

*Unusual Uses for
Olive Oil*

ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

Illustrations by Iain McIntosh



ABACUS

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Little, Brown
This paperback edition published in 2012 by Abacus

Copyright © Alexander McCall Smith 2011
Illustrations copyright © Iain McIntosh 2011

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

*All characters and events in this publication, other than
those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious
and any resemblance to real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-349-12010-2

Typeset in Galliard by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Abacus are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C104740

Abacus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

eins



The Award

Surprising? Astonishing? No, it was more than that, far more – it was shocking, quite nakedly *schrecklich*. Professor Dr Dr (*honoris causa*) (*mult.*) Moritz-Maria von Igelfeld, author of that definitive, twelve-hundred-page scholarly work, *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, was cautious in his choice of words, but there were times when one really had no alternative but to resort to a strong term such as *shocking*. And this, he thought, was one such occasion. It was *ganz, erstaunlich* shocking.

The news in question was conveyed in the pages of a journal that normally did little to disturb anybody's equanimity. The editors of the sedate, indeed thoroughly fusty, dusty, crusty *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*,

a quarterly journal of linguistic affairs, would have been surprised to hear of any reader so much as raising an eyebrow over its contents. And certainly they would have been astonished to see one of their better-known readers, such as Professor von Igelfeld, sitting up in his chair and actually changing colour, reddening in his case, as he studied the small item tucked away in the news section of the review. It was not even the lead news item, but was at the bottom of the page, a mere paragraph, reporting on the announcement of the shortlist for a recently endowed academic prize. This prize, set up with funds left by a Munich industrialist of bookish tastes, was for the most distinguished work of scholarship – an article or a full-length monograph – on the subject of the heritage and structure of the Romance languages. What could possibly be controversial about that?

It was not the fact that the prize had been established that shocked von Igelfeld, rather it was the composition of the shortlist. There were three names there, all known to him, one very much so. As far as Professor J. G. K. L. Singh was concerned, von Igelfeld had no objection at all to his heading the list. Over the years he had had various dealings with Professor Singh, exchanging letters at regular intervals, and he had become quite fond of him. Certainly he did not agree with the rather unkind nickname that some scholars had given the celebrated Indian philologist

– the Great Bore of Chandigarh – indeed, von Igelfeld did not agree with nicknames at all, thinking them puerile and unhelpful. His own name, which meant *hedgohog-field* in German, had resulted in his sometimes being the butt of schoolboyish references, masquerading as humour, but of course he had always risen above such nonsense. It was true that Professor Singh was perhaps a little on the tedious side – indeed, he might well have been quite incontrovertibly so – but that was no excuse for calling him the Great Bore of Chandigarh. The British – ridiculous people! – and the Americans were the worst, he had noticed, when it came to this sort of thing, with the British being by a long chalk the more serious offenders. They saw humour where absolutely none existed, and it seemed to matter little how elevated they were – their jokes often being at the same time unintelligible and silly. Professor Thomas Simpson of Oxford, for example, a major figure in the study of vowel shifts, had referred to Professor Singh by this sobriquet and had remained silent in the face of von Igelfeld’s protest that perhaps not everyone found Professor Singh boring. And he was no longer at Chandigarh anyway, von Igelfeld pointed out, which made the nickname out of date.

‘He has been translated to Delhi,’ von Igelfeld said. ‘So the reference to Chandigarh is potentially misleading.’

You must be careful not to mislead, Herr Professor Dr Simpson.’

This comment had been made in the coffee break at the annual World Philology Congress in Paris, and later that day, as the delegates were enjoying a glass of wine prior to the conference dinner, von Igelfeld had overheard Professor Simpson saying to a group of Australian delegates, ‘I’m not sure if the Hedgehog gets it half the time.’ He had moved away, and the flippant English professor had been quite unaware that his remark had been intercepted by its victim. A few minutes later, though, he found himself standing next to Professor Simpson at the board on which the table *placements* had been posted. Von Igelfeld was relieved to find that he was sitting nowhere near the condescending Oxonian, and he had turned to him with the remark, ‘You will be happy, I think, to find that you are not sitting next to a hedgehog. They can be prickly (*prickelnd*), you know.’

It was a devastating shaft of wit, but it brought forth no response from its target, who appeared not to have heard. ‘What did you say, von Igelfeld?’ he asked.

Von Igelfeld hesitated. It was difficult to serve a dish of revenge twice within the same minute. ‘I said that hedgehogs can be *prickelnd* if you sit next to them.’

Professor Simpson looked at him with amusement. ‘I would never sit on a hedgehog if I were you,’ he

remarked airily. ‘Not very comfortable, as surely you, of all people, should know! But my dear chap, you must excuse me. I’m at the top table, you see, and I must get up there before the rank and file clutter the place up.’

If he rather welcomed the inclusion of Professor J. G. K. L. Singh’s name on the list, he did not feel that way about the next name, which was that of Professor Antonio Capobianco of the University of Parma. He knew Capobianco slightly, and found his work slender and unconvincing. Two years ago the *Parmese* had written a book on the subjunctive in seventeenth-century Italian, a book that von Igelfeld had reviewed in polite but unambiguously dismissive terms in the *Zeitschrift*, almost, but not quite, describing it as *scholarly ephemera*. He would certainly not have chosen Capobianco had he been a judge, but at the same time he could understand that there might have been political reasons for including him on the list. It was nice to put Italians on lists – they so appreciated it; Italians, von Igelfeld was convinced, had a profound need to be loved by others and consequently were always reassured to see their names appear on any list. He had even heard that they tended to get upset if they were left off negative lists – such as those that ranked the most corrupt countries in the world. ‘But we *lead the world* in corruption,’ one Italian prime

minister had been said to complain. ‘How can they put us below *Mali*?’ So there could be little doubt but that Capobianco would be very pleased to see himself on this shortlist and would presumably make every effort to bribe the judges to decide in his favour – or, if he did not, some of his friends and relatives could be expected to do so on his behalf. But he would never win.

But then there was the third name, and that was where enthusiasm and mild irritation were succeeded by outrage. Professor Dr Dr Detlev-Amadeus Unterholzer, the journal announced, had been nominated on the basis of his work on Portuguese verbs – work which enjoyed a considerable reputation not only in Germany but throughout the world. *His research has put Regensburg’s Institute of Romance Philology on the map*, the journal concluded, *and deservedly so. This makes him a very strong candidate for the award of this prize.*

It was difficult to know where to begin. Unterholzer had been von Igelfeld’s colleague for a considerable time. Their relationship was not a simple one, as there had been a number of issues over the years – none of them von Igelfeld’s fault, of course – because of which the friendship between them, if one could call it that, had been strained. Most notably there had been the incident of Unterholzer’s dog, the unfortunate dachshund, Walter, or Dr Walter Unterholzer, as the

Librarian, Herr Huber, had so wittily called him. This dog had lost three of his legs in circumstances for which Unterholzer blamed von Igelfeld, and the poor animal was now obliged to get about on a prosthetic appliance involving three small wheels. Walter had, some years previously, disgraced himself by coming across and eating a small collection of bones. These bones had not been intended for consumption by dogs, rather they were sacred relics of particular interest to the Coptic church, being the bones – or some of them – of the late Bishop of Myra, none other than St Nicholas. Thereafter, Walter had become an object of veneration within the Coptic church as he had consumed holy relics and was therefore, in a sense, a reliquary, even if an ambulant one. He had enjoyed a brief period of veneration in a church, occupying a small gilded kennel before which pilgrims would kneel. Unfortunately, many pilgrims expressed surprise at the barking sounds which emerged from this kennel–reliquary, and so in the end Walter was restored to his original owners, the Unterholzers.

Von Igelfeld's responsibility for Walter's unfortunate injury had led to ill-feeling, but even putting that *casus belli* aside, there had also been numerous occasions on which Unterholzer had sought to obtain some advantage over von Igelfeld. Some of these were minor – and could be forgiven – but others were of such a serious

nature as to remain a stumbling block in the way of normal relations. One thing was clear, though – that von Igelfeld was the better scholar. Unterholzer had written his own book on Portuguese subjunctives years ago, a minor insubstantial book, which had concentrated only on a few modal verbs. Certainly that work was not fit to be mentioned in the same breath as *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, and indeed never was, at least by von Igelfeld, who always made sure that he left a gap, a silence, between any uttering of the names of his own book and Unterholzer's.

It was the glaring disparity between their respective contributions to Romance philology that made this announcement so hurtful. If anybody's work had put Regensburg on the map, it was his, von Igelfeld's, that had done so. A few people abroad might have heard of Unterholzer, von Igelfeld conceded, but they would not necessarily know him for his *work*. They might have seen him at conferences, perhaps, where they surely would have noticed, and perhaps even discussed, Unterholzer's rather vulgar nose; not the nose of a scholar, thought von Igelfeld. Or they might have come across a reference to Unterholzer's book while looking for something more substantial, such as *Portuguese Irregular Verbs* itself. But they would certainly not have bothered to sit down and read Unterholzer's observations on modal verbs.