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Opening extract from

The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha

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THE AMAZING TALE OF ALI PASHA

MICHAEL FOREMAN

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Chapter 1

It was the 1950s and I was working for the local paper, the *Lowestoft Journal*. I told my mates I was a junior reporter, but really, I was just the office boy. Now and again, I'd be trusted with a reporting job. Small jobs only, mind. And only when the proper reporters were busy. Still, it got me out of the office and away from the endless tea runs and filing.

It was weddings mainly. Everyone got married on a Saturday back then, so there was often a big fancy do at the church and a small wedding in the chapel at the same time. You can probably guess which one I got to report on.

I used to be given other stories too; the ones that

seemed to come round again and again, just like the seasons. Summer would mean the village fete, where old Fred Carver always won the competition for Most Impressive Vegetable (thanks to the ready supply of horse manure that came from the blacksmith's next door). Autumn, it'd be the church harvest festival, then winter was the school Christmas party. Just the names and dates needed changing and, Bob's your uncle, there was my report.

But when it came to spring, well, there was one story that meant spring had well and truly sprung… And I'd never been given the chance to report on it: Henry Friston and his famous tortoise.

It was a greyish morning in March, when the Editor yelled to me across the newsroom, "Say, Trev, pop along and check on Mr Friston's tortoise would you? See if it's awake yet."



Back in those days, normal folk didn't have telephones at home. So, with my reporter's pad and some freshly sharpened pencils in my top pocket (I always wrote in pencil so I could check my spelling before I handed in my report), I jumped on my rusty old bike and pedalled off to the tiny village of Corton.



It was Corton where Mr Henry Friston (59) lived, in a pair of restored railway carriages, with his family and his tortoise, Ali Pasha (68-ish).

Mr Friston was digging in his garden when I wobbled up the lane.

"Aha!" he said, catching sight of me and my pocketful of pencils. "The *Journal*, is it? Well, you're bang

on time; Ali Pasha woke up this weekend just gone." Henry pointed to a small wooden box sitting in a pool of sunshine, next to a water butt.

"He's not living outside yet," the old man continued. "It's still a bit too cold at night. But he does like a spot of sunshine."

I propped up my ancient bike and squatted down

next to the wooden box. The tortoise didn't look too pleased to see me, but I was enchanted by his crinkly, beaky head and the wise old eyes that blinked beadily in my direction. I'd never seen a real live tortoise before.

"Why is he called Ali Pasha?" I blurted out.

Not the finest opening question, I know.

"It's a very long story," said Henry. "Too long to go into now." My face must have fallen but Henry, with a twinkle in his eye, continued, "But if you're really interested, come back at the weekend and I can tell you more. Sundays are best."

So I climbed on my bike and weaved my wonky way back to the office. I told the Assistant Editor that Ali Pasha was indeed awake, a photographer was sent off to take a picture and the usual report went into Friday's paper, under the headline: *Ali's Awake – Spring Has Sprung!*

But I knew there was more to this story. And I couldn't wait to find out what that was.

Chapter 2

Sunday came and, pencils in pocket, I headed off to Corton on my rusty steed. I'd spent so much of Saturday trying to come up with questions a proper reporter might ask that I'd hardly had time to eat, and my mum had started fussing that I was sickening for something. But I knew there was a story waiting to be discovered, a proper story, and I was determined to be the one to get it.

When I arrived at the railway carriage, Henry was busy in the garden again. "Hello young fella," he said. "Brought your pencils, I see."

Henry stuck his fork into the earth and beckoned me towards a weather-beaten garden bench. Ali's wooden