

# Keeping up with the Joneses

**Philip Howard** pops on the kettle and breaks out the biscuits as his neighbour bends his ear about the loss of his father-in-law, not to mention the concomitant winter fuel allowance and free television licence

**J**UNE has passed by and I have found that many of my waking hours were spent offering comfort to my friend Mr Jones. "You'd better put on the kettle and make me one of your strongest coffees," he announced as he burst through the door. "Oi'm bereft, both spiritually and financially." It turned out that his elderly father-in-law had just expired. "Mrs Jones told me to take a look at 'im on account that he'd left his bacon alone. So we popped in, an' he just turned up 'is clogs." "Poor Mrs Jones," I responded.

"Not that she has anything to regret, she's been a wonderful lass to her father," continued Mr Jones. "Mind you, the doctor was right – told him smoking and 'aving bacon everyday would kill him." I enquired how old he was. "He was 92," he replied, adding, "You wouldn't believe 'ow much it has cost me now the old bugger's gone. I've 'ad to buy a TV licence and we got a letter from the council wanting another 25% in rates. No more winter fuel allowance – that's a day's shooting gone – and they even want the hoist back which is a shame really, what with my bad leg if ever Mrs Jones feels frisky. I even popped down to the old folks' home to see if I could find another, but there's a waitin' list."

"You're all heart," I told him, offering him a biscuit to go with the coffee. "Better not – I'm not that peckish after all that bacon I 'ad earlier." But I soon discovered this was not the

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only weighty concern troubling Mr Jones. "There's problems with the Clampetts. He's run off and he won't go back 'ome," he exclaimed, shaking his head. For clarification's sake, I better mention that Mr Jones's eldest daughter – more of a log than a chip off the old block, married Kevin Clampett. Kevin is the young scion of the Clampett family who inhabit an exceptionally wild area on the Anglo-Scottish border, aptly named Bewcastle Waste. He is particularly well liked and his prodigious strength is legendary.

Once, while branding steers, one enterprising animal attempted to escape. Young Clampett leapt on to his quad bike, overtook the beast, tackled it with a Frankie Dettori-style dismount and punched it out cold when the hapless creature tried to argue. Many have wondered whether he used a similar technique to woo the former Miss Jones though the smart money is still on the tranquilliser dart.

"This is terrible," I commiserated, amazed at this unlikely event. An alluring siren with a

chassis capable of tempting Kevin Clampett could only have come from Pamplona. "So Mrs Clampett has moved back in with you?" "No, no, no, no" replied Mr Jones, "Kevin's hiding with us. The poor bugger's done nowt wrong, but he's too frightened to go 'ome!"

And indeed it turned out that poor Kevin appeared to be a man more sinned against than sinning. His crime was to fail to be home in time for tea, having been waylaid on his quad bike by a neighbouring farmer with a silage clamp to sell. Remarkably, during his married life young Clampett had never missed a meal, even when, in winter, he had been swept a mile down a flooded river on his quad. So after a two-hour delay with no sign of Clampett or quad, she had alerted her neighbours and soon hundreds were prodding and poking flora and fauna for bodily parts. Within three hours the police had arrived to be met by a distraught Mrs C, howling and bawling, now convinced that Clampett had undergone a mental breakdown. The constabulary, equally fearful, quickly left. But not before removing all of his guns. After four hours Mrs C had got out the life assurance policies and was beginning to cheer up when, of course, poor young Clampett returned.

Happily, Mr Jones has recently reported that domestic bliss has been restored in Clampett land, but that since then, young Clampett has not been late for his tea. ■



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