

# One Green Bottle Standing on a Wall (by Robert Bee)

John Hay winced as the Emergency Ward doctor plucked another fragment of detritus from the raw burn covering the palm and fingers of his right hand and dropped it in the surgical tray.

Dr Singh shook his head. “Mr Hay, this is a bad burn, very bad. Very deep, yes.” He applied his tweezers to another fragment and tugged gently. John Hay yelped.

Dr Singh stared at the burnt hand. “Tell me, Mr Hay, were you playing silly buggers with an oxyacetylene torch? This is a very strange burn. How did it happen?” He looked into John Hay’s pain filled eyes and waited.

John knew now he shouldn’t have had that fourth beer. He’d thought he’d be okay as he’d had two pies from the Milton Pie Shop only an hour earlier, partly filling his stomach, but now, as he perched precariously on the jacaranda branch just below the top of the brick wall, he was having second thoughts.

The voices didn’t help.

John had walked from the pub towards his flat on the southern outskirts of Milton. It was a pleasant stroll along a rural road and as he turned into the side street, he passed the large heritage brick wall that was the remnant of an early settlement cottage. A large jacaranda tree, in full bloom, towered beside the four metre high wall.

As usual, John admired the tree’s blooms and the old brickwork as he strolled past. This time, something out of the ordinary caught his eye and he paused to look more closely. Focussing carefully, he stared at an object standing atop the wall. It looked like a bottle.

Walking closer, he looked again and nodded. A tall green bottle, long and tapering near the top, thicker towards the bottom. He started humming a tune, then chuckling, looked around at the ground below it, to see if there were nine broken bottles. No, this bottle was alone. Up on top of the wall. Standing there.

John was a bit of a collector and decided that strange bottle would go well on the mantle beside his prize 1978 Hermitage Grange, unfortunately empty. The green – a peculiar green, he noted – would go well with the Grange’s deep red glass.

Fuelled by that fourth beer, John started to climb the tree. He had managed to reach the second branch when he realised he would have to walk out along its limb to reach the bottle. He tested the limb’s strength. Deciding it should hold, he reached up to the branch above for support, then started to shuffle out along the limb.

The two limbs converged as he approached the bottle. John had to bend to hold onto the support, leaving his head a metre below the wall’s top edge. The bending, the height and the fourth beer began to have their affect and as John desperately fought the urge to regurgitate the pies from a great height, he heard the voices.

At least he thought they were voices.

High pitched noises like a tape played in reverse. It reminded him of the famous backwards message at the end of the Sergeant Peppers album. Or a crazy foreign language played at high speed. And there was more than one voice. They sounded as if from far away, but he knew it was coming from the spot a metre above his head.

From the bottle.

It was that fateful fourth beer that gave him the courage. He gripped the supporting branch and slowly straightened to bring his head just short of the wall’s top. As he let go the branch and grasped the wall’s edge with his fingers, he heard a fresh burst of high pitched chatter. Then silence.

He could see most of the bottle but not its base. It was beautiful, an iridescent green that shimmered across its surface. He’d never seen a bottle like it. It was perfectly smooth, with some strange symbols on it. He’d be interested to find what kind of drink it had held. Some Greek liqueur, maybe? Well, he’d soon find out.

John held the wall with his left hand, then slowly moved his right hand towards the bottle, careful not to knock it over the opposite edge. His fingers had just reached its base when a puff of smoke spilled over the wall and into his eyes. He blinked and coughed in surprise. Where the hell had that come from? He instinctively closed his fingers, just reaching half-way around the bottle’s base.

“What the...” he gasped. It was warm. As he readied to move it off the wall, it grew warmer, then hot. There was a sudden roar, like the sound of a blow torch, and the bottle pulled upward, straining to escape his grip. He held on for a second longer, then let go. The bottle rose slowly past his fingers, gaining speed and as its base cleared his hand, the blue-white flame erupting from four small jets caressed his palm and fingers.

In shock, John almost fell from the tree. As he watched the bottle disappear into the blue sky, he saved himself by slamming his burnt hand on the wall’s top, only to have it sink into molten brick. John screamed.

Dr Singh shook his head as he watched the two Psych Ward attendants lead John Hay quietly away, sobbing in his straight jacket. Sad, he thought, how very sad. What a tale. Dr Singh scratched his head. Yet, I wonder how he really burned his hand.

Shrugging, Dr Singh started to clean up the swabs and surgical tray, ready for the next patient. His rubber glove was pricked by a piece of wall detritus taken from John Hay’s hand. Dr Singh held it up to the light. It was a small splinter, about one centimetre long, with a piece of coloured matter attached at one end. Dr Singh flicked down his surgical eye glass and stared at it. “Oh, bottles,” he said.

It looked like a small flag.