

The Mystery of the Missing Mark – an Easter story for Hashers

Blame Dry Run

1. The Royal Family

Once upon a time in the distant past and a long way away – before the internet but not so distant in either time or place that hashing was unknown to the plebians of that land, there lived a beautiful princess. Like most beautiful princesses, she had a kind, kingly father and two ugly, spiteful sisters. Whilst the King did all he could to make her happy and keep her out of trouble (mainly by keeping her well away from the worldly temptations of males and intoxicating beverages), her two sisters did all they could to distress her and get her into trouble.

Every Monday evening in the summer months, the kind King encouraged the three sisters to ride out into the forest and enjoy a picnic at a pretty spot beside a scenic lake. And although the King believed that all three rode out together, the ugly sisters managed always to lame their beautiful sister's horse or sabotage her saddle or some other item of riding gear, so that she had to go on foot instead of riding. The first couple of times this happened, the princess strolled easily through the forest, enjoying her amble through nature – with the result that by the time she'd got to the lake, her ugly sisters had already eaten up all the food.

However, the beautiful princess was as well endowed in mind as in the contours of her shapely body: She reasoned that the quicker she got to the picnic spot, the smaller would be the chance that her sisters would have managed to eat up everything before she got there. And so she started to run to the picnics. The first time she did this, she arrived so unexpectedly early that there was still quite a lot of food left, and she was able to enjoy a good meal.

Although ugly and spiteful, the two sisters were not entirely stupid, so next week they started eating as soon as they got to the lake, and were almost finished by the time that the princess arrived. So in the following weeks, there developed a sort of competition; the princess running progressively faster and faster and the two sisters stuffing themselves ever more grossly. But ironically as far as the sisters were concerned, this simply made matters worse: The exercise and meagre morsels that were left over to her made the princess steadily more fit, lithe and attractive; while stuffing themselves silly in a rush did nothing to enhance the two sisters' attractiveness, and so they became even more bitter and resentful.

2. A chance meeting

One fine and warm Monday evening, the two sisters had galloped their horses to the lake as fast as they could, with the intention of giving themselves a bit more time to eat before the princess arrived. They'd just got to the lake and started to unpack the food hamper, when they heard a commotion from the other side of the lake: First there was a lot of shouting, after which an unruly crowd appeared on the lakeside. Some of the crowd divested themselves of their raiments – i.e., "got naked" as the commoners would term it – and jumped into the lake to swim or drown according to their preference.



The ugly sight that met the ugly sisters on the other side of the lake. Some were already so drunk that they could hardly stand, and were clinging onto each other for support. One was collapsing under the weight of the empty cans he'd collected in his backpack. And another had fallen over and was sliding back down into the lake.

Not being princesses themselves, the two sisters had not been kept so isolated from the harsh realities of the world as had their beautiful sister. "I wonder if that could be some of those hasher types that we've been warned about?" said the one sister. To which the other replied "Perhaps, but if so, we must be careful: They're uncultured folk who do dreadful things; they even drink beer – you know, that stuff that's drunk by the needy who can't afford decent wine."

Noise carries well across water, and as if to confirm the sisters' suspicions, they heard a number of metallic clicks followed the sound of gurgling liquids and cries of "Crikey, I needed that"; "Gosh, that hit the spot"; "My word, that was a drop of good"; "Ahhh – First Aid in a can"; and other such profanities. As they recovered from this assault on their ears and sensibilities, the sisters' mischievous minds began to fantasise about new possibilities of getting their beautiful sister into heaps of trouble: "Why don't we?" said the one. "Yes, why not indeed?" said the other, "But we must remain mounted at all times, so we can swiftly retreat if threatened."

Thus resolved and fortified by each other's presence, the two sisters galloped their horses round to the other side of the lake. By that time, the surviving swimmers had re-dressed themselves and most of the beers had been drunk. "Hello, what brings you here?" said one of the group, who was evidently so lacking in upbringing that he didn't know that he should wait to be addressed before making any utterance. Or maybe was simply trying to be friendly.

Ugly sister 1: " I'll forgive you this once. Who are you all, and what are you doing?"
Hasher 1: " We're hashers from town, and we're in the middle of one of our Monday runs."
Ugly sister 1: " How did you get here?"
Hasher 1: " We ran."
Ugly sister 1 (doubtfully): " You ran? All this way? On your feet?"
Hasher 2 (cheekily): " There's no better way to run. You perhaps don't do a lot of running yourselves?"
Ugly sister 2: " Any more cheek from you, my man, and I'll have you keel-hauled."
Hasher 2 (very cheekily): " Pity you didn't sail over the lake in your schooner, then. Would you like a beer?"
Ugly sister 2 (wishly): " You're trying to get me down off my horse, make me drunk and have your evil way with me."
Hasher 2 : " Nothing was further from my thoughts, I assure you, your ladyship. I'm simply offering you a beer. We've got a couple left over and Make It Quick is already down on his knees: If he has to carry them back, it'll kill him."
Ugly sister 1: " Enough of this frivolity!! You said "... one of our Monday runs." Do you do this often?"
Hasher 1: " Every Monday, rain or shine. Usually rain. A different trail each time."
Ugly sister 1: " Then how do you know where to go to run?"
Hasher 1: " The internet, as it will be known, hasn't been invented yet. So we have a news sheet called the Hash Trash which we distribute through the postal service."
Ugly sister 1: " We have another sister who unlike us, is very keen on running; and quick about it too. I'm sure she'd be interested in joining you. Could you send her a copy?"
Ugly sister 2 (agitated): " But that's impossible. We couldn't possibly have such a seditious rag sent to the Palace."
Ugly sister 1 (worried): " True enough." (suddenly brightening) "But they could send it to the gamekeeper's cottage. He's already in disgrace for teaching the Queen (née Lady Chatterbox) some games of which the King didn't approve."
Hasher 1: " Then that's what we'll do. But if you'll excuse us, we must be off now. After we've run back, there's food waiting in the kitchen, more beers waiting in the cooler and more nakedness waiting in the sauna."
Ugly sister 1: " And we've got to get back to our picnic. Enjoy your run back."
(aside to sister 2): " How on Earth can those people enjoy running instead of riding on horseback or being driven around by a chauffeur? But if we can get her to mix with such primitive types, our beautiful sister will soon lose her innocence and desirability in the U circles....."

As it transpired, the princess had already lost a little bit of her desirability, albeit temporarily: The ugly sisters had been such a long time away talking to the hashers, that their beautiful sister had arrived at the picnic, discovered the hamper full of food untouched and seizing her chance for revenge, had eaten all her own food and begun on that of her sisters. Which of course did nothing to improve her waistline or her sisters' mood, but their irritation was more than counterbalanced by the anticipation of the pain and shame that their new scheme would soon bring to their prey.

The two ugly sisters related with venom cunningly disguised as enthusiasm (and if the truth be known, also with a certain grudging admiration and envy) how they'd seen and gone to investigate a group of runners who seemed not only unexpectedly civilised considering their class (although perhaps rather lacking in social etiquette and more than a little oversupplied with cheekiness) but also seemed to enjoy the running, each other's company and life in general.

They explained how the gamekeeper would receive a news sheet detailing where the upcoming runs were to take place and how they would pretend to the King that all three of them were at the usual Monday picnic whereas in fact, the princess could go off running with the hashers. To give the princess plenty of time to enjoy herself (i.e. get drunk, laid or do anything else that would prove a subsequent embarrassment), they would tell the King that they'd all decided it was so nice at the lake, that they wanted to stay there longer, lighting a bonfire for warmth, light and safety.

Although the princess was unhappy about deceiving her father, she was (as her sisters had hoped and predicted) so thrilled about being able to escape from her sisters for a few hours each Monday and so curious about the hashers, their running, their beers and (last but certainly not least) their nakedness, that she readily agreed to their plan. (You the reader, having been exposed recently to four years of endless lies and spin-doctoring, know that the princess should have been suspicious of her sisters' motives.) However, the unsuspecting princess was not only beautiful and intelligent, but also supremely kind-hearted and a touch naive – qualities that could easily get her (and indeed anyone) into a lot of trouble.

3. The hash run

The very next Friday, the gamekeeper had received the new Hash Trash. As luck (or in reality, the writer's devious mind) would have it, the next Monday run was to be held in the same part of the forest as the previous run. This meant that the princess could easily ride to the venue on her horse, which you'll not be particularly surprised to hear was for the first time that year unplagued by injury or equipmental deficiency. The ugly sisters had told the King that they'd leave a bit earlier than usual and be away for longer, but he was not to worry: They would look after their princess sister just like they'd look after their very own ... sister.

The princess was a bit worried about the impression she'd make when arriving at the hash on horseback, but she was after all a real princess. But apart from one or two comments about there already being enough shiggy on trail without the horse adding its efforts, no-one seemed to mind too much. As she was introduced to the hashers, the princess began to wonder how on earth she would manage to remember all their strange names. The leader of the group – the so-called Grand Masterful – turned out to be an aristocratic chap who'd fled from the restricting conventions of upper class society. His real name was the Marquis de Suede, who'd made his fortune making shoes of roughened leather but had since turned to writing books about roughness in general and behaving roughly towards women in particular. No hasher gets to keep his real name, of course, so after much pondering amongst the Mismanagement hashers, the Marquis who wrote books had been given the hash name: Mark My Words.

After the princess had been introduced to the assembled hashers, it was time for the run to start and for the princess to demonstrate her prowess at running. As you probably know, getting round a hash trail needs more than just speed, because speed doesn't help at all if you're running in the wrong direction. But the princess soon learnt about "checks" and "false trails" and other devices designed to confuse the pack (easy), lead them astray (even easier), and slow them down (unnecessary for most of them). As the run continued, she noticed that some of the male hashers seemed to be especially admiring not only of her quick and agile running, but also of the figure-hugging running gear that her sisters had so generously bought for her, in truth at least one size too small for her generously-dimensioned torso. In his role of Grand Masterful, Mark My Words took a special interest in her whereabouts at all times: It wouldn't do to let a new girl get lost in the forest all by herself, especially when that new girl was a princess and so obviously unversed in the wicked ways of the world.

The princess was a bit unnerved by all the attention she was getting, but in her good-natured way she assigned it to the curiosity to which she thought any new runner would be subject. She was nevertheless rather relieved when someone called out "Drink Stop", both because her sisters had told her all about the drink stop that they'd witnessed by the lakeside, and because she was getting rather hot and thirsty. And she knew too, from what her sisters had told her, that once the hashers came even remotely close to cans of beer, their attention would be focused on the amber fluids contained therein, to the exclusion of all other thoughts. There was one thing, however, that her sisters had "forgotten" to tell the princess about the drink stop: Just the tiny detail that she too would have to drink beer. (Remember that her father the King had shielded her from alcoholic beverages: She was expecting to be offered tea or soft drinks - liquids considered by hashers the world over to be avoided as diligently as Prussic Acid.)

And so it was thus, in the midst of a crowd of friendly hashers, that the princess had her first taste of beer. Parched as she was, she readily accepted the can offered by Mark My Words and following the example of those around her, she drank greedily. Perhaps a little too enthusiastically for one with no prior experience of the effects of this seemingly innocuous brew. Almost before she'd started, it seemed, was her can empty. And just as quickly had Mark My Words replaced it with another, full one. The result was just as predictable to you as it was unexpected for the princess: She became a little over-animated and rather light-headed; her sense of balance deteriorated noticeably.

So shortly afterwards, when the stop was over and the run had restarted, the now carefree princess threw all restraint to the wind. Fleet of foot as she was, she soon found herself at the very front of the pack. Reaching the first check together with the Front-Runners, she chose one of the many alternative tracks on offer and raced off in search of sawdust. Upon seeing this, Mark My Words, who'd achieved his less-than-gallant aim of inducting her into a somewhat "merry" state, dutifully took off after her, keen to make sure she didn't get lost - and no less keen to avail himself of any possible opportunity within the privacy of the forest to act out his role of Grand Masterful more fully than is polite and proper when surrounded by a crowd of hashers back at the venue. Little did he suspect what was in store for him....

Unknown to her (but suspected no doubt by you, the reader), the princess was on a False Trail. Although that particular false trail was closed, the princess was running at great speed and her eyesight was somewhat unfocused by the effect of the two beers. The result was that she didn't see the rather poorly marked "X" that signalled the need to turn round and return to the check. Onwards she ran, oblivious to several branchings of the trail. New to hashing as she was, she had no knowledge of the unwritten rule that if it ever had been written, would have stated that there should never be more than 100 m between trail markings. And onwards after her ran Mark My Words as fast as he could, desperately but unsuccessfully trying to catch up.

4. Lost

Mark My Words did see the "X" that signalled the end of the false trail, and his heart sank. He pressed on, passing numerous twists and forks in the trail. And after a while, bad luck and the story's evolving plot led him to take a branch of the trail different to the one that the princess had chosen. As he continued running without seeing any sign of the wandering princess, he began in desperation to call out: "Are you? Are you?" But he was too far away from anyone for his calls to be heard, and the only replies he got were from the wind whistling through the trees and occasional echoes of his own voice, reflected from features in the terrain. He tried retracing his steps, but having been careless about noting the way by which he'd come, he went wrong and proceeded to get himself deeper and deeper into the ~~sh~~ forest.

Mark My Words was lost. I know it, you know it, and he knew it himself. And the knowledge was not comforting: His hopes of a quickie in a secluded forest glade were dashed - there would be no nunkies in nature for him this week. That he'd got himself lost was problem enough; but he'd also lost the princess, and that was a catastrophe: There was the distinct prospect of the kindly King losing both his benevolence and his temper and in consequence of that, of he himself losing his head. It was starting to get dark and Mark My Words was resigned to being a camper that night - and he was by no means a happy one!

The princess too was in trouble. Having run some considerable distance without seeing any trail markings, she realised that she was no longer "on trail". So she turned round and tried to retrace her route back to the check. But she too was defeated by the turnings she hadn't noticed on the way in, and ended up lost in the forest just like Mark My Words (although having been in front of him, she knew nothing of his following her). It was starting to get dark, but that in itself didn't worry her too much since she was a brave, resourceful lady. And she was sober again: Like many people who are in good physical shape, the alcohol had affected her quickly but had equally quickly been metabolised. What did worry her, however - and it worried her a lot - was how long her ugly sisters would remain at the lakeside before deciding to return to the Palace without her.

5. Back at the venue

While Mark My Words and the princess were busy getting themselves lost in the forest, the rest of the pack were completing the second half of the run. The checks were difficult and the false trails long and numerous, so the pack became split up into several small groups and a number of solo runners. But little by little, in dribs and drabs, they found their way around the trail and arrived back at the venue where they true to habit, ritual, and their own wanton desires, immediately attacked the supplies of beer. Thirst had a bit to do with it, too.

It took a little while before the greatest thirsts had been partially quenched and enough of the pack had returned that it made any sort of sense to take a head-count to check that everyone had safely returned. When this check revealed that the newbie beautiful princess and the GM Mark My Words were the only ones not yet back, the hashers instantly put two and two together (which in this case was the same as putting one and one together). They exchanged knowing winks and without further thought, carried on drinking as before. There are after all, few problems in a hasher's life that can't be solved by the liberal dispensation of a few beers.

Some time later, somebody noticed that the princess and MMW were still missing, and that it was starting to get dark. A little reluctantly, it was agreed to form a search party and go out and look for the two. But where should they start? Befuddled brains struggled to get into “think” mode – a pretty tall order at any time and particularly at a hash evening. Eventually, several remembered seeing the princess at the Drink Stop and marvelling at the speed with which she sank her two beers. Especially since two beers was one over the quota for Drink Stops, and not even royal privilege could be considered a valid excuse for such blatant transgression of the rules, unwritten as they might be (and are!).

Then a Front-Runner remembered seeing her disappear along a track at the first Check after the stop. No-one could remember seeing her after that, so they had a clue as to where to start looking for her, at least. But as for GM Mark My Words, he attended the runs so regularly that nobody paid much attention to where he was at any particular time: He might have gone chasing off after the princess; or he might have gone off chasing after any other of the harriettes (for such was his inclination and reputation); or he might have decided to treat himself to a self-designed short cut; or he might simply have lost touch with the pack anywhere along the trail after the Drink Stop.

6. And found

By the time that the search party had collected their wits, their warm clothing and checked that their headlamps were fully charged, it had become completely dark. Imagine their surprise, then, when just as the search party was setting off, whom should they meet but the princess sprinting towards them.

“Hello there! Are we glad to see you?” called the search party leader, “Where have you been?”

“Glad to see you too.” panted the princess. “I got separated from you all soon after the drink stop, couldn’t find my way back to the trail and ended up completely lost.”

“But how did you manage to find your way back to us, then?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have time to explain, I must get back to my sisters at once. Could I please borrow a headlamp?”

All male hashers know that no-one should deny a damsel in distress, especially if it’s the 8th of March or if the lady concerned happens to be a princess – and a very beautiful one at that. As of one, they all thrust their headlamps towards her, temporarily blinding her in the process. She fumbled about and grasped the first light that her fingers encountered, leapt onto her horse, missed the stirrups and fell off on the other side. Still blinded, she felt her way back on again and galloped off. Luckily, the horse knew where it was going.

“Did you see anything of Mark My Words while you were out there?”, the leader called after her.

“Not since the Drink Stop, when he plied me a little too generously with beer.” she shouted back.

And then she was gone, the thin pencil of light from her headlamp swiftly swallowed up by the darkness.

7. The return of the princess

At the lakeside, the two ugly sisters were still sitting by the bonfire they’d lit for light and warmth. They were distraught with worry and conflicting emotions. On the one hand, the princess’ continued absence so late in the evening could only mean that their plan had been successful and that she’d got into some serious trouble. Perhaps she’d fallen onto some jagged rocks somewhere on the run, cut herself badly and been taken to hospital, her good looks destroyed for ever? Or perhaps she was at that very moment lying naked in the arms of one of those wild hashers, engaged in a depravity that would for ever destroy her reputation amongst all prospective suitors of social status appropriate for royalty? But on the other hand, if such speculations were true, they’d soon have to return to the Castle without her, and would have to face their father’s questioning and certain anger for exposing the princess to such moral and physical danger, and for returning with neither her nor any knowledge of where she was.

The two sisters agreed to wait for one more half hour until the moon would rise and provide enough light for them to find their way back to the Castle. They trembled not with cold, but with the fear of what would await them there when they arrived without the princess. The sisters’ fear increased even more when they heard the sound of rapidly approaching hooves. Had the King already despatched searchers to look for them? Their trembling increased to earthquake-like intensity.

Great was the sisters’ relief then, when out of the darkness appeared not all the King’s horses and all the King’s men, but their princess sister. And for perhaps the first time in their lives, they were actually happy to see her. “Thank goodness you’re back” said the one, “we’ve been terribly worried about you.” Which wasn’t entirely true, nor even so much as a little bit true, since what they’d actually been worried about was arousing the King’s anger. “Yes, I too am glad to be back.” replied the princess, for she too had been worried about the King’s reaction (though not about causing her sisters a good dose of well-earned discomfort). “Let’s return quickly back to the Castle – I’ll explain what happened as we ride.”

The princess explained how she'd enjoyed the first part of the run, but then taken a trail that had petered out and after that, got lost deep in the forest. (She decided to hop over the bit about the drink stop and the beers that in no small way had contributed to her predicament.) She told how when she was young girl, her palace tutor had made her study maps of the King's vast estates, so that she knew the general layout of the forest even though she had never visited much of it except the scenic lake. Her tutor had instructed her too in the science of the night sky; its planets, stars, constellations and black holes. (And although not relevant to the story, also its unlit substances, warped drivers, cosmic G-strings, revolutionary work intervals, pulsators and waving attractions.) So as soon as it had become dark enough to see the stars, she'd identified the Pole Star and used it to guide her in the direction in which she knew the hash venue must lie.

8. Back at the Palace

As the three sisters galloped into the Palace courtyard, they met the small search party that the King had organised to ride out and look for them. (They were not, after all, Humpty Dumpty and therefore undeserving of the largest of contingents.) Naturally, the search party were happy to see them; they were even more happy to be saved a long, chilly ride in the dark; but their greatest joy was that a probable night-long outdoor expedition was going to be replaced by a pleasant evening in the warm, inviting bar of the Palace Tavern.

The King too was naturally delighted and relieved to get his daughters back safe and sound. He was so happy that he chose not to question them too much about where they'd been, nor why the princess was covered with scratch marks and her running gear torn to shreds as a result of her bee-line run through the forest, back to the hash venue. So kindly was the King, in fact, that he didn't even ask why she was wearing running gear in the first place, when she was supposed to be riding to a picnic by the lakeside.

9. Meanwhile, at the hash venue ...

After the princess had dashed off leaving them no wiser as to Mark My Words' whereabouts, the hashers were filled with dismay. Why had he not told anyone when he'd left them? Why hadn't he taken his matches with him, which would have enabled him to light a fire for warmth and be able to send smoke signals? The only clue that they had, was the information from the princess that he'd been present at the Drink Stop. So the searchers turned on their headlamps and proceeded directly to the drink stop location, to start looking from there onwards.

Some hours later they returned, hands empty of the GM and headlamps empty of charge. They were tired, cold and dispirited. And worse than that; it was a hash evening and they were stone cold sober.

"We can't do more tonight.", said the search party leader. "Those of you who don't have to go to work tomorrow can have a couple of beers, sleep here, have a couple of beers for breakfast and then we can renew the search. To those of you who must labour, many thanks for your efforts. Have a safe journey home." He should have known that it's unwise to let hashers choose between going to work or having a couple of beers (times two). No-one left the venue.

10. The search continues

Not so early the next morning, the hashers arose. Since breakfast was pre-prepared and required only opening, it didn't take long at all. The search leader, who'd wisely done his thinking before breakfast, announced to jeers and cries of disbelief all round: "I've been thinking." (pause for the noise to die down) "The most likely solution is that Mark My Words sneaked off home to one of the harriettes to get his leg over. We know it wasn't any of you harriettes who were on the run, and we know that it wasn't the princess. So before we venture out into the forest again, we should ring round to all the other harriettes." "Agreed." replied the assembled searchers. "You ring and we'll have a couple of beers while we're waiting."

After the telephonic enquiries were concluded without locating the GM, the searchers set off again into the forest, many of them unlikely to have found the GM even if they had tripped over him – the term "couple of beers" denotes a minimum, not a maximum quantity. However, as the day wore on they sobered up again, but still without finding the GM. As daylight was fading and they trudged back to the venue, their morale was as low as their morals; only the thought of the beers awaiting them kept them going.

As they entered the venue, the search leader announced: "Before you all start on the beers, I'd like to summarise today's fine efforts. Despite our long search, **Mark is missing. His whereabouts are a mystery!**"