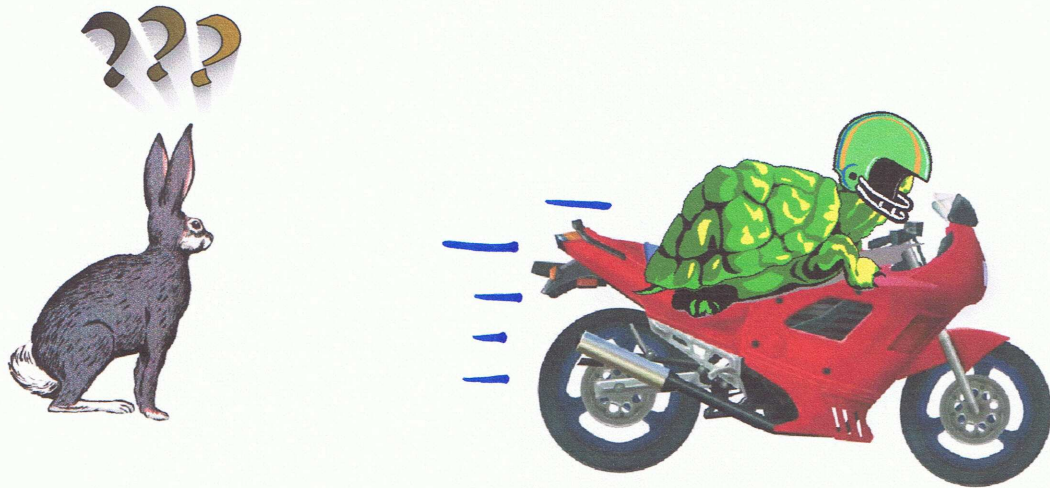


Aesop Updated



FABLES FOR THE
THIRD MILLENNIUM

Well, not really updated, since Aesop's originals are timeless, and as relevant today as they were centuries ago. The Fox continues to see the grapes as sour when he can't reach them, and no doubt he always will.

But Aesop never worked in a thirty story office building or a twenty level office hierarchy, and never had to deal with a recalcitrant computer or a belligerent boss. So for those of us who do, or did, here are fables about folk who coped with some of these modern aspects of life.

Aesop drew his morals from life; I draw mine from four decades of working for a living, thirty of them as a Federal Bureaucrat in Ottawa, (fifteen as a first level Senior Executive). I know that many people would say that "life" and "federal bureaucracy" have little, if anything, in common, but I believe that they share, amongst other things, bungled messages, suffocating committees, politically correct morons, managers who cannot manage and leaders who cannot lead. And also a few good guys.

If you have downloaded my “Eclectic Lights” collection of short stories you will have met some of my fables before. You will find several of these repeated here, alongside some new fables.

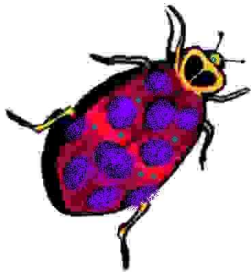
So thank you for downloading them. I hope you find my modern fables amusing; I hope you find them entertaining; I hope you find them useful.

*Barry Daniels
Western Shore, Nova Scotia
June 2009*

THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE FOLLAME BEETLE

A Fable for the Third Millennium

In the spring of 1927 an entomological expedition to the Amazon River Basin brought back samples of a previously unknown insect, which they found in large numbers along the river banks close to the river's source. Experts were at a loss to explain how an insect



present in such large quantities had not previously been reported or identified. The large, multicolored beetle, named for the team's leader, entomologist Sir Edmund Follame, was a beautiful creature, having a carapace which resembled mother-of-pearl in its subtle shades and in its luminescence. Sunlight

falling on the shell was reflected as though from some precious stone.

The beetles were of particular interest to entomologists of the era due to their unique foraging process. One insect, normally the largest and strongest of the group, would take the lead and become responsible for locating food. In order to be able to eat while traveling the insects had evolved a singular physiology; the antennae of each beetle were constructed so as to connect with and lock onto the rear legs of the beetle in front. In this way individual insects did not even have to look where they were going, and could concentrate on eating. Long lines of foraging insects would march through the jungle in a way which inspired one explorer to remark: "It was as though a diamond necklace were moving through the forest, catching those rays of sunlight which found their way through the canopy in a most amazing and

delightful display.” Lines of several hundred meters in length were common, and chains of up to half a kilometer were not unknown.

And then, suddenly, they were gone. While expeditions in '29 and '30 reported large colonies of Follame Beetles wandering in lengthy procession along the banks of the Amazon, the 1931 party was stunned to discover that the insects were nowhere to be found. The discovery of exoskeletal remains later that year explained what had happened to the beetles but not *why*. The shells formed a huge circle, over a kilometer in diameter, along jungle trails several kilometers west of the river.

The scientific community was baffled, and while various theories were examined and discarded, it fell to the noted entomologist Ivor Bindair-Dundat to produce the now generally accepted theory to account for the unfortunate demise of the Follame. Dundat had noticed from his observations of the beetle in previous years that the foraging lines were becoming fewer in number but were much longer. This was the result of the leading beetle of one line coming upon the end unit of another line and joining onto it. Ultimately this had resulted in the entire population of Follame beetles becoming joined together in a single line of immense length. This situation could probably have continued for some time except that, purely by chance, the leading beetle came into contact with the tail end of its own line and instinctively joined it. Bindair-Dundat speculated that after two or three circuits of the same area all available food had been taken, and the circle of beetles probably moved faster and faster in its search for food until the weaker members of the line perished from starvation. The dead insects unfortunately maintained their linkage, fore and aft, and the chain remained unbroken. While dead beetles could be carried by the line up to a certain point, it could not continue indefinitely. Move-

ment of the line finally ground to a halt, and the remaining beetles starved to death while locked into place in the motionless chain.

Bindair-Dundat was widely quoted as saying: “It saddens me greatly to think that if only one beetle had managed to break away from the circle the entire population could have been saved from extinction.”

Don't be a Follame Beetle! Never mistake Activity for Accomplishment. 'Moving' is not necessarily 'Going Somewhere'. And if you're going nowhere, running will not get you there any faster.

* * *

THE MONASTERY AT ESRA

A Fable for the Third Millennium

On the day after his fifty-fifth birthday King Ethelbert awoke with a splitting headache and a sour stomach, which is to say, as usual, and in his normal foul temper. As he returned reluctantly to the waking world the king recalled with distaste the problems which had haunted him throughout the restless night and which would no doubt be waiting for him again this morning. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was probably already outside the royal bedchamber with his rows and columns of figures which he would present with doleful accounts on the precarious situation of the royal coffers. Tradesmen needed to be paid; the Royal Guard had not received a paycheque for close to three months; the roof of the Queen's Tower was leaking like a sieve. The King's Chamberlain would be at the man's shoulder to explain again why even a small increase in taxes would probably push the unhappy peasantry into open rebellion, which would be seen by the King of Ombria, to the north, as an invitation to invade.

The Queen would be close behind, wailing about the ragged appearance of her ladies in waiting, with Prince Egbert hanging onto her skirts complaining that, at thirty five years of age, it was time he was given more responsibility in running the Kingdom.

It was all too much. Ethelbert went out through the window.

He slipped quietly back into the palace through a little used door that led past the Gardener's quarters into a walled courtyard. He opened a small gate which was cunningly concealed behind a rose bush, and so into the town. At a nearby Inn the king rented a horse, bought provisions for a week, and left the city by the main gate, unchallenged by the guard, who had just come on duty and was still rubbing the sleep dust from the corners of his eyes.

Three hours later Ethelbert emerged from his reverie to realise two things; Firstly, he felt better than he had for many months, and, secondly, he had no idea where he was.

Trotting along a backroad, not much more than a cart track, the king finally recognised the path as one he had taken many years ago, when he had been a young prince. He had ridden out with a few friends on a road to anywhere, looking for adventure. He had found, instead, the Monastery at Esra.

Ethelbert had fond memories of that time. He had stayed for several weeks at the monastery, long after his companions had left to return to court, and had formed a special friendship with a young monk named Jonathon. Even at that time, so long ago, his new friend had risen to high office, and was third only to the Abbot himself and his deputy, the Prior. Ethelbert remembered little about the Abbot, only that he, too, had seemed young for the great responsibility imposed on him, but he well remembered happy days spent with Jonathon as the monk made his rounds, discharging his many duties. Ethelbert had learned much of gardening, of literature and the copying of treasured manuscripts, of trade with the local villagers. The monks were



well advanced in the science of medicine, and held clinics to which local villagers travelled for treatment of their ills. The king had immersed himself in this practice, impressed by the kindness and respect which the monks had shown to all who came seeking their aid. He had vowed then that when he attained the throne all men in his kingdom would be treated with kindness and respect such as the monks had shown to their patients.

* * *

He was greeted at the gates by an elderly monk, and handed his horse to a groom who had run from the stables on seeing that a guest had arrived. He was offered shelter and refreshment, but before accepting either, he told the monk, he would first seek to become reacquainted with Brother Jonathon, friend of his youth. "Even so long ago," he told the monk, "Jonathon had achieved a high rank and must surely by now have ascended to the Abbot's robes."

"Yes, of course," the man replied, "I believe that Brother Jonathon did indeed wear such robes in his turn; but that was long ago, and I believe that he has long since gone to the fields."

Ethelbert did not at first understand what the monk meant by this remark, but then realised that he was using 'gone to the fields' as a gentle way of saying that his old friend had passed away.

"Do you mean that my friend is now to be found in the cemetery?" he asked.

"Indeed yes, I think that you must seek him there," the old man smiled. Obviously, to him, passing from flesh into spirit life was not in any way a cause for sadness.

Following the old monk's direction Ethelbert walked sadly along a winding path to the Monastery graveyard, which sat on a hill overlooking the buildings and with a view to the distant shore. The view was beautiful but could not lighten the king's dark mood.

For a long time he walked among the stones, reading the names of monks buried there, and was so lost in thought that he did not

hear the caretaker step quietly up behind him.

“May I help you?” the monk asked. “Are you seeking a particular marker, or are you here simply to enjoy the scenery, for truly it would be hard to find the equal of the view shared by our departed brothers.”

“I seek the stone of an old friend of my youth, Brother Jonathon by name, who I regret I did not visit many years ago, as I was told now that I must look for him among the departed.”

“Indeed you were well advised to do so, since he is here, for it is his task this week to care for the stones and tend the garden which is here to honour their memory. I thought I recognised you, young Prince, but the years have not been kind I fear.”

“Jonathon! Is it you? I thought....”

“To weep at my marker, Ethelred. And yet you may, but not today. Come with me to a place of shade which I know, and we will speak of the years that have gone by.”

The two men sat beneath an ancient willow and shared the bread and cheese which Jonathon had brought for his mid day meal.

“But how can this be?” the king asked. “Even long ago you were within reach of the purple robe, and yet now I find you picking caterpillars from the roses in the Monastery graveyard.”

“This confuses many visitors, to find our abbot so young and the pot boy a greybeard, but that is how such things work here. The job of abbot is not one for the old or feeble. The daily stresses of that post would bend the strongest back and break the sternest will. And so we reserve such a position for someone young, with a good mind and a strong constitution, so that he may survive on three hours sleep a night, and meals taken on the run; so that he may shoulder the endless troubles, problems of a type with which I am sure you are overly familiar.

“When we first met I had served my term as Abbot, and had recently stepped down. I well remember that time, and I was never

in my life so glad of anything as I was to finally take off the robes and pass them to my successor. For some years after that I worked as Master to the Illustrators, who copy old manuscripts, and from there I moved to the stables. There I stayed for longer than expected, for I loved to work with horses, and I do to this day. And then a peaceful term in the fields, raising crops and livestock for food and trade.

“But now I have attained the highest rank, where none may order my time. I pass my days in prayer and contemplation of God’s magnificent works, and, when I choose to do so, I may spend some time helping the sick at the clinic, or as you find me today, caring for the dignity of friends who have moved on beyond any earthly concerns.”

“But surely, my old friend, it is a great loss to the monastery that one such as yourself, full of the knowledge and wisdom of the years, should spend his days chasing insects in the cemetery gardens!”

“But of course! A waste it would be. If you look now down the hill you will see our newly minted abbot surrounded by a group of his peers, making his way up the hill towards us. I see with him Brother Peter, who at twenty six years old is recently appointed Minister of the Exchequer, a thankless task at which I also spent time some years ago. It is a rare day that I am not sought out for an opinion, or a piece of advice, or some morsel of knowledge I have stored away within this grey head of mine. In my days as Abbot I consulted frequently with older heads, and it would be a fool of an Abbot who did not take such advantage. But see, they will be greatly apologetic, and will not trouble us for long, and I will take you then to visit the medical rooms, for you will find much there to interest you.”

* * *

The king rode back into the palace yard on a glorious afternoon when the sun stood so high that it cast no shadow. He was challenged and then saluted as the guard recognised his sovereign through the veneer of road dust and grey bristles. As he trotted towards the stables a groom ran forward to meet him and take the

horse, but the king would not release the animal. “Leave be,” said Ethelbert. “This fine creature has served me well, and has carried me far with little complaint. I owe him at least a rub down and a good feed, and to see that he is well rested and recovered before he is returned to his owner.”

Puzzled, the groom stepped back. The King’s Chamberlain, alerted by the Palace Guard, came into the stable yard at a run.

“Majesty, thank God you are back safe. Your attention is needed to a score of issues. The Guardsmen are demanding their back-pay; merchants are withholding deliveries until accounts are settled; Ombrian troops have been seen at the border, and her Royal Majesty, your wife, is enraged by.....”

“Hold!” said the king, “These matters will be attended to in good course. Go seek out Egbert. He has been nipping at my heels for too long in search of greater responsibilities, and by God he shall have them. Tell him he is now Regent and prepare the papers to make it so. Tell him also that he may seek the advice of my counselors and indeed I will take it ill if he does not do so. If he should require *my* advice or guidance he may also seek it, though matters in the stable will occupy me for the balance of the morning and I then intend to concern myself with the health of the people of our lands. I have carried the weight of this kingdom on my shoulders for longer than needs be, and I now declare myself promoted!”

“Groom,” called the king, “Show me, if it pleases you, where I may find brushes and blankets, and pails to carry water. I will see to the needs of this fine animal, and affairs of state may wait my pleasure.”

* * *

A man may progress through his career and move upwards to greater responsibility and the rewards which higher rank may bring. But he must be ever vigilant to ensure that he does not make

progress' to the detriment of life's greater rewards – such as freedom from worry, the ability to sleep soundly, and sufficient leisure time to pursue his most pleasurable pursuits.

* * *

GUARDIAN DEVIL

A Fable for the Third Millennium

As we make our way through life we all profit, now and then, from the advice of the Guardian Angel who sits quietly on our shoulder, saving us from the worst of our blunders and from our most ill considered choices. Everybody knows that. Even Adam had his angel, who advised most strongly that the apple business was a totally bad idea. What is not so well known is that we all have a little Guardian Devil sitting on the other shoulder, who is there to put a little fun in our lives. The GD was put there after Satan successfully argued in the High Celestial Court that the Free Will, with which God has generously endowed us all, serves little purpose unless we are also given a range of options from which to choose. Hence Eve's ill advised choice to sample the aforementioned fruit, and Adam's decision to go along with the plan.

In childhood it is GD who whispers that three cookies are not enough, that the cookie jar can be reached easily if you first climb onto the kitchen counter, and that Mom will be glued to the TV set until her favorite soap opera ends in about an hour. GA tells you that three is more than enough, and that too many sugar cookies will make you fat and ruin your teeth.

GA will tell you that too many toys will spoil you rotten by focusing excessively on the material aspect of your life, and if you insist on getting yet another Playstation game you could at least give away a few of the old ones to some deserving cause. GD sees nothing at all wrong in being spoiled rotten, and tells you that it is very good practice for adulthood, when the quality and cost of the toys will increase immeasurably.

Both Angels will intercede with your parents on your behalf, the one advising Mom that if she lets you have too many goodies she will end up with a fat, spoiled brat of a kid with astronomical dental bills, while the other murmurs that it is well worth a few cookies to be left in peace for an hour with the Soaps.

In Adolescence GA warns you against all the things which make this period of your life bearable, while GD tells you that you have precious few years in this phase, and things not done *now* may remain undone forever. GA can become positively apoplectic about the importance of homework, while GD insists that if you don't go to the party tonight, the new girl in your class is going to end up with your best friend, Lester.



And in all of this, your freedom of choice is a God given right.

In later life the pattern continues, while the stakes are raised. GA will tell you: Play fair; The best candidate will get the job. GD: It wouldn't hurt your chances to let the boss know (covertly, of course) that the other candidate is a member of AA (true) who has recently fallen off the wagon (false).

GA: "You made a solemn vow when you married Mary."
GD: "Mary will never find out."



GA: The kids need orthodontistry, you haven't taken the family on holiday in years, your credit cards are all maxed out and your five year old Honda still has years of life left in it.

GD: That beautifully restored flame-red sixties Corvette is *wicked!* And the dealer has made you a *very* generous offer, if you can just come up with the measly ten grand deposit. And why shouldn't you? After all, you've *earned* it, and you *deserve* it.

In the end, your life will be lived according to the choices you make, and when it all flashes before your eyes in your final moments only you can say whether you have derived any benefit from it. Were the sacrifices worth while? Were your indulgences over the top? Nobody will answer those questions for you.

And the moral of the story? Good is better than Evil? No Way! If you're looking for that level of philosophy you would probably be better off reading Friedrich Nietzsche.

But perhaps it would not be unreasonable to suggest that...

...those who always give you what you ask for are not necessarily your friends, and those who would deny you what you ask for are not necessarily your enemies. Better, then, to base such judgments on the intent behind such actions than on the actions themselves.

* * *

SHIPS

A Fable for the Third Millennium

It has been said that some men are born great, some men achieve greatness and some men have greatness thrust upon them. So it is with riches, except that there are perhaps a few more options. In addition to inheriting money and working hard to earn it, it is possible to marry money, to win it in quantities which would have boggled the minds of our grandparents, or to be born with such an audacious amount of luck that while walking along the street one day you happen to trip over a diamond the size of a robin's egg.

Wally Pointer was not born to rich parents (which also ruled out the possibility of eventually inheriting a large sum), had neither the ability nor inclination to work towards wealth, squandered what little money he had on lottery tickets, and had neither the looks nor the personality which would have made him marriage material to rich (or even poor) widows. He seemed destined therefore to be born, live, and eventually die in a state of not-quite-
abject poverty.

Wally had one thing going for him, however; a wonderful thing; a gift which almost made up for the fact that it was essentially his one and only asset: He was an optimist.

More than that, he was an *ultra*-optimist. A *die-hard* optimist. A cockeyed *incurable* optimist. Wally could find himself flat on his back in the gutter and consider this to be an excellent opportunity to gaze at the stars. He could listen to the ten o'clock news and conclude not that the world was an ugly, dangerous, disgusting place in which to live, but that he was the luckiest of men to live in a corner of it where he could go each night to a warm, dry, safe place to sleep, and he would go there well fed, healthy, fit and free from worry; and that he would wake up the next morning with a job to go to (Wally worked as the assistant manager, in an office of two, at the local landfill) with good promotional prospects (I *did* say that he was an incurable optimist) and job security for life – unless people inexplicably and unexpectedly stopped producing garbage.

Wally was, in short, a happy man. When his friends questioned his lifestyle he would shrug, smile and tell them: “If I wait patiently, my ship will come in!” His friends at first offered well intentioned advice. “Save some of your paycheque, Wally, even if only a few dollars per week. By the time you retire it will add up to a nice pot of money.” “Pay into a pension fund, Wally. It won’t cost much, and you will be glad of it one day.” “Take some night-school courses, Wally. They’re free and will qualify you for a better job. Why won’t you at least try.”



To all of this, and more, Wally would shrug, smile, and say: “If I wait patiently, my ship will come in one day,” and so eventually they all gave up. He kept his friends, because he was, at heart, a likeable sort of fellow, but the range of conversations he held with them shrank as time passed, until the best he could expect was: “Hi, Wally: Your ship come in yet?” To which he would shrug, smile, and reply: “One day; it will come in one day.”

Wally grew older, and then he grew old. We all seem to follow that route no matter how diligently we may seek to travel by some other path. His friends, who grew old alongside him, eventually profited from their own advice, and retired with tidy pensions and nice little pots of money in the bank. They led comfortable lives and were happy to lend support to their lifelong friend who had retired

pensionless, moneyless, homeless – but fortunately not friendless and not hopeless. “Still waiting, Wally?” they would ask him with a smile, slipping their old friend a five or a ten, or, on special occasions a twenty. Wally would shrug and smile and say: “Any day now, my ship will come in, I know it will.”

In the end Wally died, and was buried, and his friends chipped in towards a small marble headstone, on which was carved Wally’s name, the two important dates of his life, and the legend: “Here lies Wally. Though he waited all his life, his ship never came in.”

Poor Wally. He never realised the truth of it.

If you intend to spend your life waiting for your ship to come in, it is first necessary for you to send one out.

* * *

THE SQUIRREL’S TALE

A Fable for the Third Millennium

You’ve probably heard that the Lion is the King of Beasts, and this may be true, today; but it was not always so. In the beginning the animals went their own ways and for the most part this suited everyone perfectly well. Oh, there were always little disputes such as who had prime rights to a fine watering hole, or whether the fox should pay compensation for eating somebody’s uncle, but by and large they all got along.

There were two problems, however, which the animals feared greatly, and which they faced each year with no hope of solution. The first of these was the spring flood. The river which ran through the centre of the forest was for most of the year a calm and gentle thing, but when the spring rains came the river changed into a raging monster. It roared out its anger as it rampaged through the forest, climbing over its banks to flood the burrows of small animals who had made their homes too close to the rising waters. Many beasts, large and small, were snatched from the banks to be carried away by the torrent and never seen again.

The river's anger subsided by early summer, and the animals enjoyed a few weeks of calm before the next terror was visited on them. The fires. These could start anywhere, and drive in any direction at the discretion of the winds. No place in the forest was safe. Many small animals who normally sought refuge in the treetops would find to their peril that this was now the *least* safe of havens. Others, crazed with fear, simply ran in circles until first exhaustion took them, and then the merciless flames.

Every year the animals faced the waters and the flames with whatever grace and courage they could muster, but with little hope.

But then, one fine spring morning, high in the treetops, a squirrel awoke from his long winter sleep with the memory of a dream. In his dream he had seen a creature in a golden crown, who had brought all the animals together to fight the twin scourges of the forest. "Yes!" thought the squirrel. "That is what we have been missing. We need a *Leader!*"

So the squirrel called a meeting of the animals, and each sent a representative to the great clearing at the centre of the forest. It was the first time this had happened since the man and woman had been cast out after some funny business involving an apple and a snake. The snake would never talk about it afterwards.

"Animals of the forest," the squirrel began, "Since the beginning of time we have been subjected to the terrors of flood and fire with no hope of an answer. This is because no individual animal can hope so solve such a complex problem. But if we all work together, and all contribute our talents, we can beat these perils. A *leader* will bring us together; a *leader* will combine our efforts; a *leader* will beat the waters and the fires!"

A *Leader!* What an idea! "Yes," said the tortoise, "An idea of much merit. But who will be our leader?" The question spread through the crowd, and everyone began to talk at once until they were silenced by a great roar.

"A Leader must, above all, be *brave*," said the Lion. "The Lion is

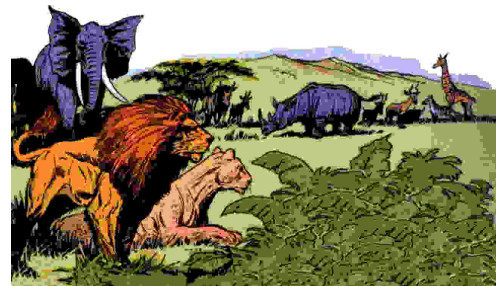
the bravest animal in the forest, and therefore the obvious choice. Furthermore, I will bite the heads off any who oppose me.”

“Hooray for the lion!” cheered the animals, seeing the logic of his argument.

The following week the animals gathered again to hear the lion’s plan.

“For the floods in the spring,” the lion began “We will all learn to swim. Animals who are natural swimmers will teach those who are not, and we will practice in the summer when the river is calm. Then, when the floods come, any animal caught in the waters will simply swim to shore.

“As for the fires, we have been looking at the problem backwards. By running *away* from the fires we are simply challenging the fires to a race — a race we mostly lose. Instead, we will run *into* the fires and through them, to a place which has already burned. Our calculations show that even the smallest and slowest of animals can do this with a chance of survival. The key is not to fear! It is important to run hard, without hesitation. But you will *not* hesitate, for we will be right behind you, and we will bite the heads off any who turn back.”



“Right!” said the tortoise, his voice dripping sarcasm. “Brilliant!”

The lion’s plan was put into effect the following spring, with disastrous results. The calm waters of summer had not prepared the animals to deal with a roaring current. Weak swimmers were pulled under immediately and swept along by the rushing waters to an unknown fate. The survivors scarcely had time to recover before they had to apply the second part of the lion’s plan, for the fires came early that year. It is easy to speak of courage in the safe surroundings of a forest clearing, but it is quite another matter when you are so close to the flames that the heat is causing the ends of your whiskers to curl. Many animals turned from the inferno to face in preference the lion’s jaws, only to find themselves

looking at the other end of the lion. Retreating. Fast.

Two weeks after the last ember had ceased to glow the squirrel called the animals back to the clearing.

“We will not blame the lion for the unforeseen difficulties,” he began. (Some foolish animals had made the mistake of openly criticizing the lion for the failure of his plan). “However, we must now choose a new leader.”

There was silence in the clearing for long seconds. “Humph!” said the elephant at last, “The prime requirement for a leader is not courage, as we have found to our cost!” (The elephant had no fear that the lion would try to eat him) “A leader must be strong and work hard, to set an example for those who follow. We elephants are the strongest animals of the forest, and the hardest workers. I will be your leader!”

“Yeah for the elephants!” cried several animals.

“Here is our plan,” said the elephant a few days later. “My colleagues and I have invented a thing called a ‘firebreak’. All the trees in an area five miles long and half a mile wide will be removed. When the flames arrive at this area they will find nothing to burn, and the fire will die. The animals on the side with the fire will only need to run to the firebreak, and they can then safely cross to the side where the fire cannot reach.”

The elephant paused for applause, which was thunderous. “Furthermore,” he continued as the crowd hushed, “The larger trees will be tied together with vines to form a platform over the river which can be safely crossed even during the floods.”

Work on the firebreak commenced the following day. It ended the following week. Although the elephants worked long and hard they had seriously overestimated the capacity of the smaller animals for this kind of work. While the squirrels tried their best, their ability to move large pieces of wood for long distances was limited. And the hard work sharpened the appetites of several animals so that their natural instincts were hard to fight. A group of chipmunks eating lunch *became* lunch for a hungry fox. The rest of the chip-

munks left. Eventually even the elephants had to give up.

When the fire arrived it leaped the incomplete firebreak with ease. Several animals who would normally have outrun the flames were so tired from their physical labors that they, too, became victims. The few trees which had been dragged to the water's edge rested where they lay until the floods of the following spring lifted them away to an unknown destination.

"Who will be our leader now?" asked the squirrel, cutting back on his usual rhetoric.

"I will," said the ape with surprisingly little hesitation. "We have erred in assuming that a leader must be strong and courageous. Intelligence is the driving requirement of a good leader, and we apes are known to be the most intelligent of the forest creatures. I will be your leader."

"OK for the apes" said one or two animals.

"In anticipation of this development," said the ape, "We have already addressed the problems, and I have here a plan to beat the floods and the flames,"

"Wow," said some of the animals, impressed despite their misgivings.

"A bunch of tree trunks tied together with vines is not a bridge," said the ape, with a sneer directed at the elephant. "*This* is a bridge!" With an elegant flourish the ape unfolded a large blueprint. Attached to the top was an artist's impression. "A heavy central span will carry the bigger forest animals," the ape explained. "The supports for this span will be the trunks of large trees, which will be anchored deep in the riverbed, far enough out into the river that they will be safe from the fires. At each side of the central span will be a cantilevered walkway to be used by the smaller animals, and above the bridge, attached to the tops of the support beams, will be a rope bridge for use by the more agile animals. In this way the entire population can flee the flames, or cross the flooded river, in total safety. All animals will be required to contribute to the construction according to their abilities.

Beavers, for example, will play a key role in building the underwater anchorages. Squirrels will be involved in construction of the overhead rope bridges. Elephants, of course, will do the heavy work for which they are best suited.”

Even the most jaded were impressed by the genius of the concept. The animals went to work with renewed enthusiasm.

Three weeks later the bridge was finished. Everyone agreed that it was a beautiful piece of work. It crossed the river at the widest point, and reached high above the tallest of the trees. Birds who flew over the bridge came back full of wonder. “Can’t wait to try it out,” said the tortoise. He didn’t have to wait long.

The fire came at night, while many animals were sleeping. The alarm was given by a night-owl, who saw the flames while he was flying high over the forest, looking for his supper. The animals were very frightened at first; then they remembered the bridge. A thousand animals — including a hundred elephants -- ran as fast as they could towards the bridge.

“Elephants go to the main bridge” screamed the ape. “Deer, you go to the side bridges. Squirrels, use the overhead vines. No, no, I said *deer* to the side bridges not rhinoceroses! You guys are far too heavy! Squirrels, you must go overhead! If you use the main bridge the elephants might step on you! No, of *course* Hedgehogs don’t have to climb the vines!”

Overhead vines caught fire from flying sparks and several small animals were trapped in the flames high above the frightened elephants. The ape screamed louder and louder but nobody was listening. Four hundred elephant feet hit the bridge at the same time. The supports for the bridge were held in the riverbed by a mix of sand, small pebbles and clay, which had been too difficult for the beavers to understand (they had spent most of their time playing underwater tag anyway). The main supports began to shudder and shake.

With a thundering groan the supports gave way, and the bridge fell into the river with a tremendous splash. It drifted to the centre of the river and floated away with the current, spinning slowly. Here

and there small fires broke out on the floating bridge as hot coals fell onto the wood. On the bridge, two hundred animals cried out in vain for help, while from the depths of the forest came hundreds of terrified beasts, heading in vain towards the place where the bridge had been.

When the squirrel called all of the animals together few arrived at the clearing. "I really thought the ape's plan would work," he said to the tortoise. "Too much intelligence, too little wisdom," replied the tortoise.

"*Wisdom!*" said the squirrel. "Of course! That's it! Not strength; not courage; not even intelligence; *Wisdom* is what a leader needs." All eyes turned to the owl.

"Owl," said the squirrel "Your wisdom is legend. Everyone knows that the owl is the wisest creature in the forest! Will you be our leader?"

"Ah," said the owl "Let me see if I've got this straight. If I succeed, you will expect me to solve harder problems, but if I fail you will call me names and turn your backs on me, as you did to those who have tried and failed."

"That's right!" cried an elephant. "That's just what they did!"

"But more importantly," the owl continued, "You are asking me to solve problems which do not concern my kind. The flooding of the river and the burning of the forest pose no problems to those with wings. So, thank you, but no. I think that perhaps I am too wise to take such a job." So the owl spread his great wings and lifted off into the night. One by one the animals left the clearing, until the squirrel was alone in the dark woods. "Who will be our leader?" he asked; but there was no one to answer.

A light snow began to fall, for winter had returned to the forest and it was once again time for the squirrel to begin his long sleep. And then, snug in his bed, high amongst the treetops the squirrel realised the most important truth of all.

A leader does not need the courage of the lion, nor the strength

of the elephant. He does not need great intelligence, or even great wisdom. But he needs a little of all of these, together with a good heart and a healthy helping of common sense.

Yet even as the thought formed, so came the onset of his winter sleep, and so the squirrel closed his weary eyes as a gentle snow fell over the forest, and the animals thought no more of leadership for a long, long time.

* * *

THE WORKSHOP COMMITTEE

(or How Santa got the Sack)

A Fable for the Third Millennium

“Look at this, everybody!” Santa burst into the Elves’ workshop positively brimming over with enthusiasm, waving a large sheet of paper on which some type of motor vehicle was sketched in bright red crayon. “Look at my great idea. It’s the perfect toy. I was up most of the night working on it. It’s basically a Big Red Truck, which is what most boys want anyway, and it’s got a ladder and a bell which both work, but I’ve also added.....”

Santa looked up from his sketch and noticed for the first time that the elves were not at their benches but gathered in a tight circle at the centre of the shop. “What’s this?” he asked.

“Santa, we need to have a few words with you,” said Alvin, the oldest of the elves.

“If this is more of that Political Correctness business, half of my elves are already lady elves, and if I hire any more females you’ll be complaining that the *men* are under-represented,” Santa replied, his enthusiasm waning rapidly.

“Santa, we’ve mentioned several times that calling us ‘my elves’ is a very patronizing thing to do, It implies a sense of ‘ownership’

which is entirely inappropriate these days.” Alvin said. “Anyway, it isn’t about that. We’d like to discuss the way you run the shop.”

“Same way as I always did, except for the new washrooms.” Santa folded his sketch and stuffed it into a pocket of his red tunic. He looked around for a chair big enough to sit on, knowing that this ‘discussion’ could take some time.

“Please understand that we’re not complaining, exactly,” Alvin continued. “You’ve always been fair and open with us. It’s just that now we’re in the Third Millennium, and you see, well, your dictatorial management style is just a tad out of place.”

“Dictatorial?!”

“Now don’t get upset. We’re not calling you a tyrant or anything like that, it’s just that we’d like to have a little more say in how things work. In choosing what toys are to be made, for example. And we’d like to take a look at the ‘Naughty or Nice’ list once in a while to make sure we’re all on board with your selection criteria.”

“You want *what? Nobody* sees that list but me and Mrs. Claus.”

“Well we can put that aside for now, if you like. What we’re really saying today is that, to come right down to it, we want to form a Workshop Committee.”

“To do what, exactly?” Santa had moved from ‘enthusiastic’ through ‘wary’ to ‘upset’ and was now edging towards ‘annoyed’, with ‘angry’ coming closer by the second. “I think you’d better explain.”

“Well, you’d still be in charge, of course. I mean, you can be the Chairperson of the Committee if you want, but we would like to have some of our workers, five or six I think should be about right, at the meetings with you. See, for one thing, instead of coming into the shop with a new idea it could be presented at the meeting, and the shop work would not be disrupted.”

“I don’t see much shop work to disrupt at the moment,” Santa observed.

“And we’d like to input our own ideas,” Alvin continued, ignoring Santa’s sarcasm. “Ideas for new toys, for example, or better work procedures, or improved safety, or.....”

‘Well,’ Santa thought, ‘If it’s only five or six that still leaves 95% of them at their workbenches, which would be a substantial improvement.’

“O.K.” he sighed. “If I agree to give it a try will you all get back to work? Christmas is only eight months away, you know.”

“Agreed!” said Alvin.

A good deal less jolly than when he had entered, Santa left the workshop in search of a large glass of Santa’s Little Liquid Helper.

* * *

As Chair of the Workshop Committee, Santa called the first meeting of the group to order, banging on the table with the small wooden gavel which the elves had made for him. “Right. Now I want you all to look at this; it’s the perfect toy. It’s basically a Big Red Truck, which is what most boys want anyway.....”



“If I may,” Alvin interjected, “I know how busy you are, Santa, so you probably didn’t have a chance to read the ‘Rules and Procedures for Meetings’ document I sent you. However, paragraph 17 specifically prohibits the Chairperson from making submissions to the committee. The Chairperson, you see, must be free from perceived bias, and able to enforce order without prejudice. If you’d like, I would be happy to submit your idea to the Design Subcommittee on your behalf, or you could always choose to step down as Chairperson and participate actively in the work of the committee. Your choice, Santa.”

“Hmph. Yes, Alvin. I think that I’d rather participate than sit here like a stuffed dummy. Is that alright?”

“Of course Santa. As Vice-chair, then, it falls to me to take over as Chairperson.” Alvin moved to the head of the table and rapped smartly with the gavel. “As Chairperson of this committee I suggest that we relax the rules a little until Santa has had a chance to study our ‘Rules of Order’ booklet. Perhaps on this occasion we could give Santa a little leeway? May I have a motion to that effect from the floor?”

“Yes, good,” said Santa without waiting for motion or vote. “Now about my Big Red Truck, it’s the perfect toy.....”

“If I may, Santa,” Alvin once again broke in, “That’s a value judgment which is no longer yours to make. It’s up to the Design Subcommittee to determine if your idea is ‘perfect’. Joyce, as Chairperson of the Design Sub-committee, have you completed your value-determination study of Santa’s toy?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t had a chance to look at Santa’s idea yet, Chairman.”

“Well, let’s take this as an opportunity for Santa to formally submit his idea for evaluation.”

With gritted teeth which could in no way be mistaken for a smile Santa slid his sketch across the table.

“Oh, no,” said Joyce, shaking her head for added emphasis. “I’m afraid I can’t accept this, Santa. There’s no indication of materials used; no quantities; no time estimates for manufacture. I don’t see *any* cost data, anywhere. There aren’t even any *dimensions*, for Heaven’s sake! This could be six inches long or sixty feet. Oh, no Santa; this won’t do at all. What I have here is a crude illustration of what might or might not be a child’s toy. Anyway, even from this sketch I have a strong suspicion that it is never going to survive the scrutiny of the Psychological Impact Subcommittee. What do you think, Mavis?”

“Oh Santa,” Mavis smiled, “You have such a lovely child-like charm, you know, with your little crayon drawings; but just *look* at all that red! That bright red colour has so many unpleasant

connotations; blood, fire, danger, that sort of thing.”

“*It’s a Fire Truck!*” Santa positively growled.

“Why not use a lighter shade of red, at least,” Mavis suggested, still smiling. “Maybe something closer to Bubblegum Pink, Number RR-56/*a* in the Colour Guide attached to our Psychological Impact Submissions Guidelines booklet? With nice Denim Blue stripes, or perhaps a checkerboard pattern.”

“A Big Pink Truck with Blue Stripes is not exactly what I had in mind,” Santa sighed. Having moved beyond anger he had begun the slide into quiet capitulation.

Alvin banged his gavel. “Yes, well, I think we’ve spent enough time on this truck thing. Perhaps one of you might like to volunteer a little time to spend with Santa, to bring him up to speed with our new design and production protocols?”



“I’d be glad to do that,” said Mavis. “I’d need to take a leave of absence from the workshop, though, and do the briefings during working hours. My leisure time is so vital to good workplace behavior, teamwork, and interpersonal relationships, you see.”

“Of course, Mavis,” said Alvin, “How could anyone possibly argue with that?”

* * *

Santa stared at the productivity chart, unable to believe his eyes. Since it was now the middle of September the graph should be nudging 85%, while it actually stood below thirty. If the number didn’t hit 100% by Christmas Eve there would be empty stockings on the twenty-fifth, and the repercussions would be unpleasant, to say the least. He tried to recall what had happened to the last Santa who had failed to meet his December deadline, but couldn’t recollect such a thing ever happening in the long history of the Santa business.

As he strode briskly into the workshop he was stunned by the resounding silence. His footsteps echoed in the cavernous room, One solitary elf sat at his bench, apparently absorbed in a small pamphlet which lay open on the work surface.

“Oh, hello,” the elf said as Santa approached. “They sent me in here to study because it’s so nice and quiet in here these days. They said they won’t let me back on the Financial Projections Subcommittee until I can demonstrate that I understand Supply Side Economics. I find it hard, though, don’t you?”

“Where is everybody?” Santa exploded. “Don’t they know that Christmas Eve is only twelve weeks away? Where are the toys? There should be a thousand Raggedy Anne Dolls over there; six hundred electric train sets! Where are the Teddy Bears and Dollies’ Tea Sets? What the Hell is going on here?”

“Well,” said the elf, his cheeks scarlet, “I never would have believed that I’d hear such language in this workplace! And from Santa himself, of all people! Since you ask, the schedule board is on the wall behind you. I think you’ll find that the Finance Subcommittee is working in Syndicate Room seven, the User-Demand Projections Group is having a Teambuilding Away Day and has gone for a sleigh-ride, the Environmental Sensitivity Advisory Unit is experimenting with a new line of paints, and the ‘Let’s-Drag-Santa-Into-the-Twenty-First-Century’ crowd has gone on a field trip to SONY to look at their new line of large screen TVs. I’m not sure what the Methods and Standards people are doing, but Clarence was in here earlier looking for his stop-watch.”

“Isn’t *anybody* working?” Santa howled.

“Oh, Santa, that *is* so insensitive. We’re *all* working.”

* * *

When Alvin called the December meeting of the Workshop Committee to order nobody noticed at first that Santa was missing. He often missed these meetings lately. He had spent the last few in the shop, working furiously at the sewing machine to produce Dolly’s Wedding Day packages, mumbling under his breath all the

time. There was some confusion regarding what he was mumbling, as Alvin refused to believe that Santa would use those words.

Alvin picked up the gavel to call the meeting to order, but before he could rap on the table the door to the committee room blew open and a stranger entered. The man was tall and broad shouldered, with slicked-back dark hair, long and curly at the back, and a smartly trimmed Vandyke beard. His dark blue pinstripe suit was immaculately tailored and a gold Rolex watch glittered on his wrist. He was puffing and chewing in turns on a short fat cigar. Without a word the stranger sat down in Santa's chair, which he tipped back to place his custom made reindeer-leather boots on the rosewood table.

"I don't know who you are, or who you *think* you are," Alvin spluttered, "Or *where* you think you are if it comes to that, but if you wish to participate in this meeting you should first read the "Principles of Behavior" appendix in our "Rules of Order" booklet. And furthermore, smoking is strictly forbidden everywhere on these premises, so I'd be much obliged if you would....."

"Shut up, Alvin," the stranger drawled around his cigar.

"And I'll thank you not to address the Chairperson of the Workshop Committee in such a manner. Where's Santa? Does he know that you're here, whoever you are?"

"He's out, I'm in, and you're all in deep doo-doo. Meet the new Santa, boys and girls."

"You're ... How"? They can't do this. They can't replace Santa without due consultation You'll not get away with this. I'll either have a full explanation and apology or I'll"

"You'll what?" The new Santa slipped his feet from the table and his chair came down with a thump. He glared at the Chairperson of the Workshop Committee. "What will you do, Mister-slash-Mizz Chairperson? Call a strike, maybe? How, exactly, would I know the difference? There hasn't been a toy produced in this shop for four months, and we've only three more weeks before Christmas Eve. What exactly are you threatening me with?"

“I would hesitate to use work stoppage as a weapon,” Alvin replied coolly, “But under the circumstances you leave me no choice. And in case you’re thinking of sending in scab workers, we will occupy the workshop. You’ll never have the toys you need by Christmas Eve.”

“Well I’m relieved to hear you say that, Mister Chair, because it saves me the trouble of sacking you all. I wish you well for your sit-in. Perhaps you’ve forgotten that this is the North Pole, and that it’s going to get damn cold damn fast when we cut the power to the building. And if you survive the winter I’d suggest you find yourselves some hard hats before spring, when the wreckers move in to pull the old place down.”

“Then how, exactly, do you intend to get the toys produced?” Alvin blustered.

“We’re out-sourcing,” Santa snapped, grinning around his cigar. “Our make-or-buy calculations already had this place down as a major loser, but your performance of the last few months has persuaded us to move up our schedule. Anyway, you guys are welcome to stay in the workshop as long as you like. The power goes off tomorrow morning. Now if you’ll excuse me I’ve got a Jet to catch. You’d be amazed at how well the Japanese treat a prospective buyer when you tell them you’ll be needing five and a half million portable DVD players. Lock the front door when you leave, will you? On second thoughts, don’t bother. Nobody is going to break in here. There’s nothing worth stealing.”

Santa left the Committee Room in a haze of blue smoke and expensive cologne. He paused outside the room and called back: “Oh, I almost forgot. Merry Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night. Ho! Ho! Ho!”

* * *

The optimum size for a committee is often one person. For a committee which is required to make decisions, the optimum size is always one person.

* * *

THE STUPID BUMBLEBEE

A Fable for the Third Millennium

Grasshoppers and Bees do not compete with each other for food, territory or mating rights, and so it was that George the Grasshopper and Bernard Bumblebee became good friends. George went one day to visit the hive, which hung in a large old oak tree, and found Bernard sitting on a branch watching the activity all around him. George noticed that his friend looked troubled, and asked what was wrong.

“It’s the numbers,” Bernard explained. “I just don’t see how we can survive for long the way we’re going. We’re simply not bringing enough food into the hive. The clover field is half a kilometer away, you see, and, although our worker bees are doing their very best, the trip there and back is simply taking too long. If we don’t find a way to speed things up, we won’t survive the winter.”

Surprised, George looked at the activity all around him; everyone seemed to be very busy indeed. A long line of bees snaked out of the hive, along the branch, down the trunk of the tree and away into the distance. A similar line approached the tree from the meadow, climbed the trunk, along the branch and back into the hive, where they delivered their cargo and immediately joined the outgoing line to repeat the process. “Bernard, why are all the worker bees *walking* back and forth to the meadow?” George asked. “Why do they not fly?”

“Ah, well, it’s a matter of aeronautical engineering, George. We’re simply not built for it. The Queen hired a team of management consultants to do an efficiency study, and fortunately for us there was an aerodynamics expert on the team. He explained to us that our wing area is simply too small to support our large bodies. There’s also the matter of wind resistance — even if we were to get off the ground, our size would make us prey to every gust of wind, and we’d never be able to fly in a straight line. It’s alright for

Hornets and Horseflies, with their sleek aerodynamic shapes and smaller bodies, but it's not for us Bumblebees. You see, in order to fly we'd have to flap our wings so fast that we'd shake the damn things off. I mean, just look how flimsy they are." Bernard extended his wings, and George saw that they did indeed look too frail to support his friend's great weight.

Just as he was about to take his leave George was distracted by a buzzing sound, and looked into the distance to see a small spot moving erratically towards the hive. As it came closer George saw that it was a bumblebee, flying very badly but flying nevertheless. The bee landed on the branch, bounced into the air, landed again and walked unsteadily into the hive. Amazed, George turned to Bernard. "Wasn't that a Bumblebee?"

"Yes."

"But he was *flying!*"

"Take no notice of him. That was just Basil showing off."

"But he can fly!"

"Yes, I know. We've tried several times to explain it to him, but in the end we had to admit defeat; Basil is just too stupid to understand aerodynamics."

When you need to do the impossible, make sure that there is at least one person on your team who is too stupid to understand why it can't be done.



* * *

THE CARPENTER'S HAMMER

A Fable for the Third Millennium

John Lockwood liked to say that his name had predisposed him to his trade, but this was not true. As with his father and grandfather before him, carpentry ran in John's blood. For the Lockwoods, no rose could smell as sweet as the scent of cedar shavings and pine sawdust from the shop floor, and the finest painting in the grandest gallery could not compare to the grain of a newly polished pine table or sideboard. And like his father and grandfather, John excelled at the trade and was known far and wide as a consummate craftsman.

John's father died at the bench he so loved, and not in the manager's office where he rightly belonged. The men would joke good heartedly that an invisible manager ran the place, since the flesh and blood manager was more often to be found admiring a new piece of white oak, or sketching a design for a dining room table. John's grandfather had started the shop with two apprentices to help him, but by the time his father moved into the small corner office there were eight skilled carpenters on staff as well as three apprentices, a clerk and a storeman. At the time of his father's passing the payroll of the little company had grown to thirty five and the original premises were straining at the seams. John knew that he could no longer afford the luxury of spending time at the workbench with his beloved wood, and so he packed his toolbox for the last time and moved into the corner office.

The office was a mess. Papers were strewn everywhere. Mrs. Jacobson, the company clerk, had, in her own words, "nagged the old man like a fishwife" on the subject of keeping orderly records, but admitted that this had been as effective as "yelling at the wind to stop blowing." Skimpy records did not show whether bills had been paid or debts had been collected. Production records gave no hint of who worked well, who worked fast or who worked at all. An ominous scrap of paper stated "Spoilage costs for March" and gave a figure which made John's hair stand on end.

He looked over his personnel records — names of longtime friends and workmates. Old Samuel, for instance, had worked at the shop since John's grandfather's day, and had taught John many of the basic skills of the craft. Samuel was now into his sixties, and so crippled by arthritis that he worked very slowly. His work was still of the very highest quality, worthy of exhibition in the finest

gallery, and it commanded the highest prices; but he took so long to finish each piece that the return barely covered the old craftsman's wages, with not a penny over for shop profit. Arthur turned out his pieces rapidly, but it was rough work and it did not sell well. Mick, the foreman, was a competent craftsman but he preferred to work at the bench rather than focus on what the men were doing, and discipline in the shop had become very lax. Neither was he good with apprentice training,—being impatient and critical without showing the youngsters what they had done wrong, and how to avoid such errors in the future.

From his study of the ledgers one immediate problem jumped out at him. The amount of overtime paid out in recent months was staggering, and John was well aware of the men's complaints in this area, and of the occasional angry phone calls from their wives. He needed more hands to keep up with the workload, and hired five more journeymen and two apprentices. Because of the state of the shop's finances John relaxed the usual standards and hired men who would work for less than the going rate. He also replaced some worn shop tools, but not from the usual supply house, where the cost would have been more than he could afford.

The extra staff did not help. Although daily production was slightly improved, three of the new men proved to be short-tempered bar-room brawlers, well beyond Mick's ability to control. For the first time ever a fight broke out on the shop floor (over an allegedly stolen tool) and John had to run out of his office to restore order.

Despite his efforts to turn the company around, things went rapidly from bad to worse. Within a few months the prospects for the company had become so bleak that John saw no way out, and expected that the shop would face bankruptcy in the new year, if not before. He braced himself to tell the men, but before he could rise from his desk Samuel entered the office. The old carpenter closed the door behind him and placed a sack on John's desk.

"The Master, your father, told me to give you this if it looked like you were in trouble, but not before you'd been on your own for half a year or so. I'm thinking that it might be the time. There's this letter that goes along with it." John opened the sack and took out a large wooden case. He recognised it at once; it was the toolbox

his father had used since before John was born, and which he had carried to the end of his days. His father's name was carved in bold letters at the centre of the lid, and underneath, in a shaky hand, was John's. He had carved that on his seventh birthday, his father's large strong hands guiding his son's movements with the chisel. John opened the box. The tools within were immaculate, their blades oiled and shining, their edges as sharp as razors; the handles seemed to shine with an inner glow, the grain standing out from the wood from decades of use. To his surprise, John saw that each tool had a numbered tag tied to its handle. He opened the letter.

“Son: From my grave I ask you a final favour. Speak with Howard in the storeroom. He has several pieces of white oak which I have instructed him to keep for you. (‘Sure’, John thought, ‘If he can remember where he put them.’ Howard’s stores were much like John’s small office when it came to tidiness and order.) I would like you to build a cabinet, fronted with glass, which is to be placed at the front of the shop, where all who enter will see it. In this cabinet I would like you to place my toolbox, so that whenever you look at it you will think of me, and remember the lessons I taught you. I would like you to build this cabinet in a special way. I have numbered the tools in my toolbox, and each is to be used for the purpose outlined in the attachment.”

John did not immediately open the attachment, but sat and wondered at the strangeness of this request. None of the men needed to be reminded of the old craftsman who had been their employer and their friend for so many years, and there was never a day that John did not think of his father with affection and pride; but strangest of all were the numbered tags attached to the handles of each tool. It was many years since John had needed instruction in the selection of the right tool for a given job. He opened the attachment.

“The tool marked #1 is to be used to cut the oak to the required size,” it began. Then tool #1 must be a rip or crosscut saw, John thought, but to his amazement he found the #1 tag firmly tied to the handle of his father's hammer. *“Tool number two is for reducing the planks to the needed thickness and smoothing of the grain”* the instructions continued. It was not the plane but the carpenter's

drill which carried the second tag. A chisel was named as the tool to be used *“in setting the pegs to connect the shelves in the cabinet.”* The crosscut saw was suggested as appropriate for *“acquiring a smooth finish to the outer surfaces of the wood.”*

Samuel nodded politely and left. John sat in stunned silence. Perhaps his father’s mind had slipped towards the end. Nothing else could explain the odd nature of his final request. John dropped the papers into the toolbox and set them aside. Other urgent tasks demanded his attention. Urgent tasks always seemed to be demanding his attention lately, he thought.

Over the next few days he looked often at the toolbox, wondering what his father had intended. In the end, not knowing how to comply with his father’s last request, he sought out old Samuel.

“I was to wait until you came to me for help and then give you this,” the old man told him, handing over a second envelope. “I don’t know what’s in it and it was not my place to ask, but it’s what the Master asked of me, and I hope it will be of help to you.”

Alone in his office John opened the letter. As he read the words he could imagine his father in the shop, his stool tilted back and his feet propped on the workbench after a long day.

“I hope you haven’t started work on my cabinet, son.” The letter began. *“That was a fine piece of oak I’d been keeping for years looking for just the right use. If you tried to cut it to size with my hammer then you’re not the son I think you are. “Did you get my message? Pretty obvious, huh? There is a purpose to each tool and each tool is made to serve a purpose. Use the wrong tool for the job and you’re inviting disaster. You don’t cut wood with a hammer nor smooth it with a saw. You wonder why I should need to remind you of this? Well if Samuel saw a need to give you this letter, then what you’re doing is worse than using a hammer to cut wood. How can I know this? Because it’s what I was doing son. I realised it too late to turn things around, or even to warn you about the dangerous course I’d set you on*

“When I moved into the office I lost a good craftsman and gained a poor manager. Feeling so uncomfortable in that office I spent little

time there, leaving the shop with no manager at all. Are you doing the same thing? The workshop is your toolbox now, and the men within it are your tools. Make sure that you select the right tool for each job; make sure that you are not trying to cut wood with a hammer. And start with yourself, John. Are you the right tool for the manager's job?

"Remember this too: I taught you than money spent on low quality tools is money wasted. Your mother grumbled at the expense when I first filled my toolbox, but those tools gave me a lifetime of service while other men's tools wore away or broke all around me. At best, a poor tool will give you poor work.

"I'm sorry, son, that I've left you in this mess. I hope this advice can help you before it's too late."

John folded the letter and placed it in the box. The shop was dark, the men having left some hours previously. John turned off the lights, and left the office. As he looked over the empty shop floor he wondered if it *was* all too late.

* * *

The first man to be moved was John Lockwood. The new manager was an ex army officer, still in his forties, living on a disability pension after a piece of shrapnel had ensured that he would not walk again without a cane. John's enquiries told him that the man had been well respected by those under his command, and that he had come to officer rank by means of a field commission. He made the man a good offer which was accepted immediately. The two of them worked late into the night and changes were made.

One of the new tradesmen and one apprentice had shown willingness to learn and to give a fair day's effort. The others were paid a week's wages and released. Samuel was given his own corner of the shop, where his main job was to instruct the apprentices, thus relieving the other tradesmen of a task they had not wanted and did not do well.

Mick was sent back to his bench, where he settled in with a sigh of



relief. The new shop foreman was John Lockwood. Howard came out from the warehouse, which he had run badly, and was appointed as the first full time salesman for the little company, a job at which he was to excel. Mrs. Jacobson, less than a month from her sixty-sixth birthday, was given a handsome severance package which included a comfortable

pension. A new clerk, college trained, was hired to put the paperwork in order.

The new shop began to tick along and then to hum, and then to roar. Morale reached and surpassed it's old level.

John Lockwood searched the storeroom and found six broad planks of kiln-dried white oak, into which he poured his time, his skill and his love. Over the years many handsome offers were made for the fine display cabinet which sat inside the main entrance, but it was not for sale. The cabinet housed an old toolbox, the lid propped open to display the fine old tools. In front of the toolbox sat a carpenter's hammer, and in front of the hammer sat a small engraved steel plaque. The plaque read:

"This is a hammer. It is used to drive nails."

* * *

THE VICTORY MESSAGE

A Fable for the Third Millennium

The rider came to the castle gate slumped over his horse, barely conscious, and the castle guard ran to help the man down before he tumbled from his saddle. The warrior was pale from loss of blood. An arrow was still lodged in his chest, and judging from the angle of the shaft the barb could not be more than an inch from his heart. The corporal cradled the fallen man, and placed his ear close to catch the faint words from the dying soldier's lips.

"Aterrible ...defeat. The General is... dead... along with most of his men. Even now.... the Hordes march on the capital. Warn the King. Flee, now. Flee for your...lives."

The Sergeant of the Guard came through the gatehouse at a run, but he was too late. "Did he carry a message?" he asked the corporal.

"He said something about a defeat, Sir. A great defeat, the General and all his men; all gone, he said, and the Hordes are coming to the capital. Warn the King. Tell him he must flee for his life."

The Sergeant spun on his heel and marched smartly back to the guardhouse, where he called for a runner to carry the message into the Royal Palace. "Private, come here, at the double man. Go to the captain, fast as you can. Tell him the Army has suffered a great defeat; the General is gone, along with most of his men. The hordes are coming to the Castle. Tell the King that he must flee at once if he values his life."

The Private took off at a run, his steel shod boots striking sparks from the cobbled courtyard. At the entrance to the Officer's Quarters he saluted smartly. "Urgent message for the Captain," he told the Lieutenant at the door.

"The Captain's at lunch, lad, and not to be disturbed, but you can give me the message and I'll see he gets it as soon as he leaves the dining room." The Private knew better than to argue with an Officer, and was more than a little intimidated, being confronted by a Lieutenant in full dress uniform.



“Yes sir!” he stammered. “Sergeant says to tell you the battle was lost and no survivors and the Horde is coming to kill the King and he’d better flee now, flee for his life, Sir.”

The Officer had not failed to notice that the Private was less than fully composed. “Now calm down, lad. I think you may have muddled the message a bit. If there were no survivors, then who brought the message?”

“A rider just arrived. Sir, not half an hour ago.”

“Well, there you go, son! That’s at least one survivor, right? Now did the message mention the General at all?”

“Yes sir, sorry sir, he did sir. The General has gone off with his men, sir.”

The Officer laughed. “Well that’s a whole lot better than ‘no survivors’. Sounds to me like the General and his men are doing a little mopping up, and the Hordes are on the run. Are you absolutely sure the message was ‘the battle is lost’?”

The Private concentrated hard but could not recall his Sergeant’s exact words. He decided to stand his ground “Yes, sir. That was the message. Lost, sir.”

“At ease, lad. Back to the Guard house with you and tell your Sergeant you’ve delivered the message.”

Relieved to be dismissed the soldier turned and departed at the double. The Lieutenant sauntered into the dining room and joined his Captain at the table.

“Afraid there’s a bit of bad news, Sir.”

“What is it, Dickie?” The Captain set down his spoon and looked up from his plate. “News of the battle, is it?”

“Yes, Sir. Bit of a setback, I’m sorry to say. A defeat, according to the rider who just arrived, but to tell the truth I don’t see how that can be, since the message also says that the General has gone off to do a bit of mopping up, as far as I can gather.”

“Can’t be that bad then. You know the General; anything less than a total rout and he’s likely to call it a ‘defeat’. Better let the King know, though. I’ll go myself.”

“I’ll carry the message for you, Sir. No need to disturb your lunch.”

“Good of you, Dickie, but I think I’d better do it, specially since it’s not the best of news. Here, sit down and try this Beef Consommé; it’s delicious.”

The Captain pushed back his chair and headed for the office of the Head Chancellor, the primary advisor to the King. Finding that the Head Chancellor was not in his office the Captain spoke with the Assistant Chancellor.

“Bit of bad news, actually,” he told the bureaucrat. “Oh, no need for alarm, it’s just that we were hoping to end this business of the Hordes raiding our territories up by the border; one decisive battle to settle the whole business, you see. Well, it didn’t quite work out that way, apparently, and the General is still with his men, doing a bit of mopping up, I understand. Takes a while, you know, that sort of thing, chasing down the small groups. Those barbarians can go to ground faster than a badger! Anyway, it might be best to let the King know. You’ll see to that, will you?”

“Absolutely, Captain. Thank you for bringing me the news so promptly.”

Shortly after the Captain left, the Head Chancellor returned to his office. “Was that the Captain of the Guard just leaving, Clarence?”

“Yes sir. He brought a message from the General. Apparently the battle was a bit less than a total success, and the General will have to stay up north for a little longer, chasing down remnants of the Barbarian Armies.”

The Head Chancellor laughed. “Oh, these soldiers, they do amuse me. ‘Less than a total success’ indeed. The General obviously thinks that if a single Barbarian is left breathing then it counts as a defeat. The Hordes are in retreat, the General and his men are chasing them down, and he calls it ‘a bit less than a total success’. The King is in his Throne Room, I think. I’ll go and give him the news.”

The King looked up from the petition he was reading to see his Head Chancellor enter the Throne Room, his smile stretching from ear to ear.

“Wonderful news, Your Majesty! The General sends word of a glorious victory over the Barbarians!”

“How splendid,” said the king. “We must prepare a suitable reception for the General’s victorious return.”

When the Barbarian Hordes of the North stormed the city the following day they were pleasantly surprised to see that a magnificent banquet had been prepared to welcome them.

If you wish to receive clear, unambiguous and accurate information, it is probably best to make sure that there are a minimal number of communication links between yourself and the front lines.

* * *

THE GREATEST WARRIORS

A Fable for the Third Millennium

In the Hall of Adversity there are many fierce warriors, who wait with varying degrees of patience to challenge the heroes of Earth. They do not normally have to wait long, for every man born is a potential hero, at least in the eyes of those close to him, and every hero must prove himself by trials of hardship. The warriors strut about the Hall, posing and flexing their muscles. They boast of past battles, of how they defeated their earthly opponents and sent them sniveling into obscurity; they sharpen their swords, polish their shields and harass the Scheduler constantly for the opportunity to meet their adversaries in battle.



At the back of the Hall two old warriors sit together. Their beards are long and grey, their hair thinning. Their weapons are chipped and blunted; their shields tarnished and worn. Their faces are creased and weather-beaten but their eyes are sharp and intelligent; they miss nothing that passes in the Hall. They talk softly, calmly, their conversation free from bravado or exaggeration. They do not harass the Scheduler, who brings news of fresh challenges to the Hall, but wait patiently for their call to battle.

The Scheduler looks up from his desk, for a new hero has been born on Earth. The warriors know the significance of the Scheduler's glance around the room, and push forward eagerly.

"Let me go," cries Poverty. "I will break him early, and save the rest of you the need to fight this 'hero'! Give him to me and I will crush him!"

“No, I will go,” says Illness. “Men can easily escape Poverty, or even learn to live with him. Many heroes have fought Poverty early in their lives, and were only strengthened by combat with him. Give this ‘hero’ to me, for no man can become great when he must battle Illness.”

“You both make empty boasts,” taunts Prejudice. “I will not only fight him, but I will turn the faces of his peers against him. Give me the first ten years of his life and he will live out the rest in misery.”

“Boast as you will!” says War. “When he comes of age he will be mine anyway. If I do not see him killed on the battlefield I will torment him for the rest of his days with memories of what he has seen. When I have finished with this hero he will think of nothing but me to the end of his days. Do as you will, he will fall to me in the end.”

“What nonsense,” Prejudice shouts back. “War has *created* more heroes than he has *defeated!* War makes heroes from mice! He should not go, not now and not later. Let War stay in the Hall of Adversity and sit at the back with the Old Warriors.”

The Old Warriors say nothing, but smile knowingly at the young fighters.

The Scheduler looks up from his ledgers, long accustomed to this jostling for position. “I will send none of you yet,” he says to the crowd at his desk. “I will first send Solitude to do battle with this young hero.”

“Ha!” sneers Depression, “Many consider Solitude to be an inspiration rather than a challenge, and rise to greatness after combat with him. Send Solitude now and you will only have to send me later to undo the damage he will cause.”

Solitude rises to his full height and throws out his chest. “This ‘hero’ will be a waif from the day of his birth,” he says. “He will be raised in an orphanage, friendless and unwanted. He will receive no love, no compassion from those who raise him. By the time I am finished with him, there will be nothing of the hero left within him.”

* * *

When Solitude returns to the Hall of Adversity he is beaten and broken. His adversary has taken all that Solitude could throw at him with grace and courage. “Whatever I did to him, I could never

get him to abandon hope,” Solitude tells the warriors. “And while he had hope to fight along side him I could never break through his defenses.”

Illness is sent next, but returns with broken sword and splintered shield. “His spirit is strong,” he tells his colleagues. “Even while his body was wracked with fever there was never a thought of surrender. I have fought this man, and he has beaten me fairly.”

War is not sent to try the hero, and Despair makes little impact. Insecurity tries his hardest but cannot break the hero’s spirit; Disappointment has no effect; Depression cannot wear him down.

At last the Scheduler turns to the old men who sit quietly on their wooden bench at the back of the Hall. “Warriors, I think that your turn has come,” he says.

Without fuss or hurry, with no indication of urgency, the two Old Warriors rise, take up their swords and shields. Nodding to the Scheduler as they pass they walk steadily towards the field of battle.

“Who are they, those two old men?” asks Misfortune, who was defeated easily in his turn. “I do not recognise them. Can they really hope to succeed where the rest of us have failed so badly?”

“Those old men have never lost a battle,” the Scheduler replies. The first of the Warriors is Time, and although men throughout the ages have tried to defeat him, he has always triumphed in the end. His way is to fight by small degrees. Time will make a cut here, a thrust there, and at first his opponent may not even be aware that he is engaged in battle; yet a day will come when the hero realises what damage has been done to him by these small injuries, and on that day the battle is already over. No man can stand against Time, for he works constantly by erosion until, in the end, his victory is inevitable.

“The second warrior is Gravity, and he fights in a similar fashion. The younger warriors will strive to bring a man down by a sudden, swift blow, or by a killing thrust. They will charge at their enemy so as to knock him down or stun him. Gravity fights by a constant tugging at his opponent, a pull so small that in early days it may not even be noticed. Then one day the hero may take a small tumble and find it difficult to rise. He may catch sight of his reflection and notice that he stands less tall than before; that his back is stooped, his legs bowed, the arches of his feet collapsed from the constant, insistent pull of Gravity. There is no way to fight him, for he is always there, and all the willpower in the world will not influence Gravity to relinquish his hold, nor even to relax it

by an ounce.

“When the two of them combine their efforts no hero can stand against them. Treat them with reverence, young warrior, for they are the most powerful fighters in the Hall of Adversity, and they will never lose a battle.”

Heroes of Earth, fight hard against Adversity, Your battles will make you strong. Do not yield to hardship; stand firm against illness and accident; do not let prejudice sway you or depression beat you down. Face these adversaries with courage and grace, and you will triumph. Never lose hope, and never surrender.

But make what truce you can with Time and Gravity, for they are the fiercest of warriors, and no matter how strong may be your will, they shall always prevail.

* * *

THE BEANCOUNTER AND THE KING

A Fable for the Third Millennium

Once upon a time, not that long ago really, there lived a King. He was a good king, kindly and wise, and he ruled his kingdom well. When he rode about the kingdom in his Royal Carriage the people cheered and threw roses. When he became tired of smiling and waving the King would sometimes stop by the stables and saddle up his favourite charger. To avoid the company of the ever vigilant Royal Guard, he would usually do this early in the morning, when not even the palace footmen were awake. So it was that on a sparkling spring morning the King set out at a canter along the river bank which meandered past the Royal Palace through open meadows alive with wild flowers and birdsong. The sky was the colour of a robin's egg, but so bright that it hurt the eye to look directly at it, and even though the sun had barely cleared the horizon the King could already feel the heat of it on his cheek. He knew the trail well, for he had been riding these fields since he had been a young boy, many years ago.

After a few miles he turned the horse from the trodden path

towards distant woods, where he hunted from time to time, and set the animal to a gallop. A trail of sorts, not much more than a rabbit run, led towards the woods which were separated from the meadow by a high briar hedge. A prudent man would have dismounted at the hedge and opened the wide five barred gate through which the local farmer moved his sheep to and from the meadow, but it is difficult to be prudent on a bright May morning, especially if you are a king, and if you are mounted on your favourite charger. Spurred on by his rider the huge animal galloped towards the gate, but the area by the opening was worn to bare earth by the feet of countless sheep, and muddied by the rains of the previous day, and so the beast lost his footing. By long training and lightning fast reaction the animal was able to bring itself to a halt inches from the gate. While the horse therefore failed to take the jump the King cleared the gate by a good two feet and came to rest face down in a mud puddle, where he lay unmoving.

All of this had been witnessed by a local shepherd who was returning home after a long night tending to a sick ewe, and who now stood, puffing his pipe, watching the unconscious body in the muddy puddle. Having seen his King but once and at a distance he remembered only that His Highness, unlike this poor fellow, had been exquisitely dressed. But without really thinking about it any further the shepherd pulled the hapless rider out of the puddle, ensured that he continued to breathe, and carried the still unmoving body back to his croft, where the King was cleaned up, tucked in and generally very well cared for.

In due course the Royal Guard tracked the hoof prints to the gate, tracked the footprints to the croft and returned the unconscious King to the Palace, where he received the professional but less effective ministrations of the Surgeon General and his staff. So it was that the King did not learn of his rescuer until several days later, but within hours of learning the truth the elderly shepherd was brought before the king, where he knelt, cap in hand, still not sure how his act of kindness had anything to do with the regal presence before whom he now trembled.

“Rise, sir,” the King said. “It is I who should be on my knees, for without your action I would surely have drowned in that shallow

puddle. My debt to you is great, and although I know that you acted without thought of reward, you shall have one. Name it, good sir, and if it is within my power to grant, I swear you shall have it.”

The shepherd thought for only a few seconds before replying. “A job sire, if you please. Not for me, for my son. He does not take well to farm life, and has spoken often of life at the palace and how good it must be for those fortunate enough to work here. Would you give him a job here, and we will call your debt repaid?”

No amount of pleading could persuade the shepherd to take more, not so much as a few silver pennies, and so the old man left to break the good news to his son while the king called for the High Chancellor.

“A job, Chancellor. Find this boy a job. A good job, a responsible job, and one with very good pay. Do it today.”

That afternoon the Chancellor reported back to the king. He had spoken with the “boy” who was, in fact, in his middle thirties, and had come to a conclusion which he now shared with his Sovereign.

“The man is simple-minded and uneducated, Sire. He has but basic skill with numbers and little more with letters. He is not physically capable of work in the stables or fields. He cannot fight, and has no skill with wood nor iron nor stone. He is in short unemployable. There is no function within the palace walls or grounds which this man is capable of filling.”

“He can count, you say?”

“He can count, sire.”

“Then he shall start tomorrow morning in the Palace kitchens. There he shall serve as my Royal Beancounter.”

“And what exactly will be his duties, Your Highness?”

The King explained. Fresh fruit and vegetables were delivered daily to the palace from nearby farms. These deliveries included large quantities of Green Beans, a favorite of the Queen, which were delivered in sacks. The sacks were stacked in a small room

adjacent to the kitchen where they were inspected by the Royal Beancounter before being released for culinary processing. The Beancounter opened the sacks, counted the beans, refilled the sacks, marked the sacks with 'C' (for 'Counted') and sent them on to the kitchen. The number of beans in each sack was recorded in a little notebook and at the end of each day the Beancounter added up the total number of sacks and the number of beans in each. These statistics were written down on a sheet of paper headed 'Daily Bean Record' and signed with the Beancounter's mark. The sheets were hand delivered by a palace flunky to the High Chancellor himself. The Chancellor filed the reports in a special bucket shaped filing cabinet which he kept under his desk and which was emptied each night by the palace janitor. In winter they were put to a more practical use in the Chancellor's fireplace.

The Beancounter received one gold coin per month for this work - by the standards of palace pay packets this was very decent money. He was proud of his work and took it seriously. He shaved daily, bathed weekly and wore clean clothes. He was happy. The Chancellor was happy. The Queen never knew that there had been any change in the kitchen routine and her point of view in this matter is therefore of little consequence.

Within six months the Shepherd's son was promoted to Royal Beancounter, First Grade, which gave him great pleasure, though no increase in his take-home pay. Altogether a very satisfactory outcome. Pity it couldn't have ended there, so that the story could finish with 'and they all lived happily ever after', which would have been a very appropriate ending for a tale which began with 'Once upon a time'.

The following summer the King and his retinue embarked on a tour of the Kingdom, an event which occurred every third year or so. While the retinue examined tax rolls, settled minor legal quibbles and took stock of Royal Holdings the King was primarily involved with drinking, dining, socialising, drinking, listening to music, dining, attending the theatre, drinking and chasing chambermaids along castle corridors. In truth the king was feeling his age and had decided than on this tour he would cut back considerably on the chasing.

At the first stop, having congratulated the local Earl on a fine feast, the King allowed himself to be drawn out to the balcony for a private chat with his host.

“It’s my son,” the Earl said.

“What about him?”

“He’s useless. Can’t joust; won’t hunt; not interested in sports of any kind; can’t be persuaded to join the army nor the church. Can’t even expect him to marry well, since his skill with the ladies is on a par with his other talents. He’s useless.”

“And so?” said the King, seeing nothing out of the ordinary in this. Ninety percent of his nobility’s sons would have been a good fit for such a description.

“Well, I thought you might find him a job at the palace, where his lack of ability wouldn’t be any sort of hindrance to his career.”

“What sort of job?” asked the King, feeling vaguely insulted. Actually he was experiencing a strong sense of déjà vu around this whole conversation.

“Oh, you know,” said the Earl “Something with good pay, good perks, lots of opportunity to meet the right kind of people and — most importantly -- no responsibility whatsoever.”

“Do we have anything like that?” asked the King, turning to the High Chancellor who, as usual, was lurking in the shadows.

“As is happens, Sire,” said the Chancellor, “We do have an opening for a Supreme High Director General in charge of Royal Beancounting.”

“Good,” said the King. “He starts next week.”

“Sounds perfect” said the Earl. “He leaves for the Palace tomorrow.”

Given the size of the kingdom, and the fact that dining, drinking

and regal carousing are things which can't be rushed, the King returned home six months later, just as the first snows of winter were beginning to fly. The regal procession stopped at the palace gates, which for some reason were standing open and unguarded. There were no palace guards anywhere to be seen, and few courtiers. The High Chancellor's assistant, looking decidedly harried, made a brief appearance in the courtyard, but scurried away before either the King or the Chancellor could question him.

The Counting House was empty, as were the barracks. The armory was deserted and devoid of arms. The Queen was alone in her chambers. When asked what-the-hell-was-going-on-here she gave the King a look which would have floored a lesser man and hissed through gritted teeth "Ask your God-damned Beancounters!"

The King strode through corridors from which the few remaining servants scurried at his approach, and crashed through the doors to the kitchen. The Head Chef was noticeably absent and the three remaining scullery maids stirred assorted pots without remarking His Royal Highness's presence in any way. In short, the Palace was virtually deserted, and essentially nonfunctional. It had all of the earmarks of a machine which has run out of fuel and puttered to a stop at the side of the road.

But the Beancounting Department was thriving.

The Department employed a total of over four hundred, including a technical staff of sixty seven and an analytical division of eighty. There were one hundred and seventy counters in grades one through eight, and a research division which included seventeen PhDs. The Department used the most modern computerized processing systems. Bean-counts were fed into the computers which calculated mean and deviations, while automated equipment measured beans by size and compared the results against standards set by the Department's Industrial Engineering Group. Any sack which failed to measure up was returned along with the entire shipment to the farmer who had supplied it. Receiving back their beans, now several weeks old and unfit for human consumption, did not go down well with the farmers, most of whom now refused to supply produce of any kind to the palace. This lack of shipments did not seem to have deterred the Beancounting

Department nor put any kind of dampener on its rate of growth.

Thanks to the imaginative work of the Department's Research Division, the Counters were now shifting their attention to carrots and potatoes, while the PhDs had embarked on an ambitious project designed to apply their procedures to Cabbages and Brussels Sprouts.

The Shepherd's son had been fired six weeks previously for failure to meet the new counting standards.

Since Beancounting activities now absorbed over eighty percent of the palace budget it was inevitable that expenditures elsewhere had suffered. The impact of these cutbacks was readily apparent. Many of the courtiers had left the palace shortly after regular meals ceased to appear in the dining room, and most of the Palace Guard had deserted when the same thing happened to their paycheques.

The King drew his sword and went looking for the Supreme High Director General in charge of Royal Beancounting, but he was too late. The S.H.D.G. had left his lavish office in something of a hurry and was now on his horse, heading south at a gallop.

The King sat on the floor and put his head in his hands. "What am I going to do?" he asked -- but the deserted corridors gave back only an echo.

It was too late anyway. The Barbarians of the Northern Reaches had been watching the Kingdom's deterioration with great interest, and when their invading army arrived it walked into the Palace virtually unopposed. The King should have known better. Someone should have explained it to him.

A small-minded man with small vision and small ambition is rarely a danger, and can be very valuable in a position where the work is simple and repetitive, requiring little or no initiative. He will be happy there and he will do the work well. But a small-minded man with ambition, given power and authority and left to his own devices, is a ticking time-bomb. Left unsupervised for any considerable period of time, such a man can topple a kingdom.

* * *

THE SHOEMAKER'S CHILDREN

A Fable for the Third Millennium

Like his father before him, Tom Lastman made fine shoes. They may have cost a little more than the footwear you could find down at the market on a Saturday morning, but everyone said that a pair of Lastman shoes would easily outlast five of the cheaper ones. Some claimed that Tom's shoes were handed down from generation to generation in their families, and that their children wore Lastman-made shoes which once graced the feet of their grandparents. Others said that this was a story put about by the Lastman family to sell shoes, and fights had started over this issue in many a bar on a Friday night after work.

Tom did so well that he opened a second shop in a nearby town, and then a third. The three shops did well, all operating on the Lastman principle that it was good economy to pay a little more for a pair of shoes which would probably outlive you.

Tom Lastman had three sons, and when he made his will he thought how splendid was the numerical relationship of son to shop, and so he left one to each. He then promptly died, passing out of the story before we even got a chance to get to know him properly.

At the wake the sons drank well and not too wisely from old Tom's cellar, and afterwards they went down to the pub, where they toasted and roasted the old man by turns, generally agreeing that he had performed well in the role of Dad, and had left them with few complaints. The three were on the point of calling it a night when a fresh flagon was brought to their table not by the serving maid, whose beauty and desirability had been increasing throughout the evening, but by a well dressed young man who poured four steins, including one for himself, and joined them at

their table.

“Forgive the intrusion, gentleman,” the newcomer said, “But I knew your father by his excellent reputation, and I feel it remiss of myself that I did not contact him with a view to establishing a professional relationship. This I hope to rectify by establishing such a relationship with the three of you. My card.”

The card read:

*TechnoMagics Corporation
Hi-tech Solutions for Industrial Problems
Richard Chipset: Sales Representative.*

Ron, the eldest of the Lastman boys, took the card and held it up to the light of an oil-lamp which flickered above his head. “Magic, boys,” Ron told his brothers. “He’s selling magic.”

“Quite right, too,” said Mr. Chipset. “Magic to amaze you. Magic to make your lives easier. Magic to make you rich!”

“What kind of magic would that be, Mr. Chipset?” asked Don, the youngest Lastman .

“Any kind you like, dear fellow. Any kind you want. Any kind you need. Call me Dickie. Everybody does.”

Pushing back his chair with a loud squeak, the salesman stood. From the inside pocket of his smart blue blazer he drew a slim wand, black and tapered. Holding the wand in his left hand he twisted a control on the end with his right, and pointed the implement at a distant dingy wall at the back of the inn. The few other patrons, as well as the innkeeper and his barmaid, were by now watching as intently as the brothers.

“*TEK-NO-MAGICS,*” intoned Mr. Chipset. “*Gigabite and Megahertz, Microchip and Pixel.*”

The lamps spluttered and went out, leaving only the dim glow of a streetlamp which seeped in through a dirty window. In the darkness the body of the TechnoMagics salesman seemed to gyrate

slowly as he continued his incantation.

“Cable-network-online-printer,” he hissed. *“Shared-logic-intelinside,”*

The last words were the merest whisper. The room was deathly silent, save only the innkeeper’s asthmatic breathing.



“LASER OUTPUT!” screamed Chipset. From the tip of his wand a bar of scarlet fire lanced across the room to burn its message into the dirty yellow plaster.

“MINIS! MINIS! TECHNO HAS 'EM”

The lamps spluttered back to life, although the room was now eerily illuminated by the light from the blood red letters, which glowed in the wall like hot coals.

“You’ll be paying for the repairs to yonder wall, Chipset” said the innkeeper.

The salesman ignored the comment and resumed his seat at the table.

“Now gentleman, let us speak of the conversion of your footwear factories into paragons of productivity by means of the miracles of Technomagics. And, you lucky lads, if you sign today you’ll get an additional home computer thrown in free, a video game entertainment unit for the kids and a five percent kickback under the table. So who’ll be first to put his mark on the bottom of a contract?”

Ron was the first to find his voice. *“I’ll have none of your satanic devices in my factory, Chipset,”* he hissed. *“Infernal machines taking food from the mouths of hard working shoemakers, indeed! Machines that can think, you say; Machines made in the image of Satan, I say! I’ll have none of it, I tell you. Not in my shop! Never in my shop.”* Kicking his chair to the floor Ron stormed out of the room. The sound of his hob-nailed Lastman boots on the cobbled street faded rapidly into the distance.

*“Well, we know where *he* stands!”* Chipset purred around his

omnipresent smile. “What about you then, Don?”

“I’m all for it!” the youngest Lastman enthused. “Thinking machines to run my equipment! No labour problems and no payroll! It’s a dream come true. All I’ll have to do is laze around dictating memos to my secretary and taking long six-martini business lunches. That’s the life for me, Chipset! Where do I sign? (Oh, and do you think you could throw in a copy of Grand-Theft-Auto 99 with the video game set?)”

“Done, done and so you will be. Sign here, here and there.” Smiling broadly, Don Lastman left the inn after his brother.

“And you then, Jon? With the option of a large screen plasma T.V. in place of the games unit if you so prefer. Sign here and here “Not so fast, Chipset,” said the middle Lastman brother, pushing the contract back across the table. “I see some possible use for your magic machines, but we’ll talk about it in my office tomorrow after the rum fumes have cleared from my brain. You know how to find me, I take it?”

“You betcha,” Chipset said. “Shall we say two p.m.? Are you sure you wouldn’t rather do lunch?”

“Two it is then,” Jon said, swaying gently as he made his way to the door.

* * *

Ron Lastman had labour troubles almost from the first hour. In fact it was ten minutes after nine on the first Monday morning, his chair barely warmed by Ron’s butt, when a small group of men entered his office without knocking and took up a confrontational stance on his green shag carpet.

“We represent the new Cobblers United Craftsmen’s Unified Union,” the biggest of the men said. “CUCUU for short. We’re here to deliver a list of our demands.”

That’s nice,” Ron said, intending to diffuse the situation with charm and a cooperative manner. “If you’d kindly leave your list with me I’ll be sure to study it carefully and get back to you next

week to begin negotiations.”

“The list is outside on the forklift truck,” the big man said. “And the demands are not negotiable. It’s pay up or we’re all out. We expect the new pay scale to come into effect right away and the paid holidays to be retroactive for the last five years. We may have a little flexibility on the question of company cars for employees, but not much. And overtime at time and a half after four hours in any twenty four hour period is a given.”

Ron sighed. “Well, I’ll look at the list as soon as I finish my morning coffee and I’ll be back to you with my comments before noon. I can’t be fairer than that now, can I?”

“Comments? What comments? We don’t want your comments, Sunshine, we want your signature on the collective agreement. I told you we’re not here for negotiations, we’re here for your answer. Now is it ‘yes’ or is it ‘yes?’”

The strike didn’t last long as the new union and Ron’s shoe factory went bankrupt together at the end of the third week.

“We won!” chanted the men, marching arm-in-arm to the Unemployment office.

“I guess you did,” said Ron, marching with them.

* * *

Don Lastman had a fine time the first week, while the Techno-Magics technicians installed their thinking machines in his factory. Don spent the time driving around in his company car and taking his new secretary for three-hour business lunches. The following Monday morning the mayor was on hand to press the ‘Go’ button, and the local paper featured the picture on their front page under the caption ‘Local Shoemaker Goes Hi-tech.’

Everyone said how smart Don looked and marveled at how he’d found such a good looking secretary who could type at seven

words per minute with hardly any errors.

The machinery's productivity was tremendous. In the first eight hour shift, when a manned shop might have produced twenty or twenty five pairs of shoes, the automated TechnoMagics machinery produced seven hundred and twenty four shoes. This result was somewhat marred by the fact that all seven hundred and twenty four were left shoes, but this was rectified the following day when the equipment whooped and growled and spat out seven hundred and twenty four right shoes. It was a real pity that some glitch in the program caused all of the shoes to be a man's size sixteen.

An order for five dozen spiked running shoes was filled in two days, whereas the same order could have taken up to two weeks if the shoes had been hand-made. Of course, a *human* cobbler would probably have known that the spikes were intended to go on the *outside* of the shoe.

On the fifth day the automated plant produced two hundred ballet slippers, made out of cardboard, and one hundred boxes in which to ship the slippers, all made from the finest Doeskin leather. The automated shipping machinery then sent the entire shipment to Anchorage, Alaska, while the Royal Ballet in Winnipeg received a shipment of seventy pairs of Mukluks.

By the end of the first month Don's profit and loss statement was clear, simple and decidedly lopsided. His expenditures ran to six digits while his income, in round figures, was a round figure. When Don met Ron at the unemployment office it came as a shock to both brothers.

* * *

Jon Lastman spoke at length with Dickie Chipset and then spent the next day at TechnoMagics Head Office. He spent a particularly long time with the designers in the engineering department, and saw demonstrations of various types of magical thinking machine. In the end, Jon decided that he would not allow any kind of equipment to take over the work of his craftsmen, since the reputation of his products rested squarely in these men's hands. However, Jon saw many possibilities for the magic machines in his

office, warehouse and shipping departments, and before he left he placed a substantial order.

The equipment arrived and was installed. The mayor was not present to press the 'Go' button, and the entire operation was low profile. The teething troubles began the following day and lasted through the first six months. Fortunately most of the serious blunders made by the magic thinking machines were caught by the men, who did *not* make one thousand pairs of ladies' shoes with three-foot heels, even though the specifications called for this. The correct order, ten pairs with three-inch heels, was produced and dispatched. The machines accurately added up columns of figures, kept track of stocks, and simplified the office routine immensely.

Jon Lastman and his little company prospered, and in due time Jon opened a second factory in an adjacent town, and later a third. His wife bore Jon three sons, and in the fullness of time Jon made his will, leaving a factory to each son. He also left them each a letter to be opened in the event of his death. The letter read:

"My beloved sons:

There is magic involved in the making of a fine pair of shoes, and it is important that you learn to use this gift wisely and well. There has always been magic in the world; it has appeared in many guises and it has been called by many names. Once it was called sorcery, once wizardry, it has been called witchcraft and alchemy and, more recently people have come to know it as high technology. Regardless of what it may be named, magic is a poor slave and a worse master. Never let magic do your thinking for you or make your decisions, and if you use it to work for you, be vigilant always. Do this, and you will make good shoes and run a good business. And you will thrive and prosper.

And, in the fullness of time, they did.

* * *

THE ANGEL'S BARGAIN

A Fable for the Third Millennium

Albert Armstrong was a *good* boy. He sang in the church choir and was always polite to his elders, especially his parents. He believed that as a result of his good and virtuous habits God would keep him safe within His Mighty Hand. It therefore came as a shock and disappointment when, at the age of seventeen, he sat with his mother in the doctor's office to hear the bad news.

"I'm truly sorry, Mrs. Armstrong, but there is absolutely nothing I can do."

"But why, doctor? I mean, how did this happen?"

"It started before Albert was even born, my dear. The defect was present in his genes, and was there from the moment of conception. It wasn't anything he did or didn't do, or anything you could have prevented. I've put Albert's name on the waiting list for a transplant. You must face the fact that without a transplant his heart will not last past his eighteenth birthday."

"But why, father?" Albert later asked his parish priest.

"We cannot look into the mind of God," the priest intoned. "His thoughts are too mighty for us to understand, and His Ways are too deep."

'Very useful,' Albert thought. "Then what must I do to get God to help me?" he asked the priest. "I pray every night and I always....."

"God does not make bargains, Albert; only the Devil makes bargains, and his price is more than any sane man would pay."

"*I'd* pay it, father! I don't want to die. I don't want them to cut my heart out and put in a heart from somebody's dead body. I *would* make a deal with the devil, I would!"

“Now you don’t mean that, Albert. Think of what you’re saying! What if the Devil should hear you?”

“I hope he *does!* I hope he *does!* Are you listening, Satan? *I’ll do whatever you want!* Just don’t let me die!”

The Devil, of course, heard Albert’s plaintive cry very clearly, since he has ears everywhere and is *always* listening. When he arrived that night in Albert’s bedroom the Devil turned out to be a small man, very neatly dressed in a black three-piece suit, black shirt, shoes and socks, with a midnight blue necktie his only concession to colour. He seemed polite and friendly, and Albert took to him immediately.

“Let us understand the bargain clearly, the Devil said to Albert. “I will fix your heart, and in return when your body dies, your soul will belong to me.”

Albert had read Faust and knew that the Devil would try to trick him at every turn. Every word in the deal, each shift of emphasis, could change the meaning entirely. He had to be extremely careful.

“The doctor said I could die before I even turn eighteen. Well I want twice the lifespan. Twice.”

“Agreed,” said the Devil.

“And what does it mean, that you get my soul?”

“Only that you will live with me after the death of your body.”

“You mean that I will go to Hell and be tortured in the flames?”

“Oh, Albert, you’ve really spent too much time in church. Hell isn’t nearly as bad as they paint it, and we do *not* torture people. Of course, some folks tell me that the constant 140 degree Celsius temperature can get on their nerves after a while.”

“Agreed, then,” said Albert. “I’ve always enjoyed the heat anyway. Do I sign in blood or something?”

“No need,” said the Devil, and though he was still smiling the expression looked somehow sinister. “The deal is made. I will see you in thirty six years.”

Albert graduated from University with a degree in Financial Management and joined a large investment company, where he received a good wage and regular promotions. Despite several promising relationships he did not marry.

The time passed pleasantly, but too quickly. On the evening of Albert’s thirty-sixth birthday the Devil showed up in his true guise, resplendent in a blood red tunic and sporting a magnificent set of horns. His long tail swished from side to side in anticipation of the closing of a deal, and his exposed teeth could in no way be called a ‘smile’

“Time’s up, Albert. I’m here to collect on our deal.”

“Fraid not,” said Albert, not stirring from his leather recliner by the fireside. “There’s no getting out of it,” Satan responded, and there was no longer any doubt about the significance of his bared teeth. “You got your double lifespan, and now I get...”

“No I didn’t,” Albert said, unruffled. “Check the contract. I clearly remember asking for twice the lifespan; *the* lifespan, not twice *my* meager allocation. I don’t know what you think is *‘the’* lifespan for a human being, but I believe the bible defines it as three score years and ten; twice that is a hundred and forty years, which means you still owe me a hundred and four.”

From the direction of the red glow came a stream of curses which Albert, given his sheltered upbringing, did not recognise. “Arbitration!” the Devil screamed. Albert’s ears popped and he found himself in an open space in which he apparently had no body. At one end of the space a red cloud was throbbing frantically, and at the other a white light was pulsing slowly. Albert found the white light too bright to look at directly, which he thought strange given that he had no eyes. After some time the white light stopped its slow throbbing and spoke. Albert heard the voice quite clearly through ears which he didn’t have, and the sound seemed to echo in his head, which was also missing.

“I find for the defendant Albert Armstrong,” said the voice. “The human lifespan is indeed threescore years and ten, give or take a decade or two, and may be amended only in specific instances with the explicit permission of Our Lord. Under the terms of the agreement you therefore owe Mr. Armstrong an additional one hundred and four years. I am surprised at you, Lucifer, leaving such a loophole. You should use the services of a capable lawyer in these transactions. God knows, you’ve plenty down there to choose from.”

Albert wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard a chuckle in the voice.

* * *

In the early hours of the following morning Albert awoke suddenly from a deep sleep to see an Angel sitting on the end of his bed. At least it looked like an Angel. Before he could clarify this the apparition spoke. “Of *course* I’m an Angel,” it told him. “In fact I’m your *Guardian* Angel, and you can thank your lucky stars I’m here! I wasn’t told the details, but apparently you’ve really pissed off Old Nick. All the Fiends of Hell are going to be after you!”

Before Albert could register surprise that an Angel would use the term ‘pissed off’ the being continued. “And if you think you’ll get any protection from Above because you did some fancy legal footwork, you’d better think again. There are limits to what Nicodemus can do to you while you’re on Earth, but they’re very wide. If you’re lucky you’ll only lose your job, your health and all your worldly possessions. You’ll still end up in the gutter, but you may get to keep your mental faculties and at least some of your five senses. Or how would you like to fight cancer for an entire century? Or MS? Maybe some nice mental illness like schizophrenia? All of the above? Oh, nothing would kill you, though you’d surely come to wish that it *would*.”



Albert was now fully awake, and fully terrified. He had not thought this through, he realised. He had never considered such possibilities. “What can,,,,,,,,,,,,,”

“What can you do about it? Precious little. You really should have thought about who you were dealing with before you picked this particular fight. All I can promise is that if you do *exactly as I tell you*, I think I can protect you from the worst of it. So that’s my offer. Take it or leave it.”

“First I want to know....” Albert began. “Take it or leave it!” the Angel insisted.

“Ok, I accept,” Albert said, “But first I have to know....” The Angel blew him a kiss, and when it landed on his eyes he was returned instantly to the deep sleep from which he’d been awakened. When he next awoke the Angel still sat on the end of the bed, looking somewhat less substantial in the morning sunlight. “There’s no point going into work,” she told him. “You’ll only find that all your cases have gone sour, the taxmen are doing a surprise audit, your secretary is suing you for sexual harassment, your partner is missing and a large amount of money has disappeared from your business accounts. More importantly, when you’re in a crowd I can’t always sort out your spirit from those around you, and if I’m distracted for a fraction of a second you could end up under a bus or falling out of a high window. Nicodemus has to give you another century of life I understand, but nothing says that you can’t live it out in a wheelchair or a hospital bed.”

Albert was shaking again. “But if I don’t go to work how will I live?” he asked. “My savings are good for a year, maybe two if I economise, but.....”

“We really have no choice in this but to run and hide,” the Angel said, ignoring Albert’s plea for attention. “That’s not going to be easy on this tiny planet, where Nick has eyes and ears everywhere. At the very least we must get out of the city. I think I know a place deep in the South American jungle which should be fairly safe. Now call the office, resign, sell your share of the business, don’t leave any ties and don’t drop even the vaguest hint about where we’re going.”

“I don’t *know* where we’re going,” Albert positively screamed, “*or what I am going to use for money!*”

“Oh, stop your wailing, boy. We can’t risk having bank accounts in your name, and anyway money is the very least of your problems; everything you want or need will be brought to you, wherever we go.”

“Everything?”

The Angel sighed. “Ah yes. It’s been a very long time, and I’d almost forgotten how young flesh makes so many demands.” She snapped her fingers and the doorbell rang. “Go and let her in,” the Angel said. “If you don’t like the blonde there are brunettes and redheads in the car. Excuse me if I don’t stay for the debauchery.”

Two weeks later Albert thought that he’d found heaven. The Angel had assured him that from the air the compound appeared to be just another stretch of dense jungle, and, since Satan did not work well with wild animals, his eyes and ears in this place should be severely limited. While the Devil’s minions would be searching every city on earth from gutter to rooftop, the Angel believed that Albert’s chances of living out his lifespan undiscovered here were very reasonable. And he had everything! *Everything!* He was the master of a sizeable estate. He had a smart sailboat on his own private lake; a huge mansion, with an Olympic sized pool; Satellite television — one way signals only; the Angel had warned that Satan is no stranger to high technology and was probably monitoring every telephone call on earth for news of Albert’s whereabouts. His home theatre was the size of many commercial installations, and his huge party room opened onto the swimming pool, which looked lovely in the evenings with its underwater floodlights turning the water turquoise.

If Albert missed the company of his few close associates, the many new friends supplied by his Angel provided ample reparation.

* * *

Looking back, it was hard to put his finger on the exact point at which things had started to go sour. Neither did he know when his occasional evening glass of brandy had become a two-bottle-a-day habit, but he suspected that it had developed rapidly over his second year of

captivity. He had started to think in terms of ‘captivity’ as an apt description of what he’d previously called his ‘witness protection program’. Certainly, his Guardian Angel was doing everything possible to make his forced isolation as comfortable as possible, and if he ever doubted the soundness of her plan he had only to call up the picture she’d described of the revenge that Satan had in mind. He saw himself in an Intensive Care ward, semi-conscious, tubes in every orifice, a cocktail of drugs dripping into his veins and puzzled doctors clucking over him, whispering “It’s a miracle that the man is still alive.”

Albert blessed his Angel daily, and the Good Lord who had sent her. He could well believe how the Devil’s wrath increased by the minute, and shuddered to imagine what it would be like to face such anger. His Angel had made it perfectly clear that, should Satan discover their whereabouts, her small powers would be a candle flame against a gale. Albert hated feeling trapped, at the same time thinking that such feelings were an affront to the being who went to such enormous efforts to keep him safe and happy. Nevertheless, his surroundings looked more and more like a gilded cage, and he felt daily more and more like a prisoner within it.

His new friends brought gifts to him, powders to be sniffed and smoked, liquids to be ingested or injected, but his Angel intervened to prevent their effect. She warned him how such substances could corrupt him, and how the ease of mind which they initially brought would rapidly turn into something which could consume him. Unaffected by these pills and powders Albert returned to his beloved bottles.

His first suicide attempts came halfway through his third year of captivity. He climbed into a hot bath and slashed his wrists. They did not bleed. He climbed to the highest peak of his mansion and hurled himself to the concrete a hundred feet below, where he lay for a while and then rose and walked away, unbruised and unscratched. Firearms in the house would not fire for him; no blade would hold an edge sharp enough to cut his flesh. In the end he gave up, and reluctantly accepted life.

He lost his appetite for the fine food and drink which had so pleased him earlier. He ceased to enjoy the company of his ‘friends’ and

stopped calling for them. And the disapproving glances of his Angel shamed him to the core.

In the end he took to his bed. He realised that his emaciated body had become so weak that if the house were to catch fire he could not rouse himself to escape. He didn't care. He lay on his bed, not eating, not drinking, wanting to die, but knowing that his Angel would not allow that to happen.

He lapsed into fitful sleep, fearful of the nightmares which always came. And as he closed his eyes he saw a strange thing; the golden radiance which surrounded his Angel seemed to turn pink, and then red; her golden halo was replaced by a set of large, pointed horns.



“Damn,” the Devil realised that he had relaxed a little too early. It was difficult, keeping up this outward appearance day after day. But it was worth the effort; he now had the Armstrong fool exactly where he wanted him. “It was only an hallucination; a trick of the light” He slid the thought easily into Albert’s mind and watched the man sink into a deep, troubled sleep.

“Sleep well, fool,” he murmured. “Enjoy the dreams I will send you. And tomorrow you are mine again. All of your tomorrows for the next hundred years.”

* * *

An old Chinese proverb warns “Beware of what you wish for; You may get it.”

American psychologist Abraham Maslow long ago explained how a man has many needs, and will strive to satisfy them according to a sequence of priorities. Basic needs are for food, water and air, without which he will die. When these are satisfied he will seek to fulfill higher needs, such as a finding a warm, safe place to sleep; and then above this are social needs which can include a spouse, a family and a circle of friends. But his highest needs, at the very top of the pyramid, relate

to the need for meaning in his life. He must achieve success by his own efforts, and he must know that his achievements are respected and revered by his peers. It is essential to a man's well-being that he should feel needed, wanted and appreciated by the society in which he moves. The Devil knows well that in order to destroy a man you need only provide all of his basic wants and needs and then make it clear that nothing is expected of him in return. Eventually he will come to feel unneeded and unwanted; he will feel his existence to be pointless — as it will be. And he will live in Hell on Earth.

* * *

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

A Fable for the Third Millennium

“Sir, I have bad news, and I have bad news,” the NCO approached his captain, freshly graduated from Military School, recently assigned to the trenches, and itching to take command.

“Out with it then, Sergeant. Let's start with the bad news.”

“Yessir! That last mortar round took out the radio and we're cut off from forward command, sir.”

“Very good, Sergeant. And the bad news?”

“The enemy have flanked us on both sides, and we're now completely circumsised all around, sir.”

“Ouch. I hate it when that happens. And what do you think I should do, Sergeant?”

“Evaluate options and make a decision, Sir, like what they taught you at Sandhurst, Sir.”

“Quite right, Sergeant. Very well. We will advance in a forward

direction and storm the enemy trenches.”

“With all due respect, Sir, as soon as we pop our heads above the trenches we’ll have incoming fire from all directions and we’ll all have our heads blowed off, Sir. I’d say our likely survival time would be about six seconds, or just about time enough to fix bayonets, Sir.”

“Well done, Sergeant. I was just testing you. Then we will advance to the rear, break through the enemy lines and rejoin forward command.”

“Yes, Sir. I just wonder if the Captain has considered that Forward Command will see us coming from the direction of the enemy and mow us down with their new Gatling guns, Sir.”

“Nonsense, Sergeant. Our uniforms look nothing like the enemy uniforms.”

“Begging your pardon, Sir, but since our uniforms and the enemy’s uniforms are all totally covered in mud, our uniforms look *exactly* like the enemy uniforms, Sir.”

“Good point, Sergeant, good point. Then we’ll have to call Forward Command and let them know.....”

“Radio’s gone Sir.”

“Oh, yes. Slipped my mind. How about if we wave a white flag?”

“Nothing out here is white, Sir. All shitty brown, if you’ll pardon my French, Sir.”

“Yes, I see what you mean.”

“And furthermore as well, if Forward Command see you waving anything white they might get the idea that you were trying to surrender, Sir. Then we’d all get court martialled, you’d get cashiered, and we’d all get stood in front of a firing squad, Sir.”

“Ah, best not go that way, then, Sergeant.”

“No, Sir. Then have you come to any decision, Sir?”

“Still working on it, Sergeant. What do you think about.....?”

What the Sergeant might have thought would remain forever moot, since the rising scream of incoming shells from all points of the compass made further communication impossible.

* * *

When you need to make a decision and you don't make a decision, you've effectively made your decision. Let's hope the option "Do Nothing" works out well for you.

* * *