground Mr Poonlop could see many people gasping and pointing while Robert Charles jumped up and down and shouted in French. In the basket, Charles Charles was also jumping up and down and shouting to his brother while Angelique was laughing. Mr Poonlop thought maybe she laughed at too many strange things, but he liked her anyway.

When he'd finished thinking that, he said 'Oh no! What have I done?'

'You have launched our balloon one week early and without one of the great-great-great-great-great-great grandsons of Jacques Alexandre César Charles, the famous French scientist who invented gas,' said his other great-great-great-great-great-great grandson.

'I am so sorry,' said Mr Poonlop.

'There is no need to be so sorry, M'sieur Poonlop,' Charles Charles reassured him. 'It was an accident: the fault of a gust of

wind and maybe of an author who is clumsy with the weather he writes.'

I wonder who he meant? You don't think it was me, do you?

'How can I help you to land the balloon?' asked Mr Poonlop.

'You cannot,' said Charles Charles. 'We have already blown away from the site and are over the rooftops of Paris. It is not safe to land here. Even if it were, we cannot afford to buy enough gas to fill the balloon again. We will just have to make our flight today. It is my privilege to have you as my co-pilots.'

And he handed them each a banana.

'But where are we going?' asked Mr Poonlop who could see they were going a long way from the Station of the North of Paris.

'I cannot say,' replied the Frenchman. 'It depends on the winds, I believe. At this moment they are taking us to the West away from Paris. At least we will have good views.'

Maybe he was right. Angelique said that she agreed and even Mr Poonlop was quite excited to see Paris so far beneath him. But I hope you don't expect me to describe any of the views to you. All I can tell you about are the insides of the basket and the legs of Mr Poonlop, Angelique and Charles Charles. You know I don't like heights. I wouldn't go up the Eiffel Tower and now they were much higher than that.

All I know is that Mr Poonlop and Angelique kept squealing, 'Ooh! Look at that!' which I didn't.

After a while, they ate some of the sandwiches and drank furtleberry juice, while Charles Charles ate some of the bananas and drank the wine. They all seemed to be quite happy, which I could not understand when they were so high up off the ground.

Mr Poonlop said, 'What is that large area of blue down there?' and Angelique told him it was the sea.

'I think it is what we call the Sleeve,' said Charles Charles, 'and you call the English Channel.'

Mr Poonlop asked how they would get back to Paris and Charles Charles told him they could not, unless the wind changed.

So Mr Poonlop asked how they were going to land.

Charles Charles said, 'I do not know. My brother, he was reading the instruction book first, then it would be my turn.'

Angelique asked where the instruction book was and Charles Charles said it was on the little table.

Mr Poonlop asked why he could not see the little table in the basket.

Charles Charles said, 'because it is the little table by the bed of my brother, in Paris.'

Mr Poonlop and Angelique said, 'Oh dear.'

Charles Charles said, 'Oh dear is right. Do have a banana. It might make you feel better.'

They did.

It didn't.

Chapter 30

For a while, they all ate their bananas quietly, while wondering what to do. Suddenly, Angelique had an idea.

'Suddenly, I have had an idea,' she said. 'I think we must let gas slowly out of the balloon. Then we will go down.'

Mr Poonlop thought this was the right thing to do. Only one thing worried him.

'Only one thing worries me,' he said. 'If we go down over the sea, the sandwiches will get wet and the furtleberry juice will get all salty.'

'Oui,' said Charles Charles. 'But we are not over the sea any more. Look!'

Angelique looked.

Mr Poonlop looked.

I didn't. I felt dizzy and sick.

'We are over England!' cried Mr Poonlop. 'Now I have come home by mistake too.'

'I am a long way from home,' exclaimed Angelique.

'I am completely lost,' said Charles Charles, 'but I have my bananas. I will let the gas out of the balloon as you suggest, but I do not know where we will land.'

So he untied the big knot in the neck of the balloon and held it tightly in his fist. Then he let gas out by loosening his grip a little bit at a time, while Mr Poonlop and Angelique kept looking out to see that they wouldn't land on anything sharp and pointy.

'Oh dear,' said Angelique, sounding worried. 'We are getting very low and here comes a small town. Try not to drop too fast, M'sieur Charles!'

'This town looks very familiar,' said Mr Poonlop.

Can you guess why? I wasn't even looking and I thought I knew.

'Oh dear,' said Angelique again, this time sounding puzzled.
'There is a house down there with letter boxes on the roof and a chimney upside down in the garden!'

Can you guess whose house it was?

Come on, it's not hard. You can see we're near the end of the book.

Oh, you had guessed. Sorry. Anyway, when Angelique said that, Charles Charles was intrigued.

'Let me see,' he said. But, as he leaned over to look, he forgot to keep squeezing the neck of the balloon. Suddenly, the remaining gas all rushed out, making a very rude noise, and the balloon dropped down to earth with a bump. They all fell over in the basket but, thanks to all the cushions, nobody was hurt.

They all got up to look out. They were in the middle of a quiet little street in a quiet little town. Mr Poonlop recognised it at once.

'We're in Acacacacia Avenue!' he cried. 'This is my house!'

And he was right.

But you knew that, didn't you?

Chapter 31

Little Mr Poonlop, Angelique and Charles Charles climbed out of the basket, stuffed the deflated balloon into it and moved it all out of the middle of Acacacacia Avenue and safely into Mr Poonlop's front garden. Then Mr Poonlop invited his friends in to make them a nice cup of tea. But when they got inside they found I'd already written three nice mugs full and a huge plate of chocolate biscuits.

Yes, thank you, I had recovered from the scary journey, but in future I will try to avoid writing anything about Mr Poonlop that takes him far off the ground.

For a while, they sat around and talked about their adventures. But then they had to think of some other problems. Angelique and Charles Charles both had to get back to Paris for a start.

It was my turn to have an idea, so I did. While Charles Charles rang his brother, Robert Charles, to tell him he was safe, I called Angelique's author and suggested a fun way to get her back to Paris to finish her holiday. If you want to know what it was, you'll just have to try and find the books Angelique is usually in. I'm afraid I quite forgot to ask what they are called. Anyway, they will be in French, so I wouldn't worry about it if I were you.

As they stood, wobbling on Mr Poonlop's bouncy rubber doorstep, waiting for the fun thing to happen, Charles Charles and Angelique hugged and kissed Mr Poonlop goodbye.

'It has been very good to meet you,' said Angelique. 'I hope you enjoyed your stay in Paris, even though you went by mistake.'

'Yes, I did,' said Mr Poonlop. 'But it is so good to be back home. Tomorrow I shall go to the library again and then perhaps I can start to plan my seventh holiday.'

Angelique and Charles Charles looked at Mr Poonlop. Then they looked at each other. Finally they burst out laughing.

'Oh, M'sieur Poonlop,' said Angelique. 'Plan your seventh holiday? I think you have just been on your seventh holiday!'

Mr Poonlop looked puzzled. Then he stopped looking puzzled and started laughing too.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'I suppose I have!'

He even said nice things about crazy authors who send their characters on strange and wonderful adventures without warning them.

I hope he meant me.

THE END

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