

LAMBERT, LAMBERT

by Ian Watson

Illustrated by Allen Koszowski

You must be finding your present situation pretty odd, eh? Bear up, pal! Chin up. There's company awaiting you further on inside.

Why *me?*, you're wondering. I took pity on you, see. Yes, pity! I decided to save you.

'Course, once I started doing this trick of mine I developed a certain appetite for it, as you might say. I won't go so far as to call it a craving. If I craved, could I control myself, could I choose my customers? Could I ration myself sensibly? What-ever my girth, I'm no glutton. No addict, me. I feel a definite *relish*; that's about it.

Listen up, lad, and you'll understand. *What's in a name?* asked the Bard. Quite a lot, I do believe. To a greater extent than chance can explain, people's names can be unusually fitting. I'd go so far as to say that in a good many cases the name maketh the man.

Take me, Bert Brown. Blunt and solid, eh? Bert Brown could hardly be a violinist or a philosopher. He could be a bus driver or a postman. In my case, a prison camp guard. Right? You agree? Only my pals inside know differently.

Oh you'll meet them just as soon as I do my trick the next time, and you get squeezed within. Inter-esting company! Your sort. The people they put in these camps are usually interesting, at least when they arrive and for a few months after-wards. Then they stop being so interesting. Lack of the old brainfood, eh? Gruel and thin soup, scabby veg and stale bread wears them down.

You're still able to peep out. When that stops, you'll meet the others. Oh I can talk to them or just listen to them nattering but you can't yet.

By "inside" I'm not of course referring to the electrified fences, the rows of huts. I'm talking about *me*. This here is my standard orientation lecture. How thoughtful of me to provide one! Well, it calms you down. Otherwise you might thrash around and give me a spot of indigestion, as 'twere. You might unbalance me a bit; though for a fact that would take some doing! I'm carrying ballast, chum. You need to appreciate what a kindness I'm doing you. I'm sure you're catching on, you're getting there.

Where were we? Oh yes, my name. Bert's a use-ful sort of moniker to have these days. Doesn't attract attention; doesn't mark a fellow out. That's how I see it.

It's a name, if you'll excuse my humour, lacking any colour.

But thirty years gone by, my Mum and Dad named me *Lambert*. Lambert Brown. That's what Mum always called me when I was a nipper. "My little lamb, Lambert!" "Lambkin Lambert." "Where are you, Lambkin?" She stopped that caper as soon as I started fattening up. Problem with the glands, right? Soon I became bloated Bert, who got bullied at school. That's what makes me sensitive; that's how I can sympathize with people like you. Then I got a bit too big to bully.

Mum actually took the name from an old ency-clopedia that was lying around. Chap called Lam-bert Simnel attempted to seize the throne of Britain back in the time of Henry the Seventh; he got chopped for his pains. Lambert Simnel was named after a Saint Lambert, a Billy Graham type who also got the chop. Belgium has lots of churches in his honour. Belgium: mayonnaise and chips. I know things, see. It's the company I keep.

Not a very good track record so far for Lam-berts? Mum didn't care much about history; it was the little lamb aspect that appealed to her. She was like that: of diminished I.Q. Dad too, I sup-pose, though he must have been a bit brighter because he pissed off. Presumably I get my brains from him. Simnel's some kind of kraut cake. *Very* fattening. I used to eat a fair whack of rich stodgy cake when I was a kid. I don't now. I'm very strin-gent about my diet.

Stop twitching, will you? Won't do any good. Think about the word *lam*. Means to thump, to trash. That's what goes on inside the wire. Beat-ings. My fellow goons like to cut a prisoner out of the herd now and then and work him over. At ran-dom, when the fancy takes them. Nothing systematic. If starving doesn't get you, a thumping might. You're finished after that.

Commander doesn't mind. Relieves the strain. They're all missing persons in there, to begin with. If someone becomes more missing, who cares? He certainly hasn't done a runner. No inmate gets through the high-voltage wire or the auto-guns. So, pal, you won't be missed. No one's looking for you.

I mean, that applies across the board to all the prisoners. They can forget any silly notion of help from some other country — which is where it would need to come from. From America or Rus-sia. But every country's in a mess. Sea level, eco-nomic collapse, heat, famine; need I go on? We have this country sewed up tight for a long time to come. Count your blessings. I feel sorry for people like you.

"Lam" also means to escape, to beat it. You're on the lam now. Thanks to me.

All comes down to names, doesn't it?

I was working as a debt collector in Leicester. See, I could intimidate people.

That's where I discovered about my namesake and felt such a strong yen to join the penal service. Not surprising, huh? Best job these days. So many nuisances being rounded up. Pinkos. Greens. Poofsters and wogs. Domeheads and arty-farties. All the stir-rers. Got to belt up about stuff like freedom and politics and art if this country's going to survive the greenhouse. Doesn't really require as much exertion as sticking one's bod in some pensioner's doorway; not with all the control equipment at our disposal. If goons want to work up a sweat thrashing a detainee, that's their business. I don't join in. Other fish to fry. Not that I'm easily exhausted, by the way. I'm a tireless fellow.

Same as my namesake. My double! Right: chap name of Daniel Lambert. The fat man of Leicester.

Found out about him when a hailstorm chased me into the museum. Hail the size of bloody golf balls, shooting down at machine-gun rate, bouncing as high as a bus. Several people were killed that day. Old folk, babies in prams. Windows shattered all over. The climate's all screwed up and that's a fact. Anyway, the museum was showing Lambert's clothes and other memorabilia.

He was born in the year 1770, and his Dad ran the House of Correction, the Bridewell prison. This Bridewell wasn't for your murderers or forgers or thieves who were bound for the noose and the gibbet. No, it housed people who had committed what you might call moral offences against society. Debts, drunkenness, vagrancy, that type of thing. You ought to know about moral offences against society, hmm? They're what landed you in the camp.

In his earlier days Lambert's Dad was huntsman to the Earl of Stamford. His uncle was game-keeper to the next Earl and his grandad on his mum's side was a famous cock-fighter. Thus young Daniel grew up real sporty. Swimming, fishing, riding to hounds, hunting otters, fighting cocks. 'Course, the countryside wasn't any distance from the heart of the city back then. Oh he loved the sporting life. Pinkos like you did your damndest to spoil all that. Still, what does it matter nowadays?

With all that exercise, our Dan became a powerful fellow. Could carry quarter of a ton without any fuss. Could kick seven feet high, standing on one leg. Once he thumped a whopping dancing bear owned by some Froggy entertainers. You see, they were performing in the street outside the gaol when the gaol dog went for the bear, and this Froggy in charge unmuzzled Ursa Major to let her kill the dog. Felled her with one blow to the skull, did our Dan. The bear threw in the sponge.

Dan's folks apprenticed him to the button trade in Birmingham. To learn die-sinking and engraving. Must have seemed a bright idea at the time. A few years later, fashion turned topsy-turvy. Out went buckles and fancy buttons. And it was a time of unrest: the factory burned down in a riot. So Dan returned to Leicester, Dad resigned from the Bridewell, and his boy took over as keeper.

Boy, am I saying? Dan started putting on weight at a swingeing pace. (Could it have been the lack of sporty exercise running a prison? Not to mention the glands?) Wasn't too long before he weighed in at nearly fifty-three stone. Measured three feet round each leg, and nine feet round the body. When he was sitting down, his belly buried his thighs to the knees. His legs were pillows almost smothering his feet. The flap of his waist-coat pocket stretched a foot across. Special clothes for him, special chairs more like sofas.

One remarkable fact was how healthy our Dan was. When he finally died, most likely of a heart attack, at the Waggon and Horses in Stamford where he'd gone for the races, they needed to demolish a wall of the inn to get him out in his coffin — he was putrefying fast. But up until then, not a whisper of frailty! Dan could fair trot upstairs. He could outwalk most fellows. He'd teach kids to swim in the river Soar — he could float with two grown men on his back. Never caught a cold in his life, even when he used to come in soaking wet and sleep with his window open then don the same damp clothes in the morning. He never snored. Never panted. Perfect bronchials. His voice was a sweet, strong tenor.

I'm a lot like our Dan Lambert with regard to health and vigour. Additionally, he was a very *nice* bloke. So am I — as you must agree — saving you from slow starvation! Really considerate to the guests in his lock-up, he was. Humane? Benevolent? Why, he was a byword. Departing prisoners sometimes wept with gratitude.

But in 1805 the magistrates decided that such prisoners as those would be better employed labouring in the town's factories. So Daniel's job came to an end; though not without an annuity of fifty pounds a year for life for him, freely granted as a mark of esteem.

Alas, fifty pounds proved insufficient to his needs. That's why our man-mountain began to exhibit himself to the curious. Either that, or hide in his house! Such was the fame of his bulk, people would knock on the door on any pretext.

In the main, the exhibiting down in London went off really well, since our Dan was such a damn decent fellow. More like a king of men holding gracious court than a freak. Thus there was nothing ludicrous about the occasion when the largest man in the world met the smallest man — a Polish dwarf named Count Borulawski, whose missus used to pop him on the mantelshelf as a punishment when she was feeling peeved with him. A single one of Dan's sleeves' could easily have provided a whole suit of clothes for the Count. This was a meeting of two civilized prodigies. Ah, civilization's taken a downturn since those days, hasn't it just?

Dan's head was perfectly proportioned, by the way. No bloating or grossness about his face! A normal, handsome head was simply dwarfed by a giant body.

Do I hear you enquire as to his diet? Simplicity itself! Quite Spartan. A single dish at a meal, and he only ever drank water. A little like the menu in the camps.

I can tell you, how little he ate came as a revelation to me. Did he convert the whole of his modest intake of food into flesh, a hundred per cent? Didn't he ever crap or pee? Seems as how all of his bodily secretions were quite normal! So where did all of his bulk come from? Out of thin air?

You've heard the old saying as to how inside every fat man there's a thin man crying to get out. Do I hear you crying right now? Don't bother. Wipe your sobs away. Adjust to circumstances, that's the ticket.

Let's put two and two together tentatively. Soon as our Dan becomes boss of the gaol he puts on stones and stones of extra weight without any evidence of gluttony. And he liked his prisoners; he was good to them.

Could he have been so kindly disposed that he *liberated* his favourites — by engulfing them? By absorbing them into himself? Now there's a fine way to solve overcrowding in prisons! The gaoler becomes his own private gaol.

Ah, but magistrates back in those days were finicky. They kept count. Had ledgers and lists. Families enquired after prisoners. Creditors bore them in mind. Prisoners didn't merely disappear, as nowadays. Once you're behind the wire now, it's do-as-you-please.

Let me tell you, it pleased me very much when I absorbed my first prisoner. (Pleased me for his sake too! I was saving him.)

Dan Lambert inspired me. But it was me myself, Bert Brown, who cottoned on to the trick. The cottoning-on was a leap such as bloody Einstein made. Fourth dimension and all that. That's where you all are: stacked behind each other in another dimension inside of me. Soon as I cottoned on, I could do it.

Quite a party's going on in here. You're busy debating, arguing, telling your life stories. Making friends and quarrelling. Comforting and entertaining one another. Drawing up manifestos, playing games, composing poems.

And not worrying at all about starving or thumpings. All courtesy of big Bert Brown. Lambert Brown.

Naw, not *you* yet. I've told you, you need to wait till I absorb someone new; that's how it works. I grab one of you spindly types, one that I fancy, take him somewhere quiet. I wrap myself around him, I engulf, I crush. And into me goes the personality — after the ritual. Eating some liver, heart, and brain; right. Fair's fair; gives me a spot of extra nourishment to fuel the procedure, very like what I gather savages in the South Seas used to get up to. Only, I do it properly seeing as how I

understand about the fourth dimension I'm putting you into.



I'm sure Dan Lambert didn't do my trick, but I think there must have been *something* a bit four-dimensional about him, don't you? Four dimensions squashed into three. If everything possesses four dimensions the way Einstein said, then that includes food and drink. Your ordinary run of geezer only uses three dimensions; that's all he can take. A Dan Lambert could digest the fourth dimension of food too — that's how he got so big on so little. There's the explanation.

Me, I'm a step beyond our Dan, aren't I? Good thing for you I am! Welcome to the family. I'm really expanding wonderfully within. It's an education, all these new persons inside me. Henry and Crispin and Alec and Mohammed and Rasta and Lucian and Tony, ooh a good thirty lodgers by now with plenty of room for expansion. More customers pouring into the camp every day.

I wouldn't have thought I had it in me! But I do. I can contain multitudes; could be my very own prison camp.

Actually, so as not to keep you on tenterhooks, I think I'll take another stroll inside the wire pretty soon, stomp into a hut, haul out a nice face; then it's off to somewhere special and get down to business. My fellow goons don't know what they're missing.

All this hard graft of *thinking at you* is fair working me up an appetite. *Q*