

The BOFH-Stories 1998

An ugly saga of burning ambition and bootleg liquor - welcome to the BOFH's Christmas past...

A new year - how quickly time flies. It seems like only yesterday I was at the divisional pre-Christmas bash.

Admittedly I had consumed a couple of glasses of the mulled medicine so popular at that time of year, so my memory of events isn't too clear, but I do remember helping one of our more vocal clients bob for apples in the punch bowl - letting him up for air occasionally - just before that tragic accident with the Christmas tree.

Who could have known the lights were mains voltage, apart from the installer from B-Electrix of course. Still, the burning smell, screaming and impromptu breakdance act that followed the fall of the tree into the punch bowl, just as the boss was serving up another bucket of non-alcoholic refresher, was a good finale to the day and cost substantially less than a real fireworks display.

And to think that things were going to be different for Christmas 1997. The directive had come from on-high that anyone caught with alcohol on the premises was up for a quick stroll down unemployment avenue, courtesy of personnel.

Some people just have no sense of humour, I remember musing as I stashed a couple of half-empty spirits bottles in the bottom drawer of a particularly annoying user's desk. Unfortunately duty called, and I was unable to be there 10 minutes later when security acted on their anonymous phone tip-off about sly boozing on work time. Still, you can't have everything can you?

The PFY and I, true to 'Secure' Christmas protocol, had our booze safely stashed in Mission Control inside a set of what to outward appearances appeared to be run-of-the-mill fire extinguishers - a supply of which I keep on hand for special occasions.

Its amazing what money can buy. And if not money, certainly a couple of photos of an occupational safety consultant in full drag ensemble on stage at a progressive (and supposedly private) London club.

Sadly, after the tree incident, I have to defer to the PFY's reminiscences as I'd had an extinguisher-full and my memory was as clear as the terms of a typical software licence agreement.

Apparently, events unfolded in the following order:

At 4.15pm I helped the PFY make a replacement non-alcoholic punch - after bringing a couple of extinguishers down from the office to replace the ones used to put the boss out.

At approximately 5pm the party was starting to get into full swing with people appreciating the 'non-alcoholic' punch so much that I had to go get another couple of extinguishers to protect the PFY from spontaneous orange juice combustion while he mixed another batch up.

At approximately 6.17pm (from CCTV timestamps) I mounted a table and launched into the old party favourite 'The boss is so dumb'.

"How dumb is he?" the well-oiled crowd demanded.

"He's so dumb he can't even spell IT."

"He's so dumb he broke his toe rebooting his desktop."

"He thought preventative maintenance meant locking the engineer out."

"He has to study for a urine test. He's also lazy."

"How lazy is he?"

"He just finished his autobiography - Around the Cafeteria in 80 Days."

By 8.30pm the party was going downhill (or uphill, depending on your perspective) fast - the mixers had run out and the punch was pretty much a combination of gin and cleaning alcohol. The PFY was demonstrating to anyone interested how to secure a Windows NT machine, using only a hammer and the boss's new laptop.

The end came at around 10.45pm, as it usually does, with the arrival of the boss back from the casualty department.

Already fuming from his facial burns, his temper wasn't improved any when he heard party music coming from every security guard's walkie-talkie, courtesy of Radio IT and its drunken DJs.

Not recognising him at first because of the bandages, the PFY apparently tried to sign him up for the spitting competition - nearest to the boss's coffee mug wins, bonus prize for getting it in.

"Right!" the boss cried, upsetting the punch bowl as he barged over to the turntables to cut the lights and music. "That's bloody it, turn that bloody music off."

In retrospect, I'm sure the boss would have thought twice about walking past the candles on the Christmas cake with punch-soaked trousers but there you go. Even my patchy memory can recall the boss bouncing around in terror, pants on fire.

If only they hadn't used the nearest extinguisher I'm sure things would have ended differently. Still, two fireworks displays are better than one, and the troops really did enjoy taking turns on the fire hose - an unexpected Christmas bonus, so to speak.

The BOFH and PFY show there is still a place for love and compassion in the world of network management...

"Networks.... AND systems," I cry, "I like it!" The PFY shares my enthusiasm, realising the full potential for dodgy deals at our fingertips. "What was it Orwell used to say?" he responds cheerily, "All power corrupts, absolute power..." "... is even more fun," I finish.

Following the coup d'etat at the end of last year, the PFY and I have got it all - the network, the machines, the head of department's password-changing methodology - use the same word year after year, but just increment the numeric suffix by one.

Mind you, it beats adding an 's' to the end of it, as was his original practice.

"New car please," I cry.

The PFY depresses a button, and down in a packed storeroom in the basement, a tape stacker unit whirs into life. However, instead of the DLT cartridges it's used to working with, it's current payload is seven slot cars. A robot arm grabs one and deposits it onto the track set out around the locked room. Checking its position on the CCTV, I turn to the PFY.

"Right, how about a 10 lap job? Loser has to reload the stacker and answer the phones for the rest of the day."

"You're on," says the PFY, lulled into a false sense of security by my previous effort which ended badly at a particularly sharp corner.

Just 15 minutes later the PFY's down in the basement reloading the stacker.

While he's gone. I return the acceleration settings on the PFY's slot car driver to normal - cheating on a game of skill, how can I stoop so low? Years of practise, that's how. It's been hard going but now I can stoop lower than a pygmy limbo dancer.

Upon his return the full weight of his loss descends upon the PFY's shoulders. Our increased role means increased responsibility, and worse still, increased user interaction. A newly arrived phone rings. I smile smugly at the PFY as he answers it.

"Hi, look I've forgotten my password on the human resources system and I need to get into the database this morning."

"OK," the PFY responds with uncharacteristic helpfulness. "Just bring your ID up here and we'll change it for you."

I'm just about to book in for a hearing check-up when I notice the PFY switching the lifts into weekend mode, effectively making them lockdown at the ground floor.

A couple of minutes later a chunky personnel type wheezes through the door after slogging the two flights of stairs to our office.

"I'm here to get my password changed."

"Oh, I'm sorry, the PFY has just gone down to your office to change it for you," I say, as the PFY plays dead under the desk.

"He told me to meet him up here," our visitor gasps.

"No, I'm sure he said he was going down to meet you."

"Oh. Well can you change it then?" the user pants.

"I could, but he's likely to change it and overwrite the change that I make."

"Oh," the user mutters and trundles back downstairs.

A couple of minutes later he's back on the phone.

"It's about my password," he says

"Ah yes," the PFY responds, "You weren't in your office when I came down. How about you wander up and I'll change it immediately for you?"

"But I was just up there and I talked to the other guy."

"Well, you're just going to have to come up here again aren't you?"

The phone slams down and the PFY goes back into the lift maintenance menu.

After the third time the wheezing's so bad I make the PFY come out of hiding and change the password before the poor user has a coronary. I know, I know, Mr Softy, that's me.

Of course, it would have caused the poor guy a lot less discomfort if the PFY hadn't replaced his asthma inhaler propellant with helium, causing him to panic that his vocal passage was prolapsing, and then faint. On the way down he takes my CD-ROM drive with him, which puts me in a foul mood.

I'm forced to get the next call while the PFY drags the unconscious body to the sick bay. Well, puts him in the freight elevator and presses the relevant floor anyway. Never let it be said that we don't care about our users.

"Hi, I've got to get some important sales data off a floppy which says it's in DOS format."

"DOS format?"

"Yes."

"That's easy. Go into DOS."

"Uh-Huh." >clickety click<.

"And use the FORMAT command."

"Oh, of course."

Another barrel shoot successfully completed.

Chaos reigns at the office and a visitor from the past is impressed by modern standards of bastardly behaviour...

We return you now to Baker Street, where Sherlock Holmes and his faithful assistant, Doctor Watson have, through some undiscovered law of quantum science, been transported to the present century...

"It appears we have moved forward in time," the great man decides.

"But that's impossible Holmes," I cried incredulously.

"Not so Watson," he replied, reaching for his snuff container. "Why, on several occasions I myself have considered the possibility while partaking of this fine white powder. Mirror please, Watson. But what really concerns me is why we have been brought here."

"I..."

"Let us have a brisk constitutional and see if we cannot discover something upon which to test our intellectual mettle."

And so it was that Holmes and I came upon a large building with doors that opened as if by magic. A moving staircase that Holmes surmised was driven by electricity drew us to a mezzanine area where a smoking box lay on the floor.

"I don't know what happened," a man nearby was explaining to a uniformed gentleman. "I'd called the helpdesk because the screen was shimmering, and they put me through to the systems and networks operator. I hadn't even finished telling them about it when it burst into flames."

"Did you hear a clicking sound, not altogether unlike that of a typewriter?" Holmes asked him.

"Why, yes I did," he replied.

"And did you hear a noise on the telephone that may have been chuckling?"

"Now you come to mention it..."

"And what about that?" Holmes asked, indicating a small projection device upon which little people were running in panic.

"That's the emergency response room - there's a panic on because the fire alarms have gone off and the halon activation delay switch isn't working."

As we watch, one of the figures trips over a length of cabling.

"Uh-oh, another one down."

"Would I be correct in assuming that this room isn't used very often?" Holmes asks. "Yeah, that's why the cabling's all over the show," the guard replies.

"And did they perchance call upon the networks and systems people to make the room available to them?"

"As a matter of fact they did."

"Just as I suspected."

"What?" the uniformed gentleman asked.

"I cannot be sure yet," Holmes replied inscrutably. "More investigation will be necessary. If you would be so kind as to direct me to the systems and networks people you were referring to."

"I can't direct you because you need swipe card access to get in and out of the lifts and rooms. I'll take you instead."

And so it was that we rose in a mechanical elevator to an upper floor of the building.

"Just knock on the door and you'll be let in," the guard murmured, almost as if he was afraid of the place.

Wanting to waste no more time, I did this while Holmes thanked the guard profusely and shook his hand. By the time he'd returned to the door, there was still no answer from the room within, although I could see people moving about behind the opaque glass.

"I don't think we're going to be let in, Holmes."

"Nonsense," he said as he slid a small card through a slot. With a beep the door opened.

"Good Lord!" I cried "Where on earth did you get that?"

"The guard's pocket."

"But doesn't he need that to exit the elevator?"

Holmes paused for a moment, listening carefully. A muffled thumping could be heard in the distance... "Apparently so."

Upon entering the room we found two men, a young one with facial eruptions, the other somewhat older, with a sense of power about him, somewhat similar to Holmes. A kind of unspoken recognition passed between them.

"I believe I can now solve this enigma," Holmes said.

"But first a couple of pints," the older stranger cried.

Barely ten minutes later, Holmes, myself, the two men and four women were enjoying a couple of lagers at a nearby tavern.

"Another case successfully concluded," Holmes murmured. "Care for some of my special snuff Watson?"

"Your special snuff Holmes?"

"Yes, the stuff I keep for guests."

"Rather... Bloody hell - that's talcum powder and cayenne pepper. I thought you said that was the

stuff you kept for guests!"

"Well of course it is Watson, you don't think I'd take it myself do you?"

"You bastard Holmes!"

Through streaming eyes I saw the two strangers shake Holmes by the hand. Curiouser and curiouser...

The head's mid-life crisis and how a career in modelling leads to an executive position...

It is truly pathetic. Sad male heads-of-department of a certain age, realising they're no longer in the youth, or even middle-aged category, suddenly attempting to alter their lifestyle to compensate.

And so it is that the head of IT, with designer-coloured cellphone and laptop and brand new convertible car, has appointed a flashy young smooth-talker to the position of executive liaison officer.

It's easy to see how her previous experience in the modelling industry is so close to information systems that a couple of days of reading glossy mags will have her up to speed...

"I can't see that she's such a problem," the boss cries.

"She can't even spell IT, let alone be in the position of making service delivery promises to all and sundry," I protest.

"She must know something about IT to get appointed," the boss responds, confirming my suspicion that he's a card-carrying member of Naiveté International.

"I see. And how long did it take her to get her desktop machine going again?"

"The power switch is quite difficult to find," he replies, as loyal as a terrier.

My worst fears are confirmed when she decides to buy up a whole swag of network computers, "Because we won't ever have to worry about upgrading." This poorly researched decision has obtained the official stamp of approval and a purchase order has appeared on my desk for a 'technical sign-off'. I stuff it into the shredder quicker than the average user could say "Where's my hard disk gone?"

The boss is on the job in record time.

"These network computers are great," he gasps, flashing a glossy brochure.

"And why is that?" I ask.

"Because they act just like PCs without disks," he cries. "They're good because everything they need to operate is loaded from the computer."

"Sort of like a dumb terminal, with graphic and sound capabilities."

"Uh... no, much faster, and in colour."

"So it's a bit like changing a black and white TV for a colour one."

"Uh... Not exactly."

"So we're going to move from independent computers to ones dependent on a server - like ASCII terminal days. So when the main machine is down, no work gets done. Isn't that why we got desktop machines?"

"Ahhhh... No, not really."

"Oh. So they're different from, say, an NCD in what way?"

"Because we'll never need to upgrade the equipment. It'll be like your colour TV set," the boss blurts triumphantly. "Once you've got one, it'll never need upgrading - just upgrade the server software."

"Not even when the software grows and needs more memory?"

"No."

"Not even when the software wants to make use of whizzy new features like Nicam stereo, Dolby surround, and wide screen?"

"Look, we're bloody buying some, so sign off on them," the boss shouts.

What the hell, I scrawl out a signature. Not mine of course, but who's to know? Except the boss, should someone check it against his.

"In fact," the boss continues, "I think you should be using the same technology as users, so order a couple for the control room as well."

BASTARD!!

A few days later they arrive and are dispatched to the test cases in various departments. The PFY and I get ours into gear - true, we did replace the motherboard with that of a small-footprint PC with high-speed laptop disk drives, but to all intents and purposes it looks like the real thing.

Let the carnage commence!

SNMP management is a damn fine tool for a machine, especially when it lets you reboot the thing remotely. I patch a game of Network DOOM with sprites of the NC users' faces and get the kills piped to the SNMP reboot command. Kill a user, their Network Computer goes down.

Of course, it's not very sporting, so I ring the users and tell them, to give them a fighting chance. Well, as much of a chance as you can get using the apps-server-based copy of the game which only lets you pick up a handgun. Still, it's amazing how good a beancounter can get at pistol shooting when two hours of spreadsheet work are at stake and you have to win a game to use the Save

option.

Surprisingly enough, the NCs weren't a hit with the users and were decommissioned after only four days (and 327 kills).

"I was thinking about a PC version of that game," the PFY comments.

"You mean the same game, except that it causes the Pentium Hang bug on their desktop machine?"

"You mean you've thought of it?"

"Thought of it, installed it, and am waiting for new players with the chaingun."

The boss is on the track of two mysterious contractors, C. Omputer and R. Amchip, but the BOFH is on the case...

When the PFY and I are on top of things, running the network is simple. But then the boss attempts to do his job and it all goes pear-shaped.

"Who's this Charles Omputer?" He asks, eyeing a set of timesheets suspiciously.

"Never heard of him."

"You must have, you've signed his bloody timesheet."

"Charles Omputer?... Oh, you mean Chazzer. He's a part time cable monkey we got to replace the telephone cabling that got burnt out when some idiot had his PC jammed against the circuit breaker on his desk."

"You know very well the circuit breaker was faulty. Anyway, I don't know how my PC got pushed back that far."

The PFY couldn't look more innocent if he tried.

"And it shouldn't have affected the phone cabling," the boss continued.

"It wouldn't have if someone hadn't decided to 'cut costs' by running the extra office power through the data ducting."

The boss shuffles his feet. "Anyway, Mr Omputer - he's been putting in the overtime, hasn't he?"

"Yes, although it's not really our fault because you made us let Frank Irmware go last week because he crashed the server."

"We can't allow mistakes," the boss says, taking the hard line. "We have to be vigilant. Can we get a replacement?"

"Well, we've got a CV for a Roger Amchip."

"What's he like?"

"He's been in computers for years," the PFY pipes up.

"We seem to be hiring a lot of foreigners," the boss comments, "and how come I never meet any of them?"

"Well, you know the sort, green and keen, can't wait to get into the thick of it."

"I see. Well, give this Amchip guy a call and organise a meeting with him tomorrow. Sort out any potential overtime disputes!"

Bugger.

"How's 'Omuputer's cable replacement' going?" I ask the PFY.

"Should be done by tomorrow."

"And we're still keeping up appearances?"

"Judging by the unhappiness in the tea-room, apparently so."

If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times, it's the small things that count. You can't just unplug 50 telephone cables, super glue a circuit breaker shut then claim a cabling disaster has destroyed the telecommunications hub of the floor - requiring two weeks overtime to 'recable'. No, you have to give the appearance of work being done while you replugin the cables back in at the comms room, five per night.

Which is why the PFY and I leave wire offcuts and insulation on office floors right next to a knocked-over plant, which is supposed to disguise a hammer hole in the wall. And there's nothing like the theft of small change from a user's desktop organiser and a cigarette butt in their coffee mug to allay any suspicion that there were was no cabling job and certainly no cabling professional.

With a little extra effort, all suspicions are avoided.

Which leaves us with the problem of Roger Amchip.

The boss trolls into work in time to find a set of legs sticking out from under his desk. Being a total wimp, he sends me in to take a look. I flip the boss's desktop circuit breaker to off and grope around a bit.

"No pulse," I cry.

The boss screams and then power-unloads last night's biriani.

"I'll get an ambulance."

"No point, he's stone cold - feel his leg."

The boss squeamishly touches the leg. "Oh God. Who?" he asks quietly.

"Amchip. He was keen to get to work last night. Must have been electrocuted from the mains in the phone and data ducting."

"We'll have to call the police."

"You're right, and if I may say so, it's very brave of you."

"What?"

"To face the music like this. A lot of people would just pay Amchip's widow off to pretend he'd run off, rather than face a manslaughter by professional negligence charge."

"Manslaughter!"

"Well, it wasn't premeditated was it? Although you are known to have a problem with anyone claiming overtime... Poor Mrs Amchip."

"Do you think she'd accept money?"

"Well, these are tough times. I think she'd probably come up with a reasonable excuse for ten grand. They weren't that close apparently."

The boss whips out his cheque book in record time...

"Who should I make it out to?"

"Charlotte Amchip. No. That would look suspicious... Make it out to her non-profit business - Charlotte Amchip's Schizophrenics Hospice."

"How do you spell Schizophrenics?"

"Oh, just put the initials."

An hour later the boss is having a drink to calm his nerves, the PFY and I are having a drink to celebrate our recent bonus, and the head of safety is having a lie down after finding the lost CPR mannequin.

Amazing how things work out for the best isn't it?

When the BOFH suggests a team-building event, on his own time, there has to be some devilry brewing...

"Of course I bloody did!" the pimply-faced youth (PFY) shouts angrily, slamming the phone down.

Sensing tension in the air, I ask him what's up.

"A bloody user - he's been to the boss and complained about his network speed and got the OK to get it fixed."

"And you don't fancy the overtime?"

"I'm sick of bloody overtime."

The poor blighter is getting stir-crazy from spending so much time in the office. I remember only too well the feeling of depression as I contemplated another day of calls from users whose passwords didn't work when their caps keys were pressed down. Until I discovered the wonders of electricity, contact adhesive and tinfoil. But that's another story.

"What you need," I reply, noticing a shadow behind the glass panel of our door, "is a break. A chance to re-establish yourself as a member of a team. If there's one thing that contributes to workplace harmony it's the feeling of belonging to a group with a common cause."

I interrupt the PFY as he reaches for the yellow pages - no doubt to look for psychiatric hospitals - and point to the Boss's blurred form outside the door.

"But, it's not a good idea."

"Why not?" The PFY is getting into the swing of things.

"Don't tell the Boss, but a company I used to work for had this team-building weekend and when they got back, performance was up to such a level that they laid off 30 per cent of the staff."

When I looked again the doorway was free of shadow.

Later that afternoon, the boss, looking benevolent, returns.

"I know it's short notice," he says, eyeing us intently, "but I've noticed that morale is down a little recently, so I thought maybe some of us should go for a team-building weekend. Apparently one of the hotels in Brighton has conference and relaxation facilities. I was thinking maybe this weekend?"

That 30 per cent must have really got to him because half the IT department is on his list. The PFY and I make a show of reluctantly accepting the offer.

Friday night arrives and the PFY and I find ourselves at the hotel along with the other IT sheep. By a strange twist of fate, our room access cards no longer access our allocated rooms, but the large staterooms at either end of the corridor.

"Who are we to argue with fate?" I ask the PFY as I place the magcard writer back in my luggage.

"See you in the morning."

Morning dawns and it's time to pay for our sins...

The head of IT has a trust exercise where the victim falls backwards off a table into the arms of his or her co-workers. But everyone was curiously reluctant to try it out after the PFY thought he saw Kevin Costner outside the window at a critical moment of the demonstration.

The boss, however, isn't dissuaded by the head's confinement to bed, and has a myriad geeky games to enthrall us with.

"I can't take much more of this!" the PFY gasps as we're finally allowed to go to the bar at eight o'clock.

"I know. It's a bloody nightmare."

"And he's going to try some OTrust' thing about one person leading another person in a blindfold around the building tomorrow."

"Filthy. Although..."

"No, no, he's said he's not going to be in it. Besides, he knows where the stairwells and balconies are."

"Damn! Well, desperate times call for desperate measures."

"What are you going to do?"

"Buy the boss a drink or two."

A couple of hours later I've snaffled the boss's room card from his wallet and am making my way to his room while the PFY keeps him at the bar.

The next morning everyone's on deck, but there's no boss to be seen. I join the crowd of onlookers.

"All right, what did you do?" the PFY asks curiously.

"Guess."

"You watered his electric blanket?"

"No."

"Livened up his toilet seat?"

"No, but much warmer"

"How much warmer?"

"As warm as say, a Jalapeno pepper, coated in glycerine and placed strategically at the top of a jar of suppositories where it might be grabbed by a drunken sufferer of piles just before bedtime."

"You bastard. Will he turn up?"

"I don't know." I gave the issue some consideration. "What are the chances of the police releasing you when you're found stark naked in a hotel lobby beating the crap out of an ice machine?"

"About the same as the chances of a team-building exercise that can't be played in the bar today?"

"Exactly." I was proud of the PFY's perpicacity. "Make mine a lager!"

There's stocktaking to be done and awkward questions to be answered. But the BOFH stays cool as things get hot...

I hate inventory time. Every bloody year it's the same: traipse around and record the serial number attached to each device in a half-witted attempt to ensure that we don't steal any kit. Then the inevitable spot checks to make sure that we weren't lying.

It would almost be inconvenient if we didn't have a complete list of the serial numbers and control of the program that randomly selects the equipment that's going to be spot-checked.

And let me tell you, if someone ever steals the full-height 5MB hard drive, the 600 BPI nine-track tape drive, or the ZX81 expansion memory card, there's going to be questions asked in accounts.

Our spot-check kit's all in perfect nick of course - only in service for a couple of hours every year - besides, should we require to change the inventory's selection, there's a huge space in one of our deserted warehouses in Peckham that's jam-packed with equipment that no-one's going to steal.

Not that it's necessary, given that with the frightening turnover of bean-counters the chances of running into the same inventory auditor two years in a row is about the same as someone discovering the boss has stashed three motor vehicles behind packing cases in the aforementioned warehouse.

That's the beauty of a good alarm system - it doesn't ring bells to scare intruders - it just dials up your Linux box and chucks a real-time movie onto your X-terminal.

And so it was that the PFY and I noticed the arrival of three spanking-new top-of-the-line vehicles in the long-term storage area of the warehouse.

The boss, only recently returned to us by the police, is of course to blame. Trying to brown-nose away his sins with the CEO by reorganising this year's executive vehicle replacement into a bulk purchase deal, he made one error.

It seems that somehow, unbeknownst to him, Mercedes got mixed up with Lada on the order form, and instead of it being faxed to the reputable luxury car dealer a SIMM's throw from our office doorstep, it somehow made it to a less-reputable economy car dealer quite some distance away. An economy car dealer who, by some quirk of fate had three, brand spanking new Ladas sitting at the back of his showroom - for the last six years.

The boss took the delivery well though. Better than he took the playing of Johnny Cash's Ring of Fire on the cafeteria juke box over and over again after recovering from the unorthodox medication he received at the recent team-building weekend.

And so it was that I felt a modicum of animosity in the air when the boss deigned to join the inventory auditors on their rounds.

"A 600BPI, nine-track tape unit?" the auditor asks.

"Ah, that would be just over here," I respond, pointing.

"That wasn't there yesterday," the boss cries, smelling rodent.

"No, we had a reshuffle to make way for new cabling," I respond in a manner that would have got me the Baden-Powell award for preparedness.

"I see. A Seagate five-megabyte hard drive?"

"That will be on the e-mail list server."

"We don't use five-meg hard drives any more," the boss cries.

"Afraid so," I reply. "As the list server software runs on an old XT which only supports MFM hard drives."

"This is ridiculous," he cries, grabbing the auditor's sheaf of papers and fumbling into non spot-check territory.

"What about this 29-inch Sony TV?"

"Nicom Stereo, with text option?" I ask. "In the boardroom, not here"

"OK, well what about the Sega video game?"

"It's with personnel, they were going to use it for a creche for workers returning from maternity leave," I ad-lib, and far faster than the soundcard does.

"Right," he says, in a determined manner. "The brand-new heating and cooling system, supposed to be in this room - where is it?"

"In the delivery room downstairs isn't it?"

"No, I checked this morning. They said they delivered it here."

"Well perhaps it's outside the service elevator."

"No, but I have a fair idea of where it is. Warm at home is it?" he asks, flashing a photograph of the outside of my flat featuring a new air-conditioner.

"I just installed a new unit at home because I was so impressed with the spec of the system we bought."

"Bought and put where?" the boss asks nastily. "It was in the Peckham warehouse wasn't it?" the PFY chimes to the rescue. "Because of all the new heat-generating kit that was recently dumped there," he mentions, pointedly.

"Ah, yes," the boss responds, at 1,400 backpedals per second. "Of course, I should have known. Well, no problems here."

Quicker than you can say diminished responsibility he and the auditor are gone.

"He's got it in for us you know," the PFY murmurs.

"Yes, I know. And it's just not fair, and highly unjustified. Now, how do you spell Trabant again?"

The helldesk has got a bit too big for its boots, but the BOFH has a cunning plan to knock them down to size...

I'm sitting at my desk when the PFY looks up from his task of helping users with performance problems on the back-up server.

"Hey, the Kill-9 command isn't working."

"Yeah, I rewrote it with better signals. Ones with more meaning than words like hang up."

"Well what are they?"

"They're a mixed bag - everything a discerning system administrator needs."

"And they are?"

"Let's see, there's Kill-Godfather, which is a quick shot to the back of the process's header in a quiet corner of process space, and also, while it's at it, leaves a GIF of a horse's head in their screen-saver bitmap."

"Lovely, I'm sure."

"Then there's Kill-CIA, which kills the process and makes it look like natural causes."

"Uh-huh."

"Of course, further investigation of the core file reveals the words, 'grassy knoll,' which is sure to get the furry-toothed guys in research reaching for the dandelion tea."

"Yes..."

"Ahhhhh, Kill-shotgun, for when you can't remember the whole of the process's PID - it just kills anything in that vicinity. Kill-driveby, which knocks off one process on either side of the specified one, and so on."

"It's a little overboard isn't it?" the PFY asks mildly.

"No, Kill-overboard kills all processes, e-mails a nasty message to Bill Gates about how badly we're abusing our Microsoft licenses, then writes garbage all over the kernel causing the system to crash. Oh, and tampers with a couple of things on your desktop machine."

"Hey, the system's just gone down."

"Yeah -overboard is the default if your username is helpdesk. Installed SUID too, so they have the power they've been bleating about needing all this time."

The phone rings and something tells me it's the helpdesk wanting to complain. There's no pleasing

some people.

"But you know what that means don't you?" The PFY asks in horror.

"That the helpdesk is working? Yes, I know, I thought that new box of whiteboard markers would buy us a week or two in noughts and crosses games, but the boss took it out after the first couple of days."

"We can't have the helldesk trying to fix problems - it took two days to recover the database server last time."

"True - but I have a plan."

The next day dawns and I await the fruition of my labours. Sure enough, the phone's on the job real early.

"Something's wrong with all the dictate systems," the helldesk droid says.

"And what exactly is the problem?" I ask.

"Well, the 'plain English' module's gone from every desktop, so the machines don't seem to be understanding the users any more. And the Voice Recalibration Application is missing too."

"I see," I answer thoughtfully, gesturing the PFY over. "So what you're saying is that somehow, probably due to the crash the helpdesk caused on the back-up server yesterday, all the voice-tailoring of the user's dictation systems have disappeared."

"Yes."

"And don't tell me, the install media is gone too?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"A lucky guess," the PFY shouts.

"Now tell me," I say, "there must be another voice module apart from the 'plain English' one?"

"Well that's the funny thing."

"Yes?"

"There's a module I've never seen before. It's called drunken Scotsman."

"Really?"

"Yes, but I don't know what it is."

"Well, there's only one way of finding out. Take a bottle of Scotch up to Don McCloud on the third floor, prime him up and let him have a go at it."

"You can't be serious."

"You're right. Tell the beancounters they'll be typing their reports."

"But they're due at the printers tomorrow night."

"Then whatever you do, don't forget Don's a single-malt man."

As soon as he's rung off I'm priming Don over the phone. Like a true professional, he leaps to the task and has no problems being understood by the peripherals. The rush to get temps with accents stops after I mention the discrimination angle and how badly it might look if the papers got hold of it.

The next day at the pub, the PFY and I hear all about it...

"Well a couple of them mastered the accent quite well," Don slurs, after two days solid scotch drinking. "Although I've heard that they won't need it for long as the original voice module is due to be reinstalled on Monday."

"Oh I shouldn't worry about that," I mutter. "It's only a matter of time before one of the helpdesk people dictates the words 'computer, kill minus overboard' into the documentation system."

A drunken beancounter, sounding like Sean Connery on a bad day, brings over the next round.

Another dirty job that someone's got to do...

Shape up or face budget cuts - what will the BOFH do? Enlist the help of an ice cream and some digging gear...

You can only put off some support for so long, and the directive from on-high is that we've got to go out and press the flesh with the middle management types or we can expect our lack of support to be reflected in this quarter's budget allocation.

I cannot allow my junket budget to be tampered with, especially not after the serious cuts I've had to make in recent months due to unnecessary auditor attention.

The PFY and I go for the divide and conquer method to meet the userbase. I step lively to complainant number one, a cost manager loosely attached to the beancounters.

"I've got some performance problems," he cries forlornly as I roll up. "Yes, I've heard the rumours," I respond, icing up what appears to be a budding relationship between him and his attractive young personal assistant.

"But never mind, it happens to the best of you - what about your PC?"

"I was talking about my PC," he cries.

He leads me through to his office, at which time I realise that not even our beancounters like him, his PC's so old it still has the OEThis Side Up' sticker in Noah's handwriting.

Feeling a smidgen of pity for the bloke, I say: "Looks like a Magnum job to me."

"Not the gun?" he asks fearfully.

"No, the ice-cream. Bung it down the back, switch her on, and bugger off to lunch. And take anything flammable off your desk just in case."

"But they'll blame me."

"Not if you leave the wrapper in your assistant's bin they won't."

"But she's..." "...expendable," I say.

Problem solved, I move on to my next victim. On the way I meet the PFY, who doesn't appear to be in a good mood.

"How was the design group manager?" I ask.

"Manager? He couldn't manage a good crap without written instructions."

"Annoying?"

"Annoying, he bloody wanted me to move one of those workstations with the twin 21-inch monitors downstairs."

"Ah yes," I cry, recalling loud noises from the recent past. "So best to avoid the south stairwell for a bit?"

"The bottom two floors and basement level anyway - I got them down two flights without hitting the handrails."

"Bally good shot old man," I cry supportively, slapping him on the back. "We'll make a career administrator out of you yet. Right, I'm off to find out what the head of IT wants help with."

"You're seeing our boss, why?" the PFY cries.

"Apparently he's in need of some advice."

"Really?" the PFY smiles, eyes lighting up.

A few minutes later I'm in the office of our very own head of department, with a fair idea of what he has in mind.

"We're thinking of expanding our operation and moving into Asia," he mentions, confirming my suspicions. "We really need to get this videoconferencing thing off the ground."

It was always a matter of time, and that time appears to be at hand. Before the PFY and I know it we're going to have to release the bandwidth that we're using to receive cable TV from the States.

"Yes?" I murmur.

"I've been hearing good things about something called IP Tunnelling.

I'm not sure of the ins-and-outs of it, so what can you tell me?"

"Well, it's basically a way of directing Internet traffic from one site to another - usually used to provide a virtual private network."

I switch to dummy mode.

"Is it fast?"

"Oh yes."

"How much will it cost?"

"Your cabling's probably going to be cheap because we already have all the fibre bearers and everything, so I guess the main expense is just going to be hiring the digging equipment."

"Digging equipment."

"Yes, to make the tunnel to Asia."

"But we can't make a tunnel to Asia - it would take years."

"No no," I laugh, "only joking."

"Oh thank goodness."

"No, we'll only have to dig the tunnel to the BT office switchroom about half a mile away. Should cost us about four or five grand in rental."

"Four or five grand."

"Well, they might do a cash job under the table for three - if we provide our own project manager."

"Where will we get a project manager?"

"Well rumour has it there's a PA in cost management who's up for a new position. Of course I'd have to liaise fairly closely with her for the duration of the project."

"Make it so," the head cries, like a real Star Trek pro.

Beam me up Scotty, there's no intelligent life down here.

**The users are away from the office and - shock horror - the BOFH and PFY miss them.
Surely this can't be right...**

Bored, bored, bored. The building is all but deserted as the company hosts its 'New Initiative W3'

day for the workers - a disgusting event where the heads of the various departments report on the three wheres of existence - where we came from, where we are, and where we're going.

I notice that my overlay picture of a lavatory has been removed from the posters in the cafeteria. Perhaps that's why the PFY and I have the dubious honour of joining security in being the only staff not to get an invite.

It's surprising how bored an administrator can become without external distractions. The PFY seems particularly melancholy now that there are no users to bug him. A lesser man might be drawn to question his real feelings in the light of this knowledge. The PFY and I however have larger fish to grill - over the boss's under-desk heater as it happens.

Amazing what they'll do when you cover half the air inlet and disconnect the thermal cut-out.

In no time we're tucking into a tasty lunch - and crispy too, thanks to the PFY's discovery that by removing the safety cover you can place the food nearer to the bare heating wires.

"You know, it's funny," the PFY says as he gobbles the last of his fish buttie, "but in a way I miss the users."

"We should give Dr Robb a ring."

Dr Robb, is the company shrink. He used to come in once a week for huggy-feely sessions with the staff, but the presence of a video camera in the room seems to have had some effect on his popularity. I guess the deputy storeman never did get over his tape being played on the front-desk security monitor one Friday evening after drinks.

"Hello?"

"Hi Doctor Robb."

"Ah... hello Simon."

"How's the PC?"

"I don't use computers any more," he says nervously. "In fact I don't use any electrical appliances."

"But what about the phone? That's an electrical appliance of sorts isn't...."

>CLICK<

"That's strange," the PFY comments. "He's hung up And what about that crap about not using electrical appliances?"

"I know - sounds like neurosis if you ask me. Sounds like he needs another dose of that shock treatment they go on about."

"What do you mean, another dose?"

"Oh, nothing. So it looks like we're going to have to deal with this problem on our own. I think the horrible truth is - we actually need our users."

"No!" the PFY is almost hysterical.

The rest of the afternoon is spent in sad contemplation.

Normality returns when the first W3 victim enters the workplace early to get some back-ups of his Linux box while the portable tape unit is free.

"Hello," I say, grabbing the phone.

"It's about my back-ups - they don't go through."

"That's because you back up all your applications instead of the data that is changing. You don't need to back up your applications because we keep copies of them all on the server."

"But I really do want to back up my applications," the user cries, not fooled for a second.

"Then you'll have to use the ultra-fast Non-Unwinding Longitudinal Length drive."

Dummy mode on.

"Duh... OK. What's that called?"

"/dev/null"

"OK. Hey, it is fast. How do you track it?"

"Uh, the command is 'cat /dev/null' piped to 'ls -alR /'."

"OK, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"What was all that about?" The PFY gasps. "I thought we'd realised that we needed the users?"

"Don't be stupid. I'll never need a user while I have the Doom and Quake boxed set and the Internet. And grilled fish for lunch of course. Speaking of which, did you put the safety..."

A scream from the boss's office answers my question before the PFY can respond.

"Whoops," says the PFY.

While the PFY is busy with his Tunnel-Monkey work, the BOFH is sorting out the e-mail system and diverting complaints to sex lines...

It's a tedious morning at Network Central so I while away the hours by getting the PFY to do some Tunnel-Monkey work checking the earthing straps on the cable trays in the comms risers.

True, it's a hot, cramped and pointless job, but it does give him a broader view of the world of

networking. And helps him remember that when I say "Don't play with my laptop," I mean it.

The calls are coming in thick and fast this morning and without the PFY I have to start screening them myself. The helpdesk has started giving out our number to anyone who seems important, and since the boss fixed them up with an exchange console, our usual ploy of changing numbers every day no longer seems to work.

After a few calls I can see that there's a trend towards one single complaint, so I 'screen' the rest of them by diverting the phone to an outside sex line, then fire off an e-mail memo to the beancounters saying there's been a lot of telephone abuse in that area recently, and perhaps they should investigate.

But unlike Wells Fargo, my mail does not get through. In fact it hardly ever gets through. Not since the Boss, off his own bat, got our Systems predecessors to 'Upgrade' the mail server with some 'fantastic' software which does everything but drop a lipsticked kiss on the bottom of your personal e-mail.

Everything but deliver the bloody message that is.

I corner the Boss once more about this by pointing out the software's many shortcomings. However, he gets evasive.

"Well, it did cost an awful lot of money - and besides, a lot of our Meeting Calendars are plugged into it too!"

So it is that a few days later the Boss is looking through the manual archive in the store for his mailer guide when the PFY interrupts my dedicated labour with a question.

"What're you doing?"

"Ensuring the return of my beloved sendmail," I reply.

"How?"

"Ah, just helping the 'flash mailer' software 'deliver' the boss's e-mail. The 'Visible Queue' screen is actually quite good - it allows me to 'deliver' some messages personally."

"How?"

"Well, you grab certain messages and drag them onto the Trash icon."

"Which messages?"

"Oh, just one part of any multi-part message."

I show him on the screen. "See the Mail-IN queue? The Subject contains the sequence number of the part. So you delete part 23 of 24 and let the other parts go through. It's driving him insane. And, of course, I'm 'delivering' all of his outgoing mail altogether, so he's having to send everything important by internal mail just to make sure it gets there, never really knowing what's getting there and what's not."

"Well, what he doesn't know won't hurt him," the PFY mutters.

"That statement has never proved accurate in my experience. For instance, I don't believe at this point in time the Boss knows that the top step of the storeroom stepladder is very loose..."

We both listen intently to the sound of an overweight manager plunging 5 feet into several large boxes of lineflow paper.

An hour later, as I'm reverting our mailserver to my first choice (I think it was the 10 e-mail messages that I'd claimed to have sent to Buildings Maintenance about stepladder problems that swung it), the PFY comes over looking perplexed.

"I don't understand why we installed it..." he says.

Sigh. Just when you think he understands, you realise that he's still out there somewhere, looking for answers.

"As your position in the company increases, your perceived responsibility increases, your actual responsibility decreases and your understanding of the issues decreases as well," I explain.

"So why did we buy it in the first place?"

"We bought it because someone thought it was a good idea, and no-one at managerial level knew it was crap."

"I think that's a little cynical..."

I interrupt with a hands-free phone call.

"Hello?" the boss answers.

"Hi, I was just wondering why you authorised the upgrade to the new Object Orientated Programming package."

"Well, it was your idea - you said we'd run out of objects."

"Of course. Thank you."

I ring off.

"Point made?" I ask.

"I still don't think..."

"Hello?" the Boss answers.

"That graphics accelerator I removed from your machine, why was that again?"

"Because it ... something about the graphics travelling too fast?"

"Of course, I remember now," I reply hanging up.

"But..." the PFY adds.

"No BUTs - it's them or us. You can lead a boss to a decision, but you can't make him think."

Sigh.

The company architect's presence in the building creates an air of expectancy and pushes the BOFH into a bit of bastardly trickery...

There's a feeling of excitement in the air that I haven't felt in a long time. The same sort of excitement that precedes the Xmas get-together when the yearly bonuses are handed out. (Recent years excepted, of course.)

The font of all joy becomes apparent almost immediately. The company architect, usually only called in for "department refits" is on the premises. That in itself is a surprise, as I don't remember hearing of a wave of redundancies.

This time, however, my perusing indicates that there's been no departmental Axejob. (Sigh.) It must be something else. The Head of IT is sure to know.

The PFY, trained to respond to just this kind of situation, fires up the building 'topology monitor' and we home in on the 'Big Guy's' belt buckle - a chunky slab of metal that could stop a scud, complete with 'tasteful' picture of a rampant mermaid engraved into it - a gift from loyal staff.

And they say that quality never goes out of style. As luck would have it, the PFY and I gained access to it prior to presentation and loaded it with the sort of hardware that keeps civil liberties groups busy.

Some people just don't understand.

"Do you think the belt will work?" the PFY asks, just before activation.

"Of course it will," I remind him. "The bug is so sensitive it could pick up an ant farting at 10 paces. Which reminds me, make a mental note to deactivate it an hour after lunch - no point in overloading its circuits."

Meanwhile, the sub-miniature microphone in the mermaid's eye hears all...

"Gentlemen," our Head begins, in hushed tones to the assembled board. "As chairperson of the committee to investigate expansion solutions, I've the following to report: first, this building is expensive to rent; second, it's becoming too small for our purposes; and third, it doesn't have the networking infrastructure to allow us to expand into the 21st century. For these reasons, I have taken advice from certain quarters..." he pauses, indicating, no doubt, a couple of board members known for their property speculation, "and signed the company up for the occupation of a larger facility at a waterfront location at a far more reasonable rent which we could move into almost immediately."

"BULOODY HELL!" the PFY cries, echoing my own thoughts to the letter. "He can't be

serious!"

"Apparently so," I respond. "And using his lack of technical expertise as a selling point too."

"Lack?" the PFY blurts "He's not completely stupid; after all, he was on that TV programme - what was it, Beyond 2000?"

"Ah no, the TV programme he was on was Beyond Help, a completely different documentary altogether. Had a whole show on trainspotting apparently."

Within the hour, the Boss is upon us, breaking the news, A-Z in hand.

"We're moving," he cries annoyed, indicating a spot on the river.

"I only just bloody found out!"

"Best start packing," I shout.

"You mean... you're not going to oppose the move?" he asks.

"Why?" I ask incredulously. "I can't wait! The chance to design a new and futureproof network."

"But what about access to the city?" he snuffles.

"Highly overrated - smog, congestion. Give me river views anytime."

"Me too," the PFY concurs.

"But what about... all the work you've done here?"

"In the past. I'm looking forward to the challenge of the future."

"But..."

"All right. Fifty quid and I'll put the kybosh on it. What about you?"

"Twenty pints," the PFY cries.

"You can't be serious!"

"All right then, we're not serious. Let's get packing."

"Uh... OK. But what are you going to do?"

"Well, I'd tell you, but then I'd have to strap a bulk eraser to your head and stick you to one of the metal floor tiles."

"You mean it's that secret?"

"Not really, I'm just curious to see what would happen."

Taking the hint, the boss takes his leave. I get on the phone to the company's head shark, a lawyer so dodgy his business card's got someone else's name on it. I invite him down for a little chat about that tenancy contract loophole we discovered ... in about 10 minutes.

Sure enough, the end of the day finds the Boss in a giving mood.

"I don't know how you did it," he cries cheerfully, "but it's money well spent. How'd you get the head lawyer to go for it - I thought he was one of the landlords?"

"Oh, he's quite reasonable when you get him down to ground level," I respond.

"Oh," The PFY blurts, "Speaking of which, should I turn off the eraser?"

"Hmmm. Maybe not just yet. Let's leave it a couple more hours."

It's true what they say, you've just got to know how to communicate with these people...

The BOFH and PFY are hurt when they're left out of the games day - but it's nothing that a mallet and a spot of violence can't take care of...

So the PFY and I are deeply hurt when the CEO decides to ease the proles' building move disappointment by holding an IT and clients 'games' weekend - complete with Murder Mystery Saturday party - without the PFY and I.

Rumour has it our 'tame' lawyer spilt the beans about the whole tenancy contract loophole deal before departing to the relative safety of a rival company...

What hurts is that the head of IT used one of our very own excuses on us - that the network always needs someone on call because of the overseas offices, particularly now that IT will be absent for the whole weekend.

Which is bollocks, as half the offices couldn't call the International 24-hour helpdesk if it wasn't the top right-hand button on their phones.

It's almost as if they don't want the PFY and I socialising with people on a fun outing. As if they don't trust us. Apparently the interest dropped off exponentially when the Murder Party was announced.

Still, it's an ill wind - it'll give us a chance to perform some disk- warranty checks (a couple of whacks with a rubber panel-beating mallet that leaves no marks just before the end of the warranty period.) You'd be surprised how many disks fail the tests requiring a free replacement.

I'm checking we have all the kit on hand on Friday afternoon when the boss breezes in.

"Evening all," he cries cheerily, obviously gagging to break some news to us.

"Guess what I've managed to wangle?"

"Yes?" I respond, without enthusiasm.

"You've been okayed to come to the Sunday games - after you do some software installations in Personnel of course," he says, handing me a list longer than the 'known bugs' of Windows 95.

Saturday dawns and, never ones to turn down a challenge, the PFY and I pull out all stops to ensure that the upgrades get done on time. In fact, we even have a little spare, which we put to good use.

Monday comes, and I go to work knowing full well I'm going to be burdened by a conversation with the boss. Sure enough, he calls out to me before I can get to mission control and gestures to his office which, from my angle, appears to have more than its usual allocation of Personnel management in situ. The PFY is also on the scene, so it's very cramped in the boss's office.

"Simon," the boss starts, "I've just been going over a number of complaints that Justin here has raised about your conduct yesterday."

"Yesterday?" I ask, innocence my new middle name.

"At the games? At Balesworth Castle Grounds?" Justin snaps.

"Oh yes! And you say there were complaints?"

"Yes! You realise that this was supposed to be a 'fun' occasion, where members of the various departments could meet in a spirit of sportsmanship."

"Yes, I did realise that. In fact, I did my best to try every game even though some of them were quite new to me."

"So it would appear. Justin seems to believe that you may have been a little over-enthusiastic."

"Really? I can't think why. Can you?" I ask the PFY.

"Not really."

"What about the petanque game?"

"The petanque game?"

"Yes, where you played your ball from the rooftop?"

"Oh yes! Well I had to - I got a helpdesk call on the cellphone and the reception on the playing field was lousy. So, in the 'spirit of sportspersonship', I didn't want everyone waiting for me to have my turn. Anyway, I don't believe there's anything in the rules about what height you have to play the ball from."

"Perhaps not, but pretending to light a fuse on the castle's cannon before playing your ball didn't add to your competitors' sense of well-being..."

"It was only a bit of fun."

"Like the petanque ball that dented the bonnet of Justin's coupé?"

"Oh, I just needed a little fine-tuning on my aim," I cry, still going for the innocent look.

"And that would be the same excuse you'll be using for the 'Hacky Sack' game?" he continued.

"I admit I did get a little enthusiastic," I reply, "which, combined with the angle of the sun, may have led to some confusion."

"Confusion...yes," Justin hissed.

"Well at least I managed to kick the sack."

"You managed to kick a sack. Unfortunately for Justin, the sack concerned is more commonly known as a scrotum."

"As I said, the sun, me not being used to steel toe-capped shoes..."

"I might be able to accept these excuses except it appears that neither of you performed the software installs I asked..."

"Yes we did," the PFY cried.

"None of the machines are booting!" Justin shouted, unable to restrain himself any longer. "They're just sitting there."

"I told you," I said to the PFY "Those bloody hard disks were faulty."

"Which brings me to this," the Boss sighed, holding up a piece of disk-testing equipment. "Anyone care to tell me how this got into Justin's office?"

"He's fixed the coupé himself to save on insurance?" I offer helpfully.

The PFY and I settle ourselves comfortably for the wailing and gnashing of teeth to follow...

A US buyout results in a visit stateside, a lesson in the zen of lift shafts and plenty of new kit... all expensives paid

It's a crisp Monday morning when the CEO pops into our offices to ask for a bit of a favour. The boss, nose always alert for the truffles of office kudos, creeps in.

"I'd like you to rig up the video conference stuff up so that I can give a quick speech to the entire company" he requests.

"You're not retiring, are you?" the boss blurts, eyes on a prize WAAAAY above his station.

"No, no"

"An early Easter message to the troops, then?"

"No. The truth of the matter is that we've been bought out. Lock, stock and Barrel"

"THE BLOODY JAPS!" the boss cries.

"No, no!" the CEO sighs, "Anyway, with the world money situation, about the only other place it would come from would be Amsterdam."

"Oh thank goodness for that!" the boss blurts, "I don't know a word of Belgian!"

The things you hear when you haven't got your nailgun...

The day arrives and the CEO spells it out for the masses around the world. An American conglomerate looking for foreign investment stumbled across our well-doctored Annual Report and liked what they saw so much that they bought the company. The news that there are no plans for resizing is met with a collective sigh from the assembled proles. For now, it's business as usual...

"Simon," the CEO mumbles, away from the relative security of his executive en-suite for the second time this week (a new record). "Just need you and your Man Friday to pop over to the Mother company in the US for a week or so to see how they do their stuff. Smart cookies over there apparently, all state-of-the-art palaver. Anyway, the bosses there just want to go over and chin-wag with their techos. Hope you don't mind..."

An all-expenses paid junket to the US...Hmmm.

"Well, it would definitely be helpful, but it'd take ages to ship the equipment over."

"Oh, we'll fly you business class and you can take it as luggage!" he cries.

"I don't really think that will QUITE cover the network analyser hardware and the..."

"Well, I suppose we could squeeze you both into First Class" he cries magnanimously...

And so it was that two days and many, many first-class drinks later, the PFY and I are awaiting collection in a holding cell at the port of entry into the US. Apparently they don't take too kindly to heavy drinking at Customs, especially not when you use the "strange customs" joke too many times.

Luckily, our parent company actually does a bit of wheeling and dealing in the field and manages to spring us from custody. After a night's rest, we're met by our tour guide - the boss's equivalent in the mother company. He gives us a quick overview of their operation, introduces us to the systems and network blokes, then beats a hasty retreat. We're shown around the site and have to admit to being impressed with the equipment.

"It's certainly impressive," I mention to one of my counterparts as we're looking at their collection of brand-spanking new kit.

"Well, we like to keep up with the times. Besides, a lot of the older stuff was damaged when we relocated to the second floor."

"Damaged?" I ask, smelling professionalism lurking in the wings.

"Yeah, we're not exactly sure how, but the lift doors opened when the lift wasn't there..."

"Ah," I nod knowingly, "and a laden trolley of equipment plunged down the shaft?"

"THREE laden trolleys as it happened - unfortunately, I was wearing the ear muffs that the company makes you wear in the computer room and didn't hear the kit hit the bottom."

"How unfortunate," I sigh meaningfully.

"Not quite as unfortunate as the boss not trusting us with his bonsai plants and carrying them to the lift himself."

"Where he subsequently dropped them?" I ask, filling in the blanks as appropriate.

"Actually no, he held on to them all the way to the ground floor. Mind you, the paramedics did trample them in their hurry to rescue him."

A week later, the PFY and I are bailed out of a holding cell at Heathrow (what the hell, an opportunity missed is an opportunity gone forever) and the next day make our report to the boss and CEO.

"All their equipment is miles ahead of ours! We'll need an extensive systems and networks management upgrade! Worse still, our operations centre has a network latency problem because it's so far from the satellite dish on the roof. We'd need to move at least two floors up to cut the distance and reduce the delay. I'd suggest we move in after we organise the purchase of compatible equipment through the systems and networks guy over in the US head office once he's worked out what we need..."

...Meanwhile, on the other side of the water, my counterpart is presenting his compatibility proposal...

"All their equipment is miles ahead of ours...etc."

A couple of days on, I get my cheque from the US office to buy some compatible gear...

My progress to Oddbins is delayed only momentarily by the sound of a trolleyful of kit hitting the bottom of a lift shaft. That's the PFY's dedication for you - it's all work, work, work.

Good of the boss to lend a hand moving his prized cactus plants...

Translating engineer excuses into non-fiction can be a difficult task - but nothing is too tough for The Bastard Bible...

So I'm putting some finishing touches to The Bastard Bible, or as the PFY and I refer to it, 'Everything your users ever wanted to know about systems and networks management but were too afraid to ask because they didn't want to spend a bank holiday weekend stuck in a chemical toilet.'

The PFY wanders over after logging a hardware fault on an old RAID cabinet that's near the end of

its serviceable life. Noticing my disdain, the PFY can't stop himself: "You don't like engineers very much do you?"

"Not particularly. It's such a crap paid job that all the good ones bugger off to private contracting while all the crap - or new - ones get sent out to look after our gear."

"It's not quite that bad," the PFY says, shaking his head. "They get the job done."

"Time will tell." I don't want to raise his hopes as I know that our maintenance contracting company tries to reduce costs by religiously claiming the fault is software, not hardware. When that fails, they'll attempt to 'repair' gear on-site using your tools to disguise the fact that they don't actually have a workshop. That is, they're operating from the back room of a minicab company.

As expected, the engineer arrives exactly at 11:53am, just in time to hook on to the crowd going out to lunch. He wants to blend in with the rest of the department so he can get some free food. Like company, like employee.

After lunch the PFY and I let him back into the computer room to see if he knows what he's doing. He flicks a couple of switches on the RAID unit to see if any of them will make the Disk-Fault light extinguish.

When that fails - maybe because the disk has a fault? - he comes up with his carefully considered diagnosis.

"Hmmm. That's interesting," he says. I direct the PFY's eyes to that phrase in the 'Engineer Speak' section of the Bastard Bible: "I have no idea what's wrong."

"So the disk is faulty?" I ask.

"Could be, but I'll need to get my service kit from the car."

The PFY reads the translation to himself: "I need to get XXX from the car/van/courier," equals, "I'm going to bugger off back to the office and hope the call gets re-assigned to another engineer."

"Oh, we've got one here!" I cry, knobbling him completely.

"Oh... great."

Now he's stuck. He's going to have to open the cabinet up and have a poke around. Otherwise we'll know he has no idea. I give him a clue by pointing at the dud disk in the unit.

"So I guess you'll replace that?"

"It's possible," he responds, still avoiding the commitment of having an opinion. "But I'd like to check it over first."

As I take my leave, he prepares the unit for the hot-removal with a hammer. A minute later he's back in our office.

"Have you got a bigger hammer?"

At this stage I feel compelled, if only for my personal sanity, to point out the quick release latches that are preventing the disk's removal. He yanks the drive from its bay and brings it into the control room for a once-over.

"Yeah, as I thought, it's a dry joint on the logic board. I'll just re-solder it."

"I'm about to ruin a piece of your hardware," the PFY reads aloud.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing." The PFY closes the translation chart before the engineer can peer over his shoulder. "Just talking to myself."

He plugs our soldering iron in, letting it melt the mouse pad he's laid it on.

"We'll have it back up in no time," he says happily.

"It's about to become a f***ing expensive paperweight," the PFY reads.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing - just my Tourette's Syndrome kicking in."

Before the soldering iron can work its way through the mouse pad to the table top, I decide to take steps.

"Shouldn't you work on that in the computer room to prevent possible thermal expansion /contraction problems?" I ask.

DUMMY MODE ON.

"Duh... yeah... I was just going to do that. Just making sure the soldering iron was working."

He wanders back into the computer room, then returns a minute later.

"You don't have any solder do you? I seem to have left mine in the car."

"Yeah, sure," the PFY replies, handing over some of our stash.

"Wait!" I cry. "You don't want that - you want the solder with the flux core to act as a catalyst to the soldering bond."

DUMMY MODE IRREVOCABLY ON.

I hand over some chunky stuff that's more suited to plumbing than electronics, and the engineer smiles.

"Cool, I was just going to ask for the catalytic stuff."

He wanders off happily.

"What did you give him that crap for?" the PFY asks. "It's horrible to use and always gives off tons of smo..."

His question is answered as the computer room fire alarm triggers.

We watch through the viewing window for a while as the engineer fumbles with the Halon Hold-Off switch, which some Bastard appears to have epoxy glued open.

Of course, we let him out before he passes out. Just...

Call me Mr Kind-hearted.

When the boss and the PFY both suffer from acute computer acronym dependence, it's time to visit Harley Street to play in the traffic ...

"...So I think the proposal for an ATM network to back up the FDDI backbone ASAP would be appropriate," the boss says.

"I beg your pardon?" I ask, thinking for a moment that I am in some 'twilight zone' replica of my workplace.

"I read your FYI last night on TCP/IP latency. I think we should get the problem solved PQD!"

"I see," I reply, realising what has happened.

I break like the wind to the office and nudge the PFY awake.

"What is it?" he asks.

"It's bad!" I reply, deeply troubled, "I think the boss is suffering from acronym dependence...It's where a non-technical person over-compensates for the lack of intellect by..."

"...over-using acronyms in conversation...And it's most often seen in managers and salesdroids who believe that it gives the impression of computing competence," the PFY completes. "I read your article about it on a bulletin board yesterday at lunchtime."

"You read a bulletin board? In your own time?" I ask, worried.

"Well, yeah," the PFY responds guiltily, "but I was only browsing while waiting for a picture to download from Netscape."

"Smut?" I ask approvingly.

"Uh...no, it was a photo of the layout of the new laptop Pentium Pro motherboard...It's got this really small profile and..."

"Bloody hell! You're worse than the boss! You're computer dependent!"

"No I'm not!" he cries.

"You bloody are! You're reading computing mags at home, aren't you?"

"No..."

"Don't lie to me!"

"Well, maybe a couple, but it's not like I'm addicted. I could give them up any time."

"Yeah, because you only read them socially, right?"

"It's just a couple of magazines! What's the harm in that?"

"So you wouldn't mind your name and photo being submitted to the Geek-Mag blacklist that gets distributed to newsagents?"

"Uh...no." he gulps.

"You've got a machine at home haven't you?"

"What if I have? It's just an old 486 that you told me to dump. It seemed like such a waste, so I..."

"So you took it home! I warned you about the dangers of working in computers! One minute, you're a highly-paid occupant of the planet earth, the next you're a mindless geek scouring ad pages for budget anorak sales. You've got to know when to switch off."

"When's that?" he asks.

"The best time is 10 minutes after you get into work, but in your case I think sterner measures are called for!"

"It's not that bad!" he cries defensively.

"Not that bad? I've seen it happen hundreds of times! One day you're working with a normal human being, the next you've got R2D2 sitting opposite you, talking about how neat it would be to port Linux to his car computer!"

"That's just silly. Linux would never fit into the memory. You'd have to retrofit some SIMMS and then find someone who'd been through the hoops to port the kernel to..."

"See what I mean?" I ask.

"What should I do?"

"Well, in situations like this I normally advise the workmate of the afflicted person to take them to Harley Street."

"Is there a specialist there?"

"No, but the traffic on Euston Road is murder. Literally. If they shunt the afflicted into it...It's the

only way to be sure I'm afraid..."

"There must be some other way!!" he sniffles.

"Well, there is cold turkey."

"You mean, never touch a computer again?!?!?"

"No, I mean real cold turkey - they're serving it at the cafeteria today and I was tampering with the fridge controls again last night. By morning you'll be throwing up so much you won't want to risk going near anything electrical!"

"Can't I just... wean myself off?"

"You mean, like read a book that's almost as geeky - say a trainspotting journal - as a form of computing 'methadone'?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, it's worth a crack. But you'll have to get rid of the mags and machines."

"OK. But don't you have a machine at home?"

"You mean the one work got me for dial-in access?"

"Yeah."

"The top-of-the-line Pentium Pro II with all the fruit?"

"Yeah!" the PFY cries, seeing a 'pot and kettle' scenario ahead.

"Swapped it for a stereo system."

"But what if you get called up in the middle of the night?"

"On the phone that I had disconnected?" I reply.

"Ah."

"Right, I think I made my point! Now, I think it's time you took a couple of weeks' holiday."

"How kind," the PFY sighs. "But where will I go?"

"Somewhere where they know nothing about computing...where they wouldn't know a RAM chip from a potato chip!"

"But I don't want to visit Microsoft!" he whines.

Our conversation is interrupted by the boss who wanders in with a bleeding finger.

"I've just cut my finger on the edge of that BT patch rack. Do you think I'll need a tetanus shot?"

"Hmmm..." I respond. "Why don't you let the PFY take you to a place I know near Harley Street. Be all over in no time..."

That's my problem, you know - always looking after people's welfare...

The PFY is displaying distressing signs of geekism - beer-bottle glasses and the first growth of a wispy beard - can he be saved?

Things are hectic. The Boss is away on sick leave - apparently he tripped in front of the traffic on Euston Road last week when the PFY was taking him to see a specialist, but managed to drag himself to the central traffic island after only being clipped by a couple of cars...

Worse luck.

The PFY, too, is away - ostensibly on holiday - but really because he had a relapse into computer addiction. Apparently he'd barricaded himself inside an Internet cafe with 10 boxes of Mars bars, three cases of Coke and a copy of Steven's Unix Network Programming. By the time they'd cut their way through to him, he'd taken up wearing thick glasses and had the beginnings of a wispy beard.

The psychiatrist had prescribed complete computing-free bed-rest for a couple of days, complemented by dangerously high levels of ECT to snap him out of it.

And, wouldn't you know it, when you're understaffed the calls come through - two the first day, and three the day after that. I assume that because the Boss isn't there to pour oil on troubled waters, the helpdesk are trying it on...

Sigh.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Systems and Networks."

"My machine's making a sort of grinding noise. It seems to be coming from near where the power cord is."

Hmm, what would Lassie do now?

"Somewhere near the fan outlet?"

"Yeah, I suppose it's near there, but I don't know."

"OK, well, get a pencil and poke it in one of the fan holes."

>CATHUNK< "OK, the noise has stopped. Does that mean it's fixed?"

"Sure does!"

"Cool!...Hey, while I've got you on the line, sometimes my machine comes up with memory errors and the technician guy says that it's something about a seating problem with Simms. Does that sound right?"

"Yeah," I chuckle, "I'm sure he did. It's the oldest cop-out in the book. We've been having a couple of problems like that this week, due to..." >flip< >flip< "...stray capacitance, brought about by over-dehumidification."

DUMMY MODE ON!

"Duh-huh. So what do I do?"

"Well, you should probably wait for the technician to come around, but if you're in a hurry, I can give you a temporary overnight solution."

"Uh. What's that?"

"You know what your memory chips look like?"

"The long thin things that plug into the board?"

"Yeah. Well take them out - don't be too worried if you snap off the plastic clips - they're only there for shipping purposes."

"Duh-huh..."

"Wrap them in tin foil to earth the capacitant charge...plug them back into the motherboard."

"Duh-huh..."

"Then switch it on and leave it in overnight!"

"Duh...OK."

"Oh, and make sure the pencil's in place."

"Duh...OK, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

First thing the next day, I get in and the phone is ringing.

"Hello?"

The voice at the other end starts chirping on about fire, health and safety etc., but my attention is diverted by the reappearance of the PFY on deck. The treatment looks as if it was successful, judging by his general lack of interest in his surroundings.

Meantime, the voice on the phone stops, so I respond with, "I'll get right on to it," then hang up.

To get the PFY back into operations mode, I chuck five double-expressos his way, then whip him

downstairs and prime him with a couple of pints and a kebab.

Sorted! I let him straight back into the hot seat by giving him the phone.

"Hello?" He responds to his first call.

Judging by the shouting at the other end, it's my first caller of the day annoyed at the four-hour morning teabreak.

"Yes," the PFY responds, "we were out all morning dealing with the effects of..." >flip< >flip< "...Entropic Disturbance...well, if you understand the scientific explanation of entropy - the universe is exothermic and is actually losing energy all the time - systems are becoming less reliable as the world around them loses its energy. It's a bit like leaving a freezer door open - everything in it starts to thaw out."

Sounds like a full recovery to me!

"We're having a lot of systems problems because of it - printers not printing documents, files missing from hard disks.have you? Well, perhaps you've been affected too...Hmmm, I don't know whether I should tell you, it might be better to get the technician in...OK, well...shut down your machine and lift off the cover. See the big metal box at the back, or maybe along the side?...Right! See there's two holes, one with the letter 'V' beside it and one with the letter 'A' beside it?...well wind those clockwise as far as they go to allow for entropic interference. Right, now wait quarter of an hour for the system to reset itself, then turn it on...Don't mention it. Bye."

"Fancy a pint?" the PFY asks hopefully, grabbing his coat. "We've only got 15 minutes till the fire alarm."

So, in true systems management form, we see a window of opportunity and double-click on it...

The BOFH explains his new 'Management Stack Theory' to the PFY, who seems to take it all with a pinch of salt - until the boss walks in...

"So who's being made redundant again?" the boss asks, breaking the silence of the questions section of my presentation.

The room is silent while the boss and the rest of senior IT management await the answer to this weighty question.

"No one is being made redundant," I fume. "I'm talking about equipment here, routers and switches. I want to replace one router with two switches, which will give us redundancy at head office in that if one switch fails, the other one can take up the core functionality."

"Two switches, doing the same thing," the boss said.

"The same core tasks, yes."

"Like two light switches at either end of a hallway?"

"Sort of like that, yes."

"So if one's up, the other one has to be down for the light to go?"

Sigh.

Later, in Mission Control, I explain the rules of 'Management Stack Theory' to the PFY because he has no idea why the meeting deteriorated so quickly.

"Managers are stack-based," I explain. "Rule one is that they have, at most, a two-item stack limit. Mention a technical term and they'll push it onto their mental stack. Mention another, they push that up there as well. Mention yet another and they stack overload and reboot. That is, they think about what they're going to do after work, how sore their bum is, whether the marketing assistant knows her blouse is almost see-through, and so forth."

"But then they'd be rebooting all the time," the PFY says.

"Afraid not. Rule one, subsection B, deals with Stack Leakage. Technical terms leak from the stack at about one per sentence."

"Oh."

"Rule two of Management Stack Theory is that the frame size on their mental stack is pitifully small - terms are compressed to fit into the available frame. I mention 'Disk seek latency', they hear 'Disky Latex', 'Seek Latex', 'Disk Lazy', or something similar."

"So they didn't get much out of your presentation, is what you're saying? But they can't be that stupid," the PFY comments.

Oh, such innocence...

"Which brings me to rule three of Manager Stack Theory," I cry. "After a manager reboots, Volatile Memory is not zeroed, meaning that the contents are indeterminant. What the manager is left with is a jumble of terms, which, after Manager Internal Logic has finished with it, might become: 'Seek a see-through Latex Blouse'."

"Ah," the PFY doesn't quite believe me.

I can see that some form of proof is required...

"Right, you apply my rules to the following sentences. Use the whiteboard as your Manager Stack."

"OK," the PFY accepts the challenge.

"I think we need some redundant switches."

The PFY dutifully writes redundant switches on the board.

"You forgot rule two," I point out.

The PFY amends it to randy swatches.

"Which we could dynamically route to..."

- dynamo root.

"Which would allow us to multi-home..."

- My bum hurts, writes the PFY, erasing everything before it.

"Correct," I comment. "And what's left in memory after booting?"

"I need a new swatch for the randy man with the root password."

"Sounds reasonable to me."

"And a load of bollocks to me!" the PFY splutters, only to be interrupted midflow by the boss poking his head around the door.

"Yours too?" he asks, noticing the PFY's whiteboard scribbles. "Mine was aching all through that last meeting. Now, which one of you needed the new watch for rooting?"

Vindicated, I smile at the PFY.

"That'll be me," I say, grabbing hold of the tasteful new wrist accessory.

"What was it for again?"

"Oh, I'll be using it to benchmark the L2 cache performance of the new symmetric multiprocessor machines."

REBOOT

If the boss had a console screen option, I'd be watching a memory test at this point...

"I'm sorry, what was that again?" he asks.

"I just said I'll be needing a Dual-ported PC to run my Lempel Ziv compression - apparently it's a new algorithm."

REBOOT

"Cyclic redundancy checking! Electrically erasable EPROM! File read lookahead!" I blurt it all out, before the boss has gathered his wits about him.

The boss has a faraway look in his eyes.

"What happened?" the PFY asks, waving his hand in front of the boss's face.

"I've heard of this. I think he's stuck in reboot mode. He needs a manual reset."

"How the hell do you do that?" The PFY is worried.

"Uh... The male non-maskable interrupt..."

"I couldn't!" The PFY cries.

"It's that or have him stand in front of your desk all day..."

Reluctantly, the PFY kicks the boss in the crotch, and he goes down.

"What happened?" he cries, getting painfully to his feet.

"You just fainted and fell on to the corner of the desk. And you missed the end of my idea about Level 5 RAIDing all our legacy data as a data warehouse repository for the canned queries in the database front-end."

Blankness...

"I think he needs rebooting again." And I take a couple of steps back for the run-up...

The LAGERS invoice should have gone through smoothly - but a turncoat beancounter and a computing audit get in the way...

So, wouldn't you know it - I'm filling one of our 44-inch sheet plotters with toner for about the 10th time this month and it's really GETTING ON MY TITS! And it's always the red toner that needs refilling, which can only mean one thing - someone's lining their bedsit with spank-pic wallpaper.

The culprit isn't hard to find, considering that I keep logs of the size of the colour raster files to determine which plotters will need filling with what toner (and definitely not because pink usage is a good indicator of a potential blackmail candidate.

Except for that sneaky bastard in design who was printing all those midget-fetish pictures, of course, but I tracked him down with the print-time statistics - anyone who uses a full-colour printer after 10:30pm and NEVER during the day is bound to be up to no good.

So the Mission Control Lager Fund, A.K.A RG9030-NSEXOP-002 ("Running Grant, Cost Centre 9030, Non-Standard Expenditure, Operations, Account 2" in beancounter lingo) is looking extra-specially healthy this week.

It's much easier to extort money through a cost-centre transfer - the victim doesn't put up quite the same kind of fight when it's their department's money they're spending and not their own.

In fact, the lager fund is looking so healthy that it's time to "purchase some equipment" for this coming Friday night in case the balance attracts unwanted beancounter attention...

An invoice arrives and I take it to the boss for a signature as the PFY's out on a job.

"What's this for, then?"

"Ah, that's for the purchase of a new...Licensing Attribute Geopositional Accounting Receipt System - LAGERS, for short."

>click<

"A new system. I see. Oh well, best get that, then! But hang on...are you sure this is correct? Only £270?"

A hundred-plus pints is a good shout for the Bastard Operator Club at the best of times, but to allay suspicion, I feel it necessary to ease the boss's mental pain.

"TWO hundred and seventy pounds!?!!" I squeal. "My mistake - it was supposed to be FIVE hundred and seventy pounds."

I make a mental note to order myself a taxi home before I go to the pub as I'm unlikely to be able to find my mobile phone, let alone use the bloody thing by the time I've drunk my share of the "software".

I send the invoice to the beancounters and call up my fellow bastards.

They say the best laid plans of mice and men do something or the other, I'm not really sure as my attention span doesn't run that far, but I'm sure it means something relevant to someone. As far as bastards go, the best laid plans shouldn't be put through bloody beancounters.

It appears there's been a query on the invoice as some bright young beancounter has decided that the Blue Posts is not one of our approved software vendors. That in itself is a piece of the proverbial to cover up as years ago I got a lot of our legit software routed via the local boozier as a back-up plan. The real problem is that a mole inside Beancounter Central, who owes me a few favours (for losing the voice-tape evidence in a harrassment complaint), has indicated that the Lager Fund is going to be audited.

The disturbing news is that they've contracted in a consultant to do the computing audit...

I ring the PFY on his mobile and bring him up to speed. He ducks out to lunch and gets a mate to ring in a non-specific threatening phone call. While he's at it, he orders us a take-out pizza to relieve the boredom at afternoon tea.

Security, bored mindless through months of inactivity, rise to the threat. Doors that were wedged open for months are closed, security passes checked, and building searches activated. Nothing appears out of the ordinary.

I watch with interest as a suited geek-type bloke is met by the head beancounter. They take no chances and use the stairs to get to Beancounter Central...

Now it's a waiting game. The data storage facility van pulls up outside the building right on time, no doubt with a box of back-up tapes recalled by our computing professional to deal with the unfortunate head-crash on the finance database machine. What a coincidence that three disks in a RAID array all failed at the same time! The odds on that must be phenomenal - not that the local bookie's stupid enough to take that bet, of course.

The data tapes, written by some untrusting person in Beancounter Central (which was lucky, as ours

appear to have been lost by our data storage facility), are passed through security and rushed up the stairwell.

Our pizza delivery causes a stir in security, but it scans clean so we ask for it to be delivered to Beancounter Central where we'll pay for it.

"Something's wrong," the turncoat geek is saying to the head beancounter as we roll up. "The tape seems to be stuck in the drive!"

"Try the other drive!" the head man cries, noticing us.

"I did - it's stuck, too!"

Vexed by the apparently temporary delay, his annoyance is directed at us.

"What're you doing here?"

"Just picking up a delivery," I respond, as our pizza turns up.

"BLOODY HELL!" the PFY cries convincingly, "It's scorching hot!!"

"Oh no!" I sigh. "Don't tell me the X-ray parcel scanner is on the blink again. Last time this happened we lost a whole box of...OH NO! DON'T TELL ME YOUR TAPES WENT THROUGH THE SCANNER!"

[Later that same week...]

"UURGGLE MURG HURGRLE," I gasp.

"Sure, that's just off Sloane Square, isn't it?" the cab driver asks, passing me a bucket through the window should I require it.

"Unnnn!" I respond, lapsing into a lager-induced semi-coma.

There's nothing the BOFH likes more than a contractor still wet behind the ears. But even he thinks it's time to show pity when the boss hatches his latest mad scheme...

That's the problem with the head of IT's technical management meetings - because Brownie points are in the offing, the managers get a little over-excited. Things develop into a oneupmanship auction with people, like the boss, throwing in outrageous bids - like claiming that we already have the software to allow anyone in the company to query and order stores across the Web.

"And here's where you'll be situated," the boss burbles as he enters the office with a programming contractor, press-ganged in from an agency at short notice to write the program that the boss lied about already having. Feeling slightly magnanimous towards the poor blighter (after all, he has had a half-hour exposure to the boss's BO during his introduction to the wonders of the photocopying machine - a dose of which is usually fatal) the PFY and I don't put up the expected arguments to the boss's encroachment on our territory.

"Find him a machine to work on will you - something that he can use to finish the development of the Stores Project."

"The Stores Project?" I ask. "Could be tricky - might need a grunty machine for that one..."

"Well, order one then. Get the order to me ASAP!"

The PFY and I spend the next 10 minutes selecting a machine - preferably one that is fully equipped with every possible peripheral and enhancement.

The boss signs the order without a second thought and I fax it through to our local supplier, who rings back to indicate that they're rushing it over immediately.

As soon as it arrives, the PFY and I install some extra airware - in other words, steal all the guts out of it - and pass it on to the new guy in its newly customised state...

Meantime, he's busy partitioning his whiteboard.

"So what are the boxes for?" the PFY asks.

"Well, they represent the three phases of the software life cycle - development, implementation, and feedback," he responds happily.

He's so green he needs mowing...

"Don't tell me, fresh out of programming school?" I ask kindly.

"Well, I have had a bit of experience writing Web apps," he blushes.

"But no real life experience?"

"I..."

The PFY and I sigh in unison as I rub out and draw some arrows.

"The real program life cycle is more like this" I say. "Design, implementation, feedback, implementation, feedback, implementation, feedback, implementation, and so on until you die. If you actually ever get out of the design phase of course."

"So what is your answer?"

"Simple, there's one phase, implementation."

"But there's bound to be feedback."

"Of course there is, which is why most offices come with at least one feedback receptacle per desk that gets filed for you by the cleaning staff every night."

"I don't know. I think I'll do it properly."

"Don't say we didn't warn you."

A day later, the poor bastard still has no idea of what's wanted, so the PFY and I force him to bypass design and lend him a hand to whack together a passable database query and mailing package from the guts of the HR-Web system. He then puts in long hours implementing some fancy utilities for stock control, and so on.

After some careful schooling in the art of software presentation, we release him into the boss's care.

He returns half an hour later with a sick look on his face.

"How did it go?" the PFY asks.

"He didn't even try it. He just wanted me to change the colours of the buttons, the font style and things."

"No surprises there," I comment. "So you changed them?"

"Yeah, but then he wanted to try some different colours."

"Of course he did. And different fonts?"

"Yeah."

"What about the banner - did he want to change that as well?"

"Yeah, he wanted the company logo on the centre and not on the left of the page."

"Don't worry," the PFY responds. "He'll want it back on the left tomorrow. Then on the right the next day. Then the centre again..."

"What am I going to do?" he snuffles. "He didn't even want to see it in action."

"He just said it was fine as it was and signed off your contract?" I ask knowingly.

"Yeah, that's it. All I have to do is finish the aesthetics and my contract's over."

The demoralisation of having his skill and expertise reduced to colours and fonts is obviously taking a toll on the poor bloke.

"Yep, he doesn't care what it does, so long as it looks good. Now you did say what we told you?"

"Yeah. I said it was a test version and not ready for release yet."

"Good, which means he's probably given the URL to the head of IT already."

"And he will have passed it on to all the other heads of department," the PFY adds.

"But it's not even finished," he sobs, obviously upset at the thought of producing a buggy piece of code. "I'd really like to make it work properly."

I can see this is a job for a professional...

Two days (and 5,000 rolls of toilet paper delivered to the home of the boss and the head of IT) later, our green and keen contractor is back working on the project.

I'm more than pleased to see that his feedback basket is full of loads of design suggestions in the boss's handwriting.

He may well work out to be all right after all...

There's nothing the BOFH and PFY love more than a challenge - except for violence. And the boss's devious plan calls for quite a bit of the latter...

"Hi, this is Sonya, David's PA, and he's got some stuff he wants me to sort out before he gets back."

"David?"

"Your boss."

"Is that his name? He doesn't have a PA."

"He does now. He read how good they are at clarifying..."

I switch off while the benefits of PA-dom are explained in full. I'm a little concerned as this means the boss has been reading management periodicals during his recovery from non-specific stress disorders.

Surprising how some people react to a couple of hundred volts administered to the testicles through the seat of a wheelie chair...

Sadly, the appearance of a PA on the scene has put a rather large spanner in the works of the PFY and I, who were planning to use the boss's absence to steal a foot of his office to lengthen the computer room - a simple job when you have a team of builders that owe you a favour.

Bugger!

"How can I help you, uh..."

"Sonya," she snaps, a little miffed that her name has already slipped from my short-term memory. (Just using mental-cache wisely.)

"Of course. Now, how can I help you, uh..."

"SONYA!" She snaps again. "David wants me to audit the purchases he's signed off, to make sure they've all been delivered."

"That would have been done when the items were delivered," I've already sussed the boss's plan. Lacking the bottle to find out if the PFY and I have been stealing the equipment we've ordered, he's put some new blood on to it - someone who doesn't know what happened to those who've

gone before. Mind you, she could probably visit a couple of them when she goes to see the boss.

"He thought it best to make sure, so if you could just run off a printout of the orders..."

"Well, I'd like to, but unfortunately the database had a major disk fault, and we lost everything."

"When was this?" She asks. "Because I was only on the database 10 minutes ago and it seemed all right - though I don't have access to the purchasing stuff."

"As a matter of fact it just happened," I say as I hand the PFY the rubber panel-beating hammer we keep especially for emergency disk failures.

"What about a previous printout from back-up?" She asks.

"All old printouts go to security shredding services once they've been used, and the back-up system has a tape jammed in its drive," I say, passing the PFY a suicide cartridge (full of epoxy resin) as well.

"So there are no records?"

"The boss - David - has printed records, and stores have an inwards goods printout. I'm sure you could match those up - it's a bit of a job, but it'd all work out in the end."

A sniffle sounds on the earpiece as she puts the phone down.

"Something terrible has happened!" the PFY cries, in mock horror, as he enters the room.

"I'm sure it has," I reply, as I plan the future. First things first, I dial in to the private institution that's looking after the boss and figure a way into their server. 'Freud', the third administrator password attempt I try, works...

I make a couple of modifications to the boss's patient record, changing 'history of violence' from 'nil' to 'extreme', and, the real killer, changing his 'charge to' field from 'medical insurance' to 'NHS' - guaranteeing that he'll be strapped into an iron bed in the budget basement wing in no time at all. Sure, he'll be released back into the community, 'cured', after three ECT sessions, but what the hell!

He misses out on the expensive NHS treatment when I find that it's not a quid per volt - NHS might have gone as high as 10K were that the case...

While I'm at it, I toggle the 'allow visitors' field - he'll probably need his rest.

"What's the problem?" the PFY asks curiously. "I thought we weren't nicking any kit this quarter?"

"We're not, but a careful perusal of the books might find that a lot of kit has been paid for twice - once by our department, and once by the department it was destined for. It was when they were changing cost centres around and no one knew who was supposed to be paying for things..."

"So you kept the dosh?"

"No, no - that would just draw attention to ourselves. No, I got two lots of kit and used the second

lot to update all the machines in the data pool."

"The same all-women data pool that sent you the birthday card and cake?"

"Might be..."

"With the invite to birthday drinkies?"

"Yes, that rings a bell for some reason."

"The day after which you arrived to work, late, in a cab with a couple of the aforementioned women?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose so! Was there a point to this?"

"Oh nothing," the PFY mutters, wandering off.

The next day, who should arrive at work but the boss. By his glazed expression I can tell he certainly got the NHS's money's worth of electricity, which just goes to show that the mental health situation isn't as bad as everyone says it is. As luck would have it, he's in a signing mood, too - if you hold his hand and arm for him and stop him dribbling on the ink before it's dry. So we write his PA a nice reference letter, give her two weeks' notice, and order the data pool a whole set of gas-operated chairs - what the hell, it's the PFY's birthday soon.

I just love happy endings.

So much so, I plug the boss's chair back into the 24 hour timer...

The game's the thing by which to humiliate the Boss but it serves him right for getting the Head of IT's fancy woman to do the shopping... war and peace as usual

It is truly pathetic! Having successfully repelled the invasion of the PAs, I feel ready to claim the peaceful spoils of war.

Until, that is, the head of IT, designer-coloured cellphone and laptop, brand-spanking-new company convertible car, appoints the boss's former PA to the position of "executive liaison officer".

I am sure that this has absolutely nothing to do with the long lunchtime rides she takes with him in the aforementioned convertible. It is easy to see how her previous two days' experience has her thoroughly versed in the ins and outs, so to speak, of IT.

"She's excellent!" the boss cries, defending his ex-assistant.

"Excellent?" I cry. "She couldn't count her bum cheeks and come up with the same number twice..."

"She must know something about IT to get appointed!" the boss responds, ignoring my comments.

"Of course...And how long did it take her to get her desktop machine going again?"

"The power switch is quite difficult to find!" he replies defensively, loyal as a terrier.

"Yes - the switch on the front of the machine is deceptively prominent..."

The boss realises that this conversation is sinking faster than the Titanic and absents himself. Issue unresolved, I expect bad things to follow...

My fears are confirmed when she buys a swag of cheap network computers at bargain basement prices. This poorly researched decision has obtained the official stamp of approval, followed by a purchase order on my desk for a 'technical sign-off'. I stuff it into the shredder quicker than the average user can say "Where's my file gone?".

The boss is on the job even faster.

"These network computers are great!" he says. "Sonya's just been proselytising us."

"Really? I can't say I approve, but hey, what's good for Amsterdam is good for London!" I cry.

"No. I mean she's converted us."

"So you're all prostitutes? Wouldn't quit the day job if I were you!"

"I'm talking about network computers!" he snaps.

"Of course! And the prostitution?"

"There's no bloody prostitution!!"

"Of course there isn't! Walls have ears and all that," the PFY murmurs, winking.

The boss gives up and resumes his tack...

"Anyway, these NCs are great because they act just like PCs without disks!" he cries.

"They don't boot?" the PFY asks.

"No!" the boss responds, "They load everything from a server."

"Sort of like a dumb terminal we used to have 10 years ago, except with graphic and sound capabilities?"

"Uh...no, faster, and in colour!!"

"You mean like those X-terminals we threw out and replaced with PCs three years ago?" I ask.

"Uh...not exactly."

"So a desktop machine dependent on a server is better than an independent desktop PC in what way again?"

"Um...because we'll never need to upgrade the equipment!"

"Never?"

"No, it'll be like a colour TV set!" the boss blurts triumphantly, "Once you've got one, it'll never need upgrading - because everything comes from the station?"

"Not even when the software wants to make use of whizzy new features like Nicam stereo, Dolby surround and wide screen?"

"Uh...no..."

"What about when they bring out faster chips, better mice, tablets, scanners and software that needs them?"

"Look, we're bloody buying some, so sign off on them!" the boss shouts. Cornered by logic, he produces from nowhere a duplicate of the shredded purchase order, patience at an end.

What the hell. I scrawl out a signature. Not mine, of course, but who's to know? Except the boss, should someone check it against his...

"In fact," the boss continues, "you should be using the same technology as the users, so I'll send a couple to the control room as well."

BASTARD!

On arrival they are dispatched to the test cases in various departments. The PFY and I get ours into gear as well and the carnage commences!

SNMP management is a damn fine tool for network computers, especially when it lets you reboot them remotely. I patch a game of Network Doom with sprites of the users' faces and get the kills piped to the SNMP reboot command...

I ring the users and tell them, to give them as much of a chance as you can get using the server copy of the game which only lets you pick up a handgun with one round of ammo. Still, a beancounter can get good at pistol shooting when two hours of spreadsheet work is at stake and you have to win a game in order to ungrey the SAVE button (another little patch).

By Friday, the results are in. Surprisingly enough, the NCs weren't a hit with the users and were replaced with PCs after only four days.

Oh, and 327 kills...

The boss gets a slapped wrist for signing them off, the head of department's little helper receives a pay rise regardless (salary really is performance-linked), and the PFY and I get back to normal.

"I was thinking about a PC version of that game," the PFY comments later.

"You mean the same game, except that it causes the Pentium Hang bug on their desktop machine?"

"You mean you've thought of it?"

"Thought of it, installed it, and am waiting for players with a chaingun!"

Sigh. Once more into the fray...

The millennium bomb has nothing on BOFH's boss who, on the strength of just one pint, manages to blow BOFH's cover sky high...

So I'm sitting at a presentation by some American bloke who's an expert on Year 2000 problems.

Now, far be it from me to come over all sanctimonious about someone seeing a chance of good old-fashioned graft and seizing it with both hands, but at least he could make the bloody talk entertaining. It's as interesting as watching nail polish dry - which is, in fact, what I'm doing - on the hands of an attractive young systems professional beside me.

Up until morning tea-time, when her common sense takes over and she does a runner. That's the trouble these days, no one has any commitment. Except the boss, of course, who catches me trying to sneak out to the pub we'd agreed to meet up in.

"Hurry up!" he cries "or you'll miss the bit on..." (scrabble scrabble) "...the necessity to re-engineer Cobol-based Database Query Forms."

Now as far as I'm concerned, there are only two ways we'll be re-engineering any of the crap written in Cobol, and they are:

A) With the "rm-rf" command, except that the operating system of the era (before RSI [or the fear of dying of old age before you'd got to the end of a command] was a worry) this translates to: "DELETE/ERASE/NO CONFIRM [...]*. *;*" or, my personal preference:

B) With an axe.

Anyway, seeing as how I've been busted, I figure I'm going to have to no-show at the boozier until the Boss drifts off to sleep.

Quarter of an hour later and I'm in the pub, chatting over the freshly polished nails of a systems safety engineer.

"So what does a systems safety engineer do?" I ask, engaging her immediately in geek-talk.

"Well, it involves all aspects of software and hardware safety. I deal with privacy and security as well as software design and testing with the aim being to ensure that no person of institution comes to harm - physically/mentally/ financially - from the operation of a computer or its software. It's a very interesting role, as you have to be constantly aware of."

My mind clicks off as I attempt to hide my distress from her - and not just because she feels users are worth saving. The worst has just occurred to me. SHE IS THE ANTI-BASTARD!

Immediately I start edging away from her to a point where I know we're not in any danger of accidentally touching. I remember my theoretical physics well enough to know what happens when

matter and anti-matter collide...

"So what do you do?" she asks, "Well, I'm a systems and networks administrator."

"And what brought you to the Y2K presentation?" she asks, expecting a response laden with altruism and concern for users.

"Well, I'm just here to ensure that our users aren't affected by any potential problems that might occur before, during and after the turn of the century..." I respond, simultaneously hating myself for being such a brown-noser, while mentally congratulating myself on a first class piece of spadework.

I just can't help myself.

"Really?" she gushes, happy to find a kindred spirit among the masses of computing professionals she's undoubtedly met in the past. "Oh yes," I cry, "You have NO IDEA the lengths my assistant and I have to go to just to ensure that users get what they need." She's thinking systems handholding, and I'm thinking of a swift kick in the unmentionables, but as I said, it's unmentionable, so I let her keep thinking along those lines. What the hell, those physics geeks might be wrong... We chat for a bit, and then wouldn't you know it, like a bad smell on a northerly breeze, in blows the boss.

This can only mean one thing...

"There's no free lunch!" he cries, disheartened. "Yeah, I thought I'd pop down here for one," I answer, placating him with the offer of a lager, thus reinforcing the "bloody good bloke" theme while simultaneously bearing in mind the boss's rating as a "one lager to lift-off man".

I enhance the effect with a vodka top, which means he should be under the table inside 15 minutes. I get back from the bar and the boss is overflowing with bonhomie at my purchase of a beer.

About halfway through his pint I realise my fatal mistake.

"Let's get wassisname down here!" he cries, to no one in particular, rummaging around in his coat for his mobile phone. He dials up the PFY and extracts a promise of his attendance. BUGGER.

Having spoiled my chances of a quiet 57 G&Ts alone with my guest, he continues on his trail of destruction. "Great bastard this," he cries, bursting with affection for me. "Remember the time that user asked for a hot spare disk, so you heated one up in the furnace and dropped it in his lap?" I'm busy making lager-tipping motions in the background when the boss lurches once more down memory lane. "Or that time you told that accountant that his chair was picking up static so he'd have to earth it - AND GOT HIM TO PLUG HIS CHAIR INTO THE LIVE TERMINAL! HA HA HA!"

So it's just me and the boss by the time the PFY gets there. Mind you, the boss is only semi-conscious by now, so it only takes about 10 seconds to fill the PFY in. I buy the boss a parting drink then pour him, glass and all, into a taxi home.

"I have to say, you took that bloody well," the PFY says.

"Forgive and forget," I cry magnanimously. "Besides, just about now he's going to figure out that his drink isn't lager."

"Number ones?" the PFY asks

"Don't be disgusting!" I cry, offended. "It's a warm fish milkshake - just the thing for a queasy stomach..."

A newcomer named Sharon, a safety retrofit and a GPS transmitter leaves the BOFH on course for sipping tequila in the sun...

"Yes, we've already met," the newcomer announces, as she enters Mission Control with the boss. "At the Y2K thing last week. Don't you remember? I met you at lunch."

"My memory of events is...a little hazy," the boss burbles.

"Yes," I interrupt, "unfortunately it appears that he was set upon by an angry taxi driver after dropping two pints, a plate of chips and a fish milkshake on to the front seat of a cab after the event. By way of his stomach."

"Be that as it may," the boss cries, seizing back the mantle of the conversation. "Sharon here rang and offered to check out our systems for potential risks - you know, company liability, software and hardware oversights that may lead to injury or other accidents, overall security, and so on."

How bloody thoughtful of her.

"Anyway," the boss continues, "I'm sure you'll give her any help she requires. OK, time we were moving on to the next stop, which is the head of our department."

The boss and our new computing safety consultant wander off in the direction of the head's orifice while the PFY scurries over.

"What does it mean?" he asks, well aware of the part the boss played in alienating me from Sharon's good books at our last meeting. Thanks to him, getting back into Sharon's good books would require spadework of back-hoe proportions.

"I'm not sure," I respond, "but I think it means trouble."

The next day my words are proved true when Sharon's analysis of the site accident logs points one or two bloodstained fingers in the direction of Systems and Networks.

"These things are supposed to be fitted with earth leakage detectors," she cries, investigating the power points of the serviceman's workbench which have sent more than one unfortunate engineer off to the sick bay for some burns cream. (While the PFY and I rifle through his toolkit, of course.)

"Ah, no, we use a different leakage detector for this," I say, pointing at a faceplate on the bench. "Faeces and urine - cuts the power the moment someone loses control of their bodily functions."

"That's ridiculous," Sharon cries "And anyway, you can't test it."

"I test it every month," the PFY cries indignantly.

"He certainly does," I concur. "He downs a jar of pickled onions then tests the desk when his digestion says so."

Having no comeback for this one, Sharon moves on to investigate how the freight elevator came to be on the 6th floor when a trolley full of user equipment was pushed through the doors on the 5th floor by the PFY.

I could say it was standard procedure to stop the boss offering our services as porters, but instead murmur something unconvincing about PLU controllers being affected by spikes.

By the end of the day Sharon has reached the conclusion I desire - our kit needs a safety retrofit. That, combined with the glossy mags on 'Systems Safety' that the Boss discovered in his briefcase (outlining the benefits of the equipment produced by a corporation in the US), is more than enough to hint at junket time.

"I don't think that is at all necessary," Sharon responds, upon hearing the boss's plan. "Everything we need can be sourced locally."

"We should investigate all options," the boss cries, not inclined to miss out on a junket to the States.

According to plan the boss attempts to add credibility to his junket by suggesting that we all go "to cover all technical bases".

And the boss does know best.

The plane lifts off and the PFY and I get into the drinks ASAP while Sharon wanders up to business class to curry some more of the boss's favour.

"I don't get it," says the PFY.

"SOP for a boss," I respond. "If you want something, get it for someone else 'for technical reasons' then it looks that much more legitimate if you get yourself one. Cellphones, laptops, you name it!"

"What are we going to do when we get there?"

"I plan to drink tequila at a beachside bar."

"I don't think there are beaches in Ohio."

"Ohio?" I cry, "We're not going to Ohio. Not after the hijack anyway."

"You're going to hijack the plane?" the PFY hisses. "You're not serious?"

"Deadly."

"But..."

"Oh don't worry, there's no gunplay. Just track one of this CD," I murmur calmly, holding up my portable CD player.

"It's a CD player!"

"Ostensibly yes, but also... a mini GPS transmitter."

"You're screwing with the plane's guidance system?"

"I prefer the term 'having a meaningful encounter'. This little baby will shortly start pumping out some low-wattage GPS information - information the plane will use to get its flight path. And, over the course of the journey, the information will deviate slightly - because if I do it all at once the pilot might notice."

"You'll never get away with it," the PFY whispers discouragingly.

"Of course I will. Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Uh, last week when you told me the power was off when I was replacing the fuse in that rack. The week before when you told me that all the ducting has door handles on the inside, so it would be all right to shut the door."

"I let you bloody out, didn't I?"

"After you'd drunk all the lager I'd found in the boss's locker."

And so it is that I'm sitting in a South American bar, drinking tequilas while the boss tries to get us a return flight to civilisation. Thanks to the super-spadework I put in when we almost ran out of fuel because of the extra miles, Sharon is my new best mate.

To escape the boredom of routine, the BOFH volunteers to man the Helldesk. But does he still have his special touch with the users?

It's a quiet afternoon when the boss slips in unobtrusively and shuffles over to my desk.

"Just want you to know that I sorted out that little Helpdesk roster mix-up," he mentions quietly.

"What little Helpdesk mix-up?" I ask.

"Oh, some practical joker had written your name in the roster to cover the Helpdesk during their team building week."

"Yes, that was me. Tomorrow from midday till five wasn't it? I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Ah!" the boss cries, no doubt ducking off to press the speed-dial button for the company's insurance broker.

The Pimple-Faced Youth is obviously confused about this - there's nothing in the Helldesk area left to steal because we did all that the last time security had its CCTV system repaired. The truth of the matter is that I'm bored. Bored, bored, bored.

Heeding the advice that a change is as good as a rest, I've signed up for a tour of duty at Idiot Central. Besides, I want to know if I still have what it takes to deal with users on a routine basis.

The next day dawns and after lunch I head directly to the Helldesk to do my best to, I mean for, the users. To be honest, it's not half as bad as I'd expected - things are pretty quiet.

In the end I put the phones back on the hook, and three lines light up immediately. I pick one at random and answer it.

"Hi, look, my machine's smoking a little, and there's a burning smell. It was really noisy this morning when I turned it on, so should I turn it off?"

"No. No need to worry - we had a little bit of equipment fail in the comms room this morning, so it's probably just the smoke and the smell coming down the lines."

"Is there anything I should do?"

"Not really, I'd just shut your office door and go to afternoon tea early until the smoke clears - it'll probably take an hour or so."

"Hey, hang on, why isn't it affecting the other machines?"

"Because you're on the hot back-up server for your department, the one that got too hot, as it happened."

"Oh, of course I am!" he gushes, gasping thanks and ducking off for an early break.

Now that I'm on limited time (till the fire alarm and sprinklers cut in) I take the last two calls as quick as I can).

"Hi," a secretary from PR chirps, "every time I try to send e-mail my program comes back and says something about a DNS thingy."

"Was it something like 'DNS look-up error'?"

"Yeah...I think so..." she mumbles.

"Oh dear." I sigh. "I'm really sorry."

"What is it?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"No, what?"

"Well DNS stands for Database of Names and Salaries."

"I don't understand."

"Well, if it can't look you up to send your e-mail, it must mean you've...been fired. Or you're about to be."

"But I've only been here a couple of months!"

"Yes, and I bet you turned down your boss when he asked you out to lunch too, didn't you?" I ask, playing a hunch based solely on the fact that the guy concerned wears babe-magnet labelled clothes and drives a convertible. And he's a loud-mouthed flashy git at staff functions. Not that I'm jealous...

"But I couldn't make it because I had to arrange my bank payments!" she snuffles, falling for it hook, line and sinker.

"Well," I respond kindly, "for what it's worth it was good working with you...unless of course..."

"Unless what?"

"Well, you could go and see the complaints officer in personnel and say that he threatened your job unless you...you know."

"Unless I what?"

"Checked out his firmware, so to speak."

"What!"

"Well it's up to you. If you wait till you're fired they'll just think you're making excuses. But if you pre-empt it, and mention nothing about the DNS stuff they'll think your accusations are true."

"Do you think it would work?"

"I would think so. It's happened before. You were just one of the lucky ones..."

"I suppose you're right. OK, I'll do it. Thank you very much for your advice."

"Don't mention it." I respond, moving on to caller three while gesturing to the PFY so he can record the head of PR's "resignation" later in the afternoon.

"Hi, my Linux box won't seem to mount a CD in it. It says that it must be mounted read-only. What's the parameter to tell it to mount read-only?"

"Ah Linux relies on hardware write locking. You have to write lock the disk itself."

"Huh? I've never heard of that before!"

"Most operating systems do it in software. It's because Linux has cache-based hardware architecture open compliance," I say, calling up as many buzzwords as possible to foil the Unix geek.

Dummy mode on.

"So what do I do?"

"Just make a 3mm hole - no larger - in the CD, right in the middle of the label, that's where it

expects write protect. And make sure it's 3mm and exactly in the middle, or you might hit the Read Protect hole too."

"Oh...OK..."

He rings off without asking why the hell anyone would have read-protected disks, obviating the need for me to explain WORN technology to him (Write Once, Read Never - just like the floppies).

As the fire alarm goes, I total up the day: off work early because of fire, one less git at social functions, and one foiled geek.

Yep, I've still got what it takes!

Will the BOFH use Roboboss again in this year's gladiatorial clash with the R&D boys? Or will the Mutant Floor Polisher win the demo-derby?

So it's all on! Networks and Systems versus R&D. No, not some trivial contest like 'guess who can get the most laxative into the other team's water cooler without being noticed' - although that's fun too, especially when you have a contact put it in at the factory. This is a game of champions - Robowars!

The Pimply-faced Youth and I are competing against Research and Development in an annual contest of skill and technology. The rules are simple: both teams enter one or more robots into the competition - robots which must find their way out of a fairly simple maze constructed of passages and rooms in the sub-basement of the building.

The PFY is particularly excited as this is his first time in the competition.

"So this is a yearly event?" he asks, helping me put together our mechanical entrant.

"Since last year, yes."

"I don't remember it."

"No, I think you were in Mr Happy mode at the time."

"What?"

"On a jolly."

"Oh. How did we do?"

"Well, as far as I was concerned, we'd won fair and square - none of R&D's seven robots were left, however, there was a bit of a protest lodged about my robot."

"Why?"

"Aaaaahhhh, because it was basically the boss with a car aerial strapped to his back, blundering

around in the basement trying to find his new laptop."

"And he won?"

"Yeah, there wasn't a laptop and when his enthusiasm waned I switched the lights off and the fire alarm on, and he picked up speed dramatically."

"And what was their protest?"

"Well, there were two actually - the first being that the boss running blindly around caused the destruction of most of the competition (which, incidentally, helped us win the demo-derby event by default) - and the second being that the boss wasn't a robot."

"So what happened?"

"Well, I showed them that, to all intents and purposes, he was a robot - he had a limited and very simple instruction set; you have to punch information into him and without it he can't think for himself..."

"I see. So why don't we enter him this year?"

"Ah. Well, the restrictions are somewhat tighter now. The robot has to be based on the processor board that R&D designed for those automatic floor polishers."

"The ones that are supposed to drift randomly around the building at night?"

"The very same."

"So what's all this crap for?" he asks, pointing at enough hardware to start my own hardware company.

"Well, part of the event is the demolition derby where the surviving robot takes line honours. My thinking is that the bigger the robot, the more chance it has of still being mobile at the end."

"So you're using a machine rack laid on wheels?"

"Yes: a) It won't attract much undue attention in the basement before the competition, and b) The rules say it has to be battery-powered, and I need quite a lot of power to keep the circular saw blades spinning, and c) It's a four foot-long steel chassis. It's going to make it through the demo-derby - especially considering the largest of the opposition robots comes to just over axle height on it."

"Where are you going to get all the batteries to run it?"

"Oh, I whipped those out of the UPS last night."

"Didn't anyone notice?"

"No, I chucked it into bypass mode - not even a glitch. Anyway, all that remains now is for me to install the polisher board with its bastardised maze-solving program, add the batteries and chuck in a little ballast..."

"Magic!"

Three nights later, the R&D boys are down in the basement setting up their robots while the PFY and I sit around on ours. Smart money seems to be centred on a small robot nicknamed "Reggie" because of its rapid cornering ability.

"Actually, I think they've got a point," the PFY mumbles, seeing a warm-up demonstration. "It's much quicker to corner than this thing will be."

"Au contraire!" I respond. "You're forgetting two things I didn't tell you about; one: with the 20 UPS batteries and the four-wheel, rare-earth-element-magnet motors on this baby..."

"five..." the starter counts down.

"...it's got phenomenal acceleration itself..."

"four..."

"But it's still going to be a pain to corner!"

"three..."

"That was point two: with all the weight inside that solid steel chassis..."

"two..."

"Yes?"

"one..."

"It would be a waste of time cornering in the first place..."

"Go!"

Ten minutes later the PFY and I are at the pub. Admittedly, the plan of driving straight through walls wasn't one of the more orthodox ways of solving mazes, but it proved successful nonetheless.

"Who'd have thought the robot would run amok in demo-derby mode and circular saw through the mains cable?" I ask the PFY.

"Who indeed?" the PFY asks, fingering the prize money that the R&D blokes were too busy to collect in their panic... "It could have chased R&D around the building..."

"No, no!" I cry. "Got to save some surprises for next year..."

**While the PFY's holding a torch for Carole, someone is putting a torch to the Welsh office.
But nothing compares with the Master Plan...**

It's early morning when the Boss rips into the office in a foul mood.

"All right, which of you bastards told the consultant in the Welsh office that you can't recover a hot database back-up from a cold tape?"

"I beg your pardon?" I ask in all innocence, knowing full well that my conscience is clear. (In other words, it was the Pimply-faced Youth.)

"Which of you told the Welsh IT consultant he'd have to heat the 8mm tapes up in a toaster before he could recover their billing database from it?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" I cry, furthering my claim of innocence without implicating the PFY in any way.

"Don't give me that crap! You almost set the office on fire last night after you told him to put a ream of printer paper on top and tape the toaster lever down!"

"I did no such thing!" I shout, mentally toasting the PFY's ingenuity.

Ten minutes later and the PFY and I are left to our own devices.

"Well done," I tell the PFY, once I'm sure we're not being observed.

"What do you mean? I was just about to congratulate YOU!" the PFY bumbles.

"So you're saying it wasn't you?"

"No!" the PFY blurts.

"Then who the hell was it?" I wonder out loud.

"There's no way to tell?"

"Don't be silly. Grab the voice recorder tapes from yesterday while I crank up the phone logs."

"What phone logs? I thought we only recorded the trading lines."

"As far as anyone else is concerned, we don't keep phone logs - it's not possible."

"And as far as we're concerned?"

"Every call, duration, and destination plus its position in the voice recorder tapes. And as for the tapes - liberal use of the muting functions makes it appear that we're only recording the traders."

"And in actual fact?"

"All but one line is potentially recorded..."

"All but one?"

"The one in the comms cupboard labelled "Faxmodem" that we use for our international personal

calls."

A mere quarter hour later we've tracked the offending incoming call from Wales. A quick earful of the conversation identifies the offender as the latest recruit to the helpdesk - one who, apparently, had all the hallmarks of a servile practitioner of computing aid at her interview.

I place a call through to the helpdesk operator concerned, introduce myself and play back the recording to her.

A non-committal silence greets my revelations while the PFY scans the access-card database to put a face to the name.

"Ah, I'll take this one if you like," he blurts, tilting the screen away from me so I can't see the results of his look-up.

This would have worked had I not installed PC-Anywhere with a permanent window to his screen. A glance is more than enough to determine the source of the PFY's new-found liaison-based altruism.

"I s'pose I can go and fix Carole's screen while you're doing it," I respond.

"There's nothing wrong with Carole's screen!" the PFY cries, well aware that my exposure to Carole, his long-term love interest, at this juncture, could prove extremely painful to him. Especially if I were to drop the phrase "debriefing the new helpdesk stunner" in response to her enquiries on his whereabouts...

"No, but better safe than sorry. Off you go, I'll handle it."

"You bastard," he mutters in defeat.

"In the flesh, in your home directory, and rifling through your e-mail!" I cry, starting my victory walk to the helpdesk area.

A quick interview with the woman concerned reveals a kindred spirit - a config geek, who only took the helpdesk role because it paid the bills...

"So you're not too pleased with the users?"

"Just the Welsh ones. They've got no tech support and all their equipment still has luggage labels from the ark."

"Yeah, it's the filter-down approach. All our old stuff goes to the Scotland office, all their old stuff goes to Wales."

"It's a pain in the arse and having a consultant who can't tell one end of a power cable from the other is too."

"But there is a way forward." I respond, outlining a plan that's forming in my head...

Two days later the PFY is browsing the boss's outgoing e-mail when...

"Bloody hell!" he blurts. "That helpdesk woman's been transferred to tech support Wales! They must have found out about the phone calls. That's cruel."

"No," I respond. "She wanted to go. She's worked out that once she gets the place shipshape and puts some new kit in, she can telecommute from London..."

Our conversation is interrupted by the entry of the boss.

"Just thought I'd come in and apologise. It seems I was a bit hasty the other day in accusing you of sabotaging the Welsh office."

"Oh yes?" I respond.

"Yes, it appears that the technical consultant in Wales was a pyromaniac - security caught him last night spraying lighter fluid in the back of their apps server. His excuse was that someone from the helpdesk had called and said the CPU heatsink was getting too cold."

"Terrible."

"I know. Anyway, just thought I'd fill you in," he sighs, leaving the room...

"Onward VBGN!" I cry.

"VBGN?!"

"Virtual Bastard Global Network. My Master Plan!"

"Uh-Ohhh..."

The BOFH and PFY attend a 'bored' meeting, everyone gets bladdered and the boss gets to 'chair' an assembly of overheated shareholders...

So the PFY and I have been roped into going to a shareholders' meeting as technical standby in case someone asks the boss a difficult question that he can't manage (like, "where's the space bar?").

There's a stuffy half-time wine and nibbles event to ensure a cheery mood and that the shareholders' views match those of current management.

"Mmm, an '89 Cab. Sav. if I'm not much mistaken," a distinguished gent to my left burbles to a fellow member of the Old School Tie classes.

"I think you'll find it's actually a '90 Cab. Sav.," his counterpart chuckles knowingly.

"Really?" the Pimply-faced Youth blurts. "I thought it was an '88 Ford Grenada - the Ghia version with the leather seats and the wood panelling!"

You have to forgive him - he always gets a little boisterous after being locked in a meeting for over

an hour. I'm a little fidgety myself...

I drag him away from civilised company while simultaneously tampering with the airconditioning (courtesy of an RF transmitter hanging out of the back of my personnel disorganiser). Within 10 minutes the place is heating up and dehumidifying nicely and all attempts at resetting the airconditioning meet with failure. (Which is the price you pay for leaving the unit's remote PIN number at the factory default.) After some whispered conversation with the catering staff, the CEO okays anything that'll stop the parched shareholders getting nasty.

And wouldn't you know it - there's 12 cases of lager packed in the boardroom's catering chiller, awaiting the company yacht club's victory celebration...

Twelve cases of ice-cold beer later, the meeting is coming along nicely. Feeling magnanimous, the shareholders have demanded that management approve an across-the-board pay rise for all salary, wage and contract workers - effective immediately. Striking while the iron is hot, I get them to get management sign-off on 100 "urgent desktop upgrades" of machines with "all the fruit". The boss, who would normally head this off at the pass - also known for his lack of tolerance to even mild amounts of alcohol, is circulating hot-off-the-press photocopies of his backside - still thankfully encased in boxer shorts.

Security moves in gently about halfway through the "long jump" event (an occupied wheelie chair pushed full tilt up a ramp made by breaking the legs off one end of the boardroom table).

Apparently a participant 'abandoned chair' before lift-off resulting in two broken windows - one in the boardroom, and one in a black cab parked below.

The next day rumours are rife - the word has got around the building about who's to thank for a projected pay increase.

Feeling like the modern equivalents of Robin Hood, the PFY and I accept thanks humbly. Lao Tsu would be proud of us.

Our fame is to be shortlived, however, as there's an emergency shareholder meeting to put right the excesses of the previous night.

It's bad. The annulments are coming in fast, and we arrive just in time to hear our upgrade plan sink beneath the waters of a corporate cover-up.

"Ah," I interject, as the motion is put, "would this be a bad time to mention that I've already ordered the approved equipment last night?"

"Well un-order it then!" a voice advises.

"Then we'd have to pay a restocking penalty of 10 per cent..."

Ten per cent being a better loss than 100 per cent, the motion is passed and the PFY and I take off to cancel the order.

"But you didn't put in an order!" the PFY blurts, knowing that the only real work I did last night was negotiate the revolving door to get to a cab.

"No, no, but when I order 10 machines, to be charged to us as 'Restocking Fee', delivered to the Welsh office..."

"Oh!" The PFY cries. "The Virtual Bastard Global Network is one step nearer!"

"What Virtual Bastard Global Network?" the boss asks, stepping into the office.

"Virtual Bastard Global Network?" I ask innocently.

"Yes...what you were talking about just then."

"Oh, you mean the Virtual Bartercard Global Network?" I ask, clutching at the first straw
"For...electronic transactions?"

"No, I think I got it right the first time. You engineered all this for new machines for some Global Network of your own design. I think the shareholders might like to hear this."

I'm shocked. The boss, who normally couldn't put two and two together and get a number less than 22, has hit the nail on the head. He knows too much.

While I'm twiddling with my personnel disorganiser, the boss tells the PFY to extract himself from the security console and join him and me in the boardroom.

Pleading claustrophobia in lifts, I take the stairs.

Ten minutes and three floors later, the boss wheezes to a halt outside the boardroom, having lost his asthma inhaler down the stairwell when the PFY accidentally bumped into him. We open the door and enter.

"Thank God you got the door open!" someone gasps as the wave of heat hits us. "The door's locked from the inside and the aircon's on the blink again. Don't close it!"

Twelve replacement cases of beer later, we're still locked in, surveying the hole in the window that the boss left when winning the "long jump" event. True, it might have looked as if he didn't want to be strapped into the chair, but I can assure you that he was excited enough to be whispering
"Wheeeee" the whole time...

And he got a cab ride home out of it too...

When the building is repainted in the lurid colour scheme of 'Teletubby Land', there is only one way to restore it to its former grey glory...

I'm coming into the office in time for morning tea when I glimpse a sight on the ground floor that I have to share with the PFY.

I am rapid-dialling my mobile phone before I'm halfway across the foyer.

"Hello, Nigerian Embassy," the PFY answers, using this week's wrong-number diversion scheme.

"You'll never guess what they're doing on the ground floor!" I chuckle.

"Painting the walls radiation orange?" he asks.

"Oh. Of course, you've got CCTV, what was I thinking?"

"Yes, and not just that!"

"What?"

"Well, do you want the good news or the bad news?" the PFY asks, in a playful manner.

"The good news." I respond, taking the lift for a change.

"The good news is that there's only one bit of bad news."

"I see, and the bad news is?"

"The painters started on the fourth floor last night."

"How bad is it?" I ask as the lift doors open, answering my question.

I am now staring at an office that looks like the inside of a heat lamp.

The boss strolls over, smiling benevolently - or is that malevolently?

"Awful, isn't it?" he asks pastily.

Ah! What I'd mistaken for a smile of benevolence was in fact a wince of distress. Easy mistake to make with the boss only recently back from sick leave.

"Who did it?" I ask.

"The building owners," the boss responds. "Apparently in response to the request of senior management. But that's not the worst. Stores just rang to say our purple carpet's arrived."

I choke down my gag reflex and manage to utter, "Why?"

"Because this study," the PFY cries, holding up a management rag, "says that certain colours are more conducive to an energetic workplace."

"I thought that was pale blues and pinks?"

"No," the PFY responds, recalling from memory sections of the article. "Pale blues and pinks are conducive to a calm atmosphere - which, incidentally, are the colours of our office."

"You're bloody joking!"

"No. Oh, and I lied about there only being one bit of bad news."

I rip down to my office to investigate.

"Yes, yes, I see what you mean," I say, relaxing into my chair. "It is a little calmer than the harsh metallic white of before. It's almost soothing in a way."

"It's not good to stay in here," the PFY comments. "It's dangerous - remember the negative ion generators...?"

How could I forget a former management plan to pump negative ions into our building in an attempt to make the PFY and I consider customer relations more.

"The computer room!" I cry.

The PFY, the boss and I head to the clinical safety of the computer room's harsh greyish walls.

"Much better!"

Through the viewing window in the fire escape door I see the IT workers going through their routines, unaware of the harmful effects of the wall colour.

"Poor bastards!" the PFY cries.

"It's too late for them! We've got to think of ourselves!" the boss blurts, echoing my exact thoughts.

(Which is a worry. Come to think of it, the boss's room has always been a bluish pinky colour.)

"What to do." I murmur, looking to see the boss's level of commitment, "what to do."

This goes on for another couple of minutes until the grey affects the boss's mind and an idea pops out.

"A fire!" he cries, as I make a mental note to give future bosses an hour a week of computer room therapy. "No! It'd never work - the extinguishers would cut in immediately."

"True!" I respond, "and all that water on the semi-cured paint."

"It'd never wash it all off!" the PFY blurts.

"It doesn't have to wash it off! It just has to make it patchy!"

".requiring a repaint!" the PFY finishes.

While the PFY and the boss complete their Laurel and Hardy act, I set to work removing a panel from high on the wall.

"What are you doing?" the boss asks in confusion.

"A small fire, while bloody dangerous, is not the answer, nor." I add, silencing the PFY's next sentence, "is a big fire. We need a small fire, in the right place."

"And where's that?"

"In." I cry, ripping off the plate to reveal a blocked-off galvanised iron duct, "the air-conditioning system."

"It'll blow the smoke all over the building!" The PFY cries, enlightened once more.

"Friends, countrymen," I cry, "lend me your jackets and shoes!"

"Will we get them back?" The boss asks, stupidly.

I pry open the ducting, stuff in the jackets, shoes, some tape listings, some tapes, a gallon of tape head cleaner and, what the hell, the boss's wallet (old habits die hard).

"Halon!" I cry.

The PFY dashes over and switches the fire alarm on.

"What the hell are you doing?!" the boss cries in terror.

Nothing happens.

"There's a wiring 'fault'," the PFY says. "The fire alarm switch holds off the Halon, while the Halon-hold-off switch turns it on."

"One of yours?" the boss asks.

"You're too kind," I smirk, chucking the lit matches into the ducting and closing the panel.

Quicker than you can say "Is that the fire alarm?" the fire sensor board is lighting up like a Christmas tree and the sound of alarms echo from all corners.

"To the new colour scheme!" I cry, lifting one of the raised-floor tiles and pulling out three lagers chilled to a crisp 17 degrees.

"Cheers!" the boss and PFY cry in unison.

And they say that orange inspires teamwork.

Does the BOFH know anything about the disappearance of the telecomms manager, his lawnmower and the wife he's 'grass-widowed'?

It's been a quiet morning for me.

A cynic might suggest this is because I patched the helpdesk calls through to the marketing manager who cut up rough last week when we were slow to upgrade his PC. He just didn't seem to understand that Doom does normally take precedence over RAM upgrades, although 71 callers all claiming that the network was running slow might have forced some wisdom into his brain.

Even though we've put them back on-line, the users are still restless and somewhat puzzled at the

'teething troubles' with the new coffee machines. You see, as part of the rather sudden refit the offices have undergone (if somewhat abortive, in colour terms), the powers that be decided to replace the tired old coffee machines with snazzy new ones.

This choice came as a pleasant surprise down here in Networks & Systems. When the previous drinks machines were installed, the PFY and I tried the usual procedure of reprogramming the 'tea' button to deliver vegetable soup, and the 'vegetable soup' button to deliver boiled Hoover-bag contents. Sadly, this approach made the end product rather more attractive than the real thing, so we admitted defeat and put everything back to its default settings.

Now we have these new machines, however, the users can actually tell that what they're getting isn't what they were asking for, thus making the whole reprogramming concept worthwhile. And the hedgehog broth is receiving some favourable reviews, not to mention a degree of mirth from those who are convinced the labels are only a bit of fun, and it's really just beef soup.

The phone rings and I answer it. This is partly because we're bored and partly because the the PFY has clocked the CLI and decided that the caller is good-looking enough to warrant attention - I only wait until the 18th ring.

"I need e-mail installed on my notebook," the monitor speaker of the call recorder proclaims, rather too confidently if you ask me.

The PFY checks the asset register and confirms that the user is as chained to the desk as they come, and hence has only the regulation issue 8MB 386 desktop running NT Workstation. "What notebook might that be?"

"The one I'm using to write my dissertation."

"Dissertation?"

"Yes, I'm doing a psychology course on day-release."

"So it's not exactly a company machine, then?"

"Well, no, it's my boyfriend's, but the dissertation is relevant to my job, and the company's paying my college fees."

"Sorry, but if it's not a company machine, we can't connect it to the network."

"That's okay, I connected it to the network already. It just needs the e-mail package installed."

"Oh, how kind of you to save us the trouble."

The PFY realises why I have been pointing for some time to a previously unidentified blob on the management console, which I have identified via SNMP as a top-end, not-released-till-December pre-Alpha beast of a notebook. Rumour has it there are only a dozen in the country so she must have been doing some serious extra-curricular work to blag it. Tentatively, I start to explore the machine over the LAN.

"Hey," the PFY exclaims in mock excitement into the mouthpiece, "you're the one I've heard about - there are only 11 of those in the country, aren't there?"

"Well, yes, 12 in fact."

A muffled bang from the speaker indicates that it is indeed the model that is reputed to suffer from a rather explosive Desktop Management Interface (DMI) - otherwise known as the Detonate Machine Interrupt-problem.

"Nope. Definitely 11," chuckles the PFY as he replaces the receiver basking in the warm glow of a job well done.

At this point, the boss casually strolls in (we've obviously been too friendly, as he's lost that cautious look, the nervous tic and the tendency to look under his car before opening the doors - though he still wears rubber gloves when handling doorknobs). He's looking for the telecomms manager, who has apparently gone AWOL.

"It's very sad that he's gone missing, I'm sure," I assure the boss, "but what with all this voice-data convergence and stuff, does it really matter?"

"That's not the point!" fumes the boss, in his this-is-really-important-honest voice. "He hasn't been seen for some time and his wife is complaining the grass is getting long!"

I flick open the Yellow Pages at 'Psychiatric Clinics' and hand it to the boss.

He looks quizzically at me.

"It's amazing isn't it?" I start thinking aloud. "There are some strange people who think that PBXs will always be so difficult as to warrant an in-house expert all of their own. Who think that phones on desks are a right, not a privilege. Who think network operators are the scum of the earth because they have scheduled downtimes. Who don't realise that you can deliver 30,000 volts to the voice-comms frame without even dropping a cell on the fibre LAN running past it."

By now, the boss knows not to waste his breath on expressions like "I knew you were up to something last week!" or "Is he all right?", concentrating intently instead for several seconds on the volume in his hand. He snaps it shut, drops it back in the drawer, and smiles decisively.

"So he won't be needing his lawnmower back for a bit, then?"

The BOFH steps in to help with a staff identity crisis, and the PFY drives a wedge between systems maintenance and the boss

So I'm in early to do some systems maintenance.

Well, when I say early, I mean 9:15am - just when everyone's established their connections to the database and applications server.

My console beeps to indicate that the required 200 interactive sessions have been reached and I start my programme to ensure the reinstatement of overtime rates...

I echo "Axeme" to /dev/kmem and the system goes down faster than a Clinton intern.

As expected, the boss hurtles out of his office like a beige tornado, only to be repelled with a resounding 'thud' by the wedge I'd kicked under the door earlier, in response to the new "Fire and Safety" policy of electronically unlocking certain swipe-card controlled doors during working hours "for ease of access". Unfortunately this means that every half-wit from PR thinks it's an open invitation to come up and talk about someone "hacking their username".

Talk of the devil; a PR geek slips in.

"Told you we should have got a bigger wedge," the PFY murmurs.

"Hi," the PR bod cries. "I think my username has been hacked!"

"No it hasn't," I respond without looking up.

"It has! It's been happening all through our department for a couple of weeks now!"

"Ever since you got that ID camera that takes digitised photos which you're printing on self-adhesive photo labels?"

"I suppose so, but I don't see what that's got to do with it?!"

"So you're saying you don't have a photo of your wife, pet, car or sly love interest stuck on your keyboard in that wasted space where the "Caps Lock" light was?"

"Uh..." he mutters, failing to think quickly.

"Take my advice - cut out the eyeholes on the picture and hit the Caps Lock key every time your wife or pet looks possessed..."

Our visitor backs out of the office in an embarrassed silence as the PFY looks up.

"Self adhesive photos?"

"Yeah," I respond "for this year's renewal of photo-id cards."

"I thought security did those?"

"They did, but the head of PR is the CEO's new blue-eyed boy, and you know what goes with blue eyes..."

"Brown nose?"

"Correct. So the head of PR is snaffling a lot of jobs that fall into the grey area of demarcation."

"Why?"

"More jobs, more workers. More responsibility..."

"More dosh!"

"Correct again. A thinly disguised plan to grab more quiddage."

"I hardly think that's true!" the boss comments, entering the room now his sense of balance is restored. "It just cuts down on photographic double-handling."

"How's that?" the PFY asks.

"Because the PR department keeps an electronic archive of photographs of staff members which they give to the press."

"Yes," I comment, "like when one of the beancounters wins Profit-and-Loss Adjuster of the Year Award..."

"I..." the boss starts, "...anyway, that's not why I'm in here. Why's the Apps server down?"

"Apps Server..." I mutter looking at the maintenance whiteboard. "Yes, it's got routine maintenance scheduled - see,"

I point to the lettering thereon.

"You're supposed to schedule that sort of thing out of hours!"

"Well, I'd like to, but you asked us to watch the overtime."

"Yes, but I didn't mean for maintenance on crucial machines!"

"You did!" I cry, reminding him of events recently past. "You started this after a weekend's overtime on maintenance of a crucial server!"

"The bloody espresso machine is not a crucial server!"

"Speak for yourself," the PFY quips, baying for blood.

"It's not! Now get that server up!"

"But..." I start.

"No buts, get it up!"

Pseudo-reluctantly, I remote-boot the server.

Which only leaves the problem of the recent influx of PR types.

A quick scan of the PR network finds the right PC and, thanks to lax group administrator security and default passwords, within a minute I'm browsing the profile of the attached photo-label printer.

And back me up on read-protected media if the printer doesn't have several uploadable photo overlays to choose from, including the words "security", "contractor", "cleaner", "board member" etc.

The next day a resounding thud announces the boss's arrival. After a minute, a second thud confirms the PFY's theory that a larger wedge has done the trick...

On release from the sick bay with mild bruising, the boss returns and knocks patiently on the door. The PFY lets him in.

"What's behind this?" he asks.

"It's a photo-id of an accountant," I respond.

"Why is the word Beancounter printed over his photo?"

"Because it's his job?" I ask.

"If that's the case, how many Wankers are employed in the building?"

"I wouldn't like to speculate on that one..."

"Seventy three apparently. Twenty-seven Beancounters, 35 Tossers and one Bumbag. Which I resent! Oh, and two Good Bastards - but you know that..."

"Someone's hacked a PR username!" the PFY comments.

"Yeah, but I can't believe that PR didn't check the photos before they sent them to security for printing!" I reply. "I suppose they'll have to be reprinted."

"They can't!" the boss cries "Security has run out of blanks and can't get new stock for a fortnight..."

The next day there's some upset when security gives the new cards to the great unwashed. Funny. Even with an updated photo they're still not happy...

When does saying less mean making more? When the boss suggests adding needless desktop capacity and you're renting out any going spare.

"...which is why I propose that we standardise on full-height disks to effectively make use of all the spare space we have in our desktop machines..."

Something startles me and I wake to find myself in the middle of an IT discussion group meeting - one of the boss's great ideas to bring the minds of the department together.

Sadly, there's no IQ barrier, the entrance criterion being the ability to find your way to the meeting.

I comfort myself with the thought that if we go overtime I'll be able to hear what the cleaning staff have to say, which is bound to bring a bit of sanity to the conversation.

"Ah, I don't think full-height drives is a good option in the new low-profile ca...aagh!" the PFY comments, as he gets cut short by an under-table blow.

It's too late, of course, now that opposition has been raised to an idea. By Incompetent Meeting Law, there now has to be a discussion of the relative merits of the idea being opposed. It's a

discussion that is bound to bring us half an hour closer to the end of the day, but half an hour further away from a technical resolution.

We break for a mid-morning coffee, at which time I corner the PFY and ask him, as politely as possible, what the hell he was trying to do in there.

"But he was recommending full-height drives for all desktop machines!

"Some of our machines don't even stand that high!" he blurts.

"That's irrelevant. You know they're only taunting you so that you argue and string the meeting out, and then they don't have to do any work today."

"But it's our job to offer sound advice, isn't it?"

"Don't be ridiculous! It's our job to interpret what they decide and use it to our advantage."

"So the full-height drives would be...?"

"Hmm...half-height 7200 RPM 18 gig jobbies."

"But desktops don't need that sort of space!"

"No, but if we get enough of them out there we can use it as a wide area multiple mirrored RAID-5 system!"

"Huh?"

"OK, your average user's desktop machine has what on it?"

"Their operating system?"

"Yes, yes, but the rest."

"?"

Sigh. After all this time he's still an amateur at heart.

"Their e-mail folders, personal work, the pirated copy of Leisure Suit Larry - the smutty pictures in the windows directory hidden under the name YENROH1.DLL etc."

"Oh! Yeah?"

"Well, all that, what does it take up? A Gig, max. Which means there's 17 Gig free on them for really deserving projects!"

"Like?"

"Our personal work, games, and all those smutty pictures we have on the tapes 'System Snapshot' 1 thru 200."

"So we use their hard drives?"

"Sort of. But you know what users are like - couldn't find the space bar if their stomach didn't roll into it. So we need mirrored copies."

"But why RAID-5 it as well?"

"Just in case one of the workers goes postal and brings a bomb into the building. Wouldn't want to interrupt the smutty picture slideshow just because Bean-counter Central's halfway across the high street."

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"Almost. But bear in mind what sheep departments are - all stopping for lunch together and powering down their machines."

"No. I don't think you're telling me the full story."

Bugger.

"All right, so I've contracted half a terabyte out to a couple of companies as on-line HSM disk."

"Hierarchical storage management?"

"Yeah. Our users don't use the stuff, so I use them as a network archival device."

"You're selling the company's desktop space!?"

"Yeah, to a couple of oil companies that want off-site back-ups."

"I can't believe it!" the PFY cries, shocked to the core.

"What, the Machiavellian megalomania of it all?" I ask.

"No, that you didn't cut me in!"

"Well, it's funny you should mention that. The next time Dave suggests full-height drives, I'd like you to keep your gob shut. The same goes for when he suggests monochrome monitors to cut down on sick time because of eye strain. We've got a buyer who wants a job lot of SVGAs."

"But that's just ridic...Dave's working for you, isn't he?" the PFY cries, the penny finally dropping.

"Not for - with."

"But he's completely thick!"

"Oh, that's just a cover story. He pumps out stupid suggestions at top speed to prevent other managers from getting their own in there."

There's a knock at the door.

"Speak of the devil."

"Uh, I think I've forgotten my password," Dave mumbles.

"It's OK, he knows," I respond.

"Oh. Right. Well, I've just heard rumours that your boss is going to propose that all management get a laptop conversion kit for their cars - complete with 12 volt LCD monitor, cellphone hook-up etc."

"Bloody hell," the PFY gasps. "That'll be our whole equipment budget for a couple of quarters! What are we going to do?"

"Well," Dave comments, "for a start I'd cut the monitor deal, bring in Dvorak keyboards to prevent repetitive strain injury, RS232 networking to reduce Ethernet collisions, and, when that fails, dial-up networking between floors."

Unfortunately, two days later the flaw in the plan becomes apparent when 18 ultra high-speed modems arrive in the office - courtesy of the boss who was so swayed by the inter-floor dial-up networking argument that he cashed in our budget on them.

So it is true then: you can't win 'em all...

Sigh.

Hypochondria in the office is all the rage. In fact, rage is all the rage. But when a psychiatrist is called in it's only a means to an end...

So I'm destined by fate to have a run-in with the boss. I know it, he knows it, and everything else is just window dressing.

It's his fault. He recently took on a secretary who suffers from XXXX disease, i.e. the inability to do anything she doesn't want to on medical grounds. If it isn't RSI it's some version of the 'flu hitherto unknown to medical science.

Finally I've had a gutful, so I corner the boss to see what he's going to do about it. The assistant head of personnel is there, purely coincidentally of course.

"Well, I'd like to do something about it," he responds, "but the company has fairly strict guidelines on dismissing employees due to medical conditions..."

"So she's here to stay?"

"Unless there's some disciplinary issue that you'd like to raise?" personnel replies.

"Other than she's crap?"

"She is not crap. She has simply discovered some medical conditions that are exacerbated by her

work here. So we're going to lighten her workload accordingly to allow her a chance to recover."

"Lighten her workload?! She doesn't do anything!"

"She's made a good job of organising my meetings," the boss chimes.

"That's because her hands hurt too much to take down the details! You haven't met anyone since she's been here."

"I'm meeting you aren't I?" the boss counters smugly.

Then it becomes clear to me. It's the boss's sneaky plan to insulate himself from the workers by having an obstructive secretary...

Sure enough, as I leave the office I notice a similar self-contented expression on the part of the employee in question.

"Two can play at that game!"

I blurt as I re-enter the office, gesture the PFY aside and force a reboot of every switch and router in the building.

The boss storms in seconds later, with his personnel partner-in-grime in tow.

"What's going on?"

"Routers have all gone down. I typed 'all reboot' instead of 'all status'. I must be typing dyslexic!"

"Well get them up!" the boss blurts, concentrating his attention on the lynching that will occur at the next systems liaison meeting...

"Well I'd like to, but I'm also suffering from attention defici... Oh! Look, a green cellphone! Is that new?"

The boss goes straight to the PFY and demands that he restart the equipment.

As the great unwashed beat a path to the door of mission control and the networking equipment finishes its booting, the PFY accedes to the boss's demands at full speed, with a cry of "Bastards!" and queues a 60- minute UPS disconnect test for five minutes from now - 60 being 23 more minutes than the rated capacity of our system.

"Oh no!" I cry. "Keyboard rage!"

"What are you talking about?!" the boss shouts.

"Keyboard rage! It's like road rage, only worse! It's not his fault, it's a psychological condition he's been getting counselling for! He was diagnosed by the same doctor who diagnosed my attent...Wow! This gas operated chair's really got a smooth descent! Look at this!"

"I want that UPS test stopped!" the boss shouts.

"Please don't shout," I sniffle. "My dyslexia gets worse under pressure. Bugger, I've just set the fire alarm test off by accident!"

The PFY, meantime, is beating his keyboard senseless in a very convincing manner while our two visitors make for the door.

"Be careful!" I cry, "I can't remember whether I locked out the lift system or not, and if I did - Ooooh, is that an Armani suit?!"

The next day the PFY and I meet with the head of personnel, the boss, and the head of dept.

A calm knock on the door announces the arrival of our personal psychiatric advisor.

"I don't believe you've met our psychiatric advisor, Doctor Brian Analpeeper - Phd in Abnormal Psychology from the Bognor Regis Polytechnic."

"Good morning gentlemen," Brian starts. "I have here the diagnoses of my patients' conditions which, I must say, appear to have been aggravated by the inability of their superegos to express their thoughts about current management decisions..."

Brian goes on to explain that yesterday's unfortunate power and systems outage etc. is all a result of our inability to get to the boss because of the new secretary.

"They're just a couple of freeloading layabouts who are milking the company dry," the boss snaps angrily.

"I feel at this juncture I must ask for some time alone with my clients to discern any mental harm that your comments have caused them."

"What the hell?!"

"My clients are sensitive people. Who knows what your comments may have done to their delicate psyches. This meeting may accelerate a whole new set of problems, uncovering repressed memories of employee abuse."

"What?!" the boss cries, dangerously close to blowing a major blood vessel.

"Wait," the head of personnel interjects, recognising an escalating situation when he's in one. "We'll transfer her."

"To stamp-licking in the mail room?" I ask evilly.

"We have a franking machine," the boss comments dryly.

"Not for much longer," the PFY comments. "I think I feel a bout of frank rage coming on."

"Interesting manifestation of trauma," Brian comments. "Well, I see no need for my remaining here."

"You bastard!" the boss snarls before yelping as Brian's briefcase crushes his hand.

"Sorry," Brian explains. "I'm a recovering briefcase rage sufferer."

Amazing what a psychiatrist can find out, if you pay him enough...

The BOFH is fazed by the remote working boom - but not for long. He and the PFY find more devious ways to keep the Operations beer fund topped up.

There are times when I believe that the PFY and I are the only ones who actually spend any time in the office these days.

There is a distinct tendency toward home working, which is bad news indeed.

Bad news in a number of ways. First, there are fewer people in the office to admire the support 'efforts' of the PFY and myself; this, in itself, implies a reduction in the level of available victims.

Second, for every user on the remote access server, we lose 64Kbps (before compression) of our PRI Quake connection to the US arm of the company.

Finally, and most importantly, remote access equals more user moans.

You see, remote access is hard to use. It involves not only using Windows NT's user interface, but also a modem and a phone line. It also involves calling the right number in order to gain access to the company network.

Difficult, you may think. Except the reason we run NT Workstation is because we can lock everything down tighter than...well, just think of the anatomy of waterfowl. And the modem is internal to the PC, so they can't get the wires wrong when they connect it up.

And the phone line is Araldited into the modem card, so they can't put the wrong end in the wrong hole. And the other end has a big green label saying "Plug this end into a telephone socket". Made of steel. And the dial-up number is hard-coded into the modem software. And it's even the right number on ten per cent of the machines.

So what exactly is it that these people find so hard? These are people who, by and large, can figure out which way round to sit on a toilet. Who - with the exception of the senior purchasing controller - know which end of a biro goes on to the paper. Who somehow passed a test and are legally allowed to drive a big heavy car with a big engine and sharp edges to work but still can't figure out how to plug a power cord into the only socket it'll fit into in the back of a computer.

For example, a call the PFY answered by mistake the other day:

"I can't dial into the network."

"Really? Is the modem plugged in?"

"Yes, that was the problem last time, so I made sure it was okay today."

"Have you been able to connect at all?"

"Well, I got in yesterday."

"Have you changed anything?"

"No."

"Really?"

"NO!"

"Try it again now."

"Okay...hang on...it says 'no dialtone'."

"How many phone lines do you have in your house?"

"Just one. Why?"

>CLICK<

But it's not all bad. Remote access users do have their uses, of course. You see, a while ago the beancounters decided to ban people from charging their home phone bills to expenses.

They figured that if people couldn't be bothered to come into the office, they weren't about to pay. Therefore, we in IT decided to be very friendly to the poor little cherubs who were too delicate to face a daily commute and give them an 0800 number to dial into.

Sadly, something appears to have gone wrong with the local cable franchise's phone billing system. Somehow

I don't seem to be getting the bill for all these allegedly freefone remote access calls. Yet I've heard rumours of relationship rockiness becoming rife among our remote access friends. Something to do with wives finding £800-per-quarter phone bills full of itemised, premium rate numbers with suspicious-sounding names...whatever the case, the Operations beer fund appears to be ticking up nicely at a rate of 44p per minute (35p off-peak).

Not only this, but the management are starting to catch on to the fact that there might be something in the remote-user thing after all. Something called hot-desking, I'm told.

Manager theory goes along the lines of: if someone isn't there, I'm getting charged for their bit of the office, so let's put someone else in there and save money. It is, of course, perfectly logical to take on extra people on thirty grand a year in order to fully utilise eighty quid's worth of square footage.

Anyhow, as the PFY and I gaze out of the window we can see a whole load of big vans and men carting into the building what look suspiciously like cubicle partitions. A suspicion looms...

I wonder...

Three o'clock comes, and it's time for the PFY and I to adjourn to the cosy meeting room on the corner that has a full-sized pool table and serves such a nice pint of Stella.

As we battle our way across the yard, weaving a path through the head-butting and the fist-fights, we find ourselves musing about how ironic it all is that one of the junior programmers should have discovered the old cubicle-allocation application I wrote five years ago for the previous management (most of whom have now, sadly, passed on or checked into rehab units).

For some reason hot-desking didn't work then, either.

The Operations room is lit up like a set of traffic lights when the head beancounter asks the BOFH and the PFY to account for their time...

An edict has come down from on high that we have to account for our time. It's all about accountability, internal recharging and all that jazz. Seems the boss has been getting grief for having such a big cost centre, so he's decided to make us into a profit centre by making people pay for our services. The financial director fell for the idea and appears to be writing us some terms, conditions and SLA clauses.

"We pay how much per hour?"

The PFY is startled by my exclamation, though realisation dawns as he looks at my screen-scrape of the financial director's Word window. It seems that our department loses money should my humble assistant or I be late fixing someone's machine. To the tune of a grand an hour, give or take a few pennies.

True, it's nice to labour under the misapprehension that they think we're worth that much, but in reality I suspect they're just trying to induce urgency. They also think we care how much the boss's budget loses, but that's another issue entirely.

"Quick, change it while it's in the print queue," the PFY shouts, seeing the 'Print' dialog appearing. He dives for his keyboard, but stops himself as he notices my smug grin.

Sure enough, a few days later the boss walks in, with the financial director in tow, to see how we're doing. Just so he can be kept happy we've installed a big 'job status' screen (103" TFT displays don't come cheap, but it had to be flat to be wall-mounted) which is showing lots of healthy 'green' jobs.

Allow me to explain. A 'red job' is a call on which we have missed our deadline. A 'green' job, on the other hand, is a call which has been logged but not yet attended to, but whose deadline is still in the future. We persuaded the management that we didn't need to record completed calls, as they were largely irrelevant to progress. True, the fact that there weren't any made it even more pointless, but we didn't exactly press that issue.

"Good show, chaps," the financial director booms in his clipped retired-Army-lieutenant-who-still-calls-himself-colonel tones. (Note at this point the derivation of the word 'colonel', as in COLON-el). "Keeping ahead of things, I see!"

"Oh yes, sir, we make a point of hitting our targets." Yeah, but I'm not telling you what with.

The phone rings, and the PFY flinches at the intensity of the boss's "answer it or die" look.

He's certainly learning.

"Operations, PFY speaking."

The boss manages to shepherd the financial director out of the office while he's still happy, leaving the PFY to look after his 'customer'.

"Yes, I realise we haven't managed to get round to you yet, but we're very busy, and we're still within the permitted fix time - yes, I know you called on September 8th - yes, I know it's the 30th today. What's that? Sure, I'll just look it up - ah, here it is. 14 April 2003 seems to be the deadline. Tell you what, I'll call you on the 13th just to make sure you still work here, just so I don't waste my time coming up to your office only to find you've fallen out of a window. No, that's not a threat, just a vision of the future. Bye now."

The days pass and we while away the time as our part-time assistant (drafted in for two hours a week to cope with the vast demand being placed on our human resources) knocks off the odd job here and there just so the board isn't too full.

Meanwhile, unrest is growing among the users, who don't seem to realise just how hard it is to keep that board full of green call reports. It's a full fortnight before the boss catches on to what we're up to. It took him a while, but his training is coming along nicely and every so often he spots what's happening.

"Tell me," he prompts, "just how many calls actually get as far as being closed?"

"Depends how you mean 'closed'," I reply.

"Like, problems getting solved."

"Depends what you mean by 'solved'."

"AAAAAGGGGHHHHHH!!!"

"Okay, let me explain. We set deadlines to give ourselves enough time to do the job properly. Right?"

"Riiiggghhhhttt..."

"We have two alternatives. First, we can go and fix the problem. This takes time and draws us away from our real job."

"And I'm not even going to ask what you think that is. What's the other option?"

"We sit in the pub doing essential network maintenance and, by the time the many-months-off deadline arrives, the problem, or preferably the user, has gone away. The deadline generator is tied into the HR staff turnover measurement system."

A twinkle in the boss's eye tells me he's plotting. And he knows better than to come up with anything that isn't grossly beneficial to my spotty colleague and myself.

He strides off purposefully, returning half an hour later looking triumphant.

"I persuaded the financial director that stuff might get done a little bit before deadline if there was some incentive to our department for finishing jobs before deadline."

"How much?"

"Don't ask. Enough."

Within a day and a half the call-board is darker than a gorilla's groin, and the Operations beer-fund, which is index-linked to the boss's budget, is looking healthier than ever. I could grow to like the idea of accountability.

One wager and a lager frenzy later, the BOFH is feeling somewhat worse for wear after messing with the teatime continuum

I'm not a well man.

In fact, I'd go so far as to say I'm feeling poorly.

But having used up my sick leave entitlement during the World Cup and considering a bomb threat too drastic, I struggle into work. After all, if you're going to be crook, you may as well do it on company time. It always makes me feel a little better anyway. The source of my illness was plain to see once I'd emerged from the bed to focus on the congealed remains of a half-eaten kebab solidified on the top of the TV set and half a pot of cold coffee sitting on the table.

A vague memory crosses my mind, collides with a patchy recollection and goes down...I seem to remember a lager frenzy starting at the pub just down from the office following the outcome of some wager that ended in my favour. As they do.

A wager that must have undoubtedly involved the boss in some way, shape or form, following his imperial command just a few days ago with regard to morning and afternoon tea. Apparently we're only supposed to take one of each a day, and they're only supposed to be 15 minutes long. And they're to be measured by the company's clocks and not by any personal equipment. Talk about cruel and unusual punishment.

Of course no one expected him to enforce the ruling, so it came as a little bit of a surprise when the unauthorised timesheet prunings were brought to light by a less-than-expected payment cheque.

I manage to drag myself to work, although I have to admit to feeling very seedy by the time I get to the relative security of my office. A rest is called for.

I redirect my phone to the voicemail of the networks and systems group of the company, three buildings over, then catch up with some well-deserved sleep.

An hour later I'm woken by the entry of the PFY into the room. Well, more accurately, the sound of the PFY falling through the door to Mission Control.

His condition is no better than my own, but I'm hoping that his memory of events will tide me over.

A hope that fades quickly when he informs me that the last thing he remembers was when we pulled the toner cartridge out of the fax machine and shorted out the 'toner low' and 'cartridge-removed' sensors.

Further questioning is pointless once the PFY reveals that the next thing he remembers is waking up in the telecomms access duct at the rear of the building.

Curiouser and curiouser...

I can only assume that some major form of celebration occurred, the likes of which is not often seen in computing circles (i.e. as rare as a bug-free Microsoft release).

CCTV is no help, revealing only that we left the building at approximately 5:22pm, considerably the worse for wear, in the company of half the secretarial pool, who also looked like they had a bad case of bottle fatigue.

Being a troubleshooting professional of long standing, I apply the first rule of problem solving by asking the question "what has changed?". Observation: there aren't many healthy-looking staff at their desks.

I apply the second rule of problem-solving by tracking the problem backwards - 5:22 is far too late for me to be working, so

I must have been propping up the bar at the company anti-social club.

I put in a call to one of the more human company lawyers, who's rostered on to bar duty this week to see if he remembered us.

I eventually track him down to his cellphone.

"Yes, you called me to open up the bar rather early..."

"When was that then?" I ask.

"About 10:30am."

Missing time and memory accounted for, more important questioning must follow.

"Spend much?" I ask, with a due sense of trepidation.

"As it happened, no," he said. "Not after you pointed out that your boss's memo distinctly states that the company shall provide beverages, at its own expense, for all staff between the hours of 10am and 11am."

"So what happened at 11?" the PFY blurts over my shoulder.

"That's not come around as yet. It's only about 10:49am at the moment. I'm not sure, but the clock appears to be running incredibly slowly. Mine is not to reason why though.."

Yet another penny drops and I vaguely remember tweaking the calibration knob on the pulse-advance unit of the company's timekeeping system to buy us a longer tea-break. Perhaps a

hammer wasn't the best tool for the tweak job.

"You mean it's been between 10:30 and 11 for a day?" the PFY gasps.

"Ah...two days I think you'll find."

A quick squint at the unfeasibly small numbers on my wristwatch confirms his story.

"Bloody hell. What's management doing about it then?"

"Well when your boss left here about 16 hou...I mean about six minutes ago, he said he'd be back in five minutes. The whole of legal's here still, because they were on the late morning tea shift, and the DP pool are taking their morning tea in one-minute instalments."

About 43 hours [11 minutes] later, the PFY, myself and some hardcore legal and DP drinkers are helped out of the building.

By the police.

If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times: "AGG AAARRICC GUBB IN FARLIN GOT!"
And you can quote me on that.

A bluff report may fool auditors that the company is running smoothly but try telling a hospitalised boss why safety procedures have been ignored

Something feels wrong. I know it immediately. It's a seventh sense among seasoned support professionals.

The PFY confirms it when he gets back from morning tea - at the pub - and looks around as if to check everything is as it should be.

It's like a funny-coloured smell.

The boss must be up to something. We could be over-sensitive, but I think he's a bit upset about me telling the helpdesk staff the grey powder on their furniture might be asbestos dust. That was two days ago, but the mass walkout and hypochondria is yet to end, despite proof that the dust concerned was in fact talcum powder dyed grey.

Some form of retaliation is expected and the waiting game ends fairly shortly when we see the boss waddling in our direction.

"I think it's about time you did some documentation," he blurts, after exhausting his list of social niceties ("How are you?", "How are things going?" and "Isn't that memory the stuff that's missing from my desktop machine?").

"Documentation?"

"Yes, a site guide, configuration standards, network and systems topologies, installed software, site

customisations," he bumbles, reeling off the sentence he's obviously spent half the morning committing to memory at great personal risk to the other contents of his brain (where he lives, what his name is, when it's appropriate to unzip his fly etc.).

"But we've got all that already - in the fireproof filing cabinet over there," I respond, pointing at a dull grey monster in the corner that I've only ever opened once.

"Well, let's have a look at it."

"Well, I'd like to, but apparently my assistant locked the key in it the last time he was updating the information!" I cry, using the PFY as a scapegoat for this particular excuse (as previously arranged, of course).

"Then get a locksmith in!" the boss yells, not one to be put off by small details.

Three hours and one fire alarm later the 'documentation' is a mass of ashen remains in the now open cabinet. The fact that they were a mass of ashen remains when I put them in is beside the point.

"I can't think why the PFY would have put that large jar of tapehead cleaner right next to where the locksmith would have to gas-axe the lock open. What an oversight!" I wail, stifling a snigger as the boss gingerly applies some burn cream to his hands.

"It's irrelevant now. I want some documentation to show the auditors."

"The auditors?" I protest. "What do glorified beancounters want documentation for?"

"Not monetary auditors, company auditors. Since the company sold itself to that US combine we have to have our every move audited to ensure the place is a smooth-running machine."

"My money's on a '73 Ford Escort running on three cylinders with water in the fuel tank, but I take your point."

"So I'll expect reprints of your documentation first thing tomorrow," the boss says, leaving.

"Auditors?" the PFY asks. "I haven't heard anything about them."

"First thing you'd better do is OCR scan some random manual pages - the older the better - into a word processor to add a bit of bulk to our documentation. I'll dump the network topology mapper output into another document in 24 point, which should use up about 100 pages by itself. Then push the DNS through a perl filter to add some fancy field information to it. Then I'll work on some table of contents pages, etc.," I reply.

"But won't they know it's crap?" the PFY asks.

"Nah, there'll be so much of it they'll look at the table of contents, check the first few pages, then randomly open the documents at certain pages. Which reminds me. Anything that's reasonably legit should be printed on heavier paper than the rest of the document so that anyone flipping through will stop there.

"You sound like you've done this before."

"One of the tricks of the contracting trade. There's always a run on 100gsm paper at company report time."

Three hours later, we have a document that would fool the average beginner. However, bearing in mind that the auditors have probably seen a few of these in their time, I'm going to have to insert some believable stuff into the procedures area.

An hour later, I've whipped out ten good pages of bumph on "Hot Swap," "Disaster recovery," "Host configuration and naming," "Router configuration standards", etc.

I also chuck in some roughly accurate palaver about cabling, trunking and patch panel locations, as well as a brief outline of emergency service and security configuration information. I slap it all together into an appropriately named folder, then subject it to the ageing process (meaning I jump up and down on it, kick it around until some of the pages fall out, then spill some food and ink on it) to make it look like it's heavily referred to.

The document gets submitted, and, judging by the lack of evidence to the contrary, the auditors must be happy.

And so it was that the next day the PFY and I were standing beside the network monitor when it started emitting the telltale signs of a router not talking to anything any more.

"That'll be the boss turning on router redundant takeover."

"How can you be sure?"

"The old ROMS don't support it - it causes a memory leak. Of course, I forgot to document that. Actually, come to think of it, I also forgot to document..."

A large crash from the floor above interrupts me.

"The emergency duct access retracting ladder isn't screwed into the roof yet."

Five minutes later the boss is on his way to hospital and the documentation is on its way to the incinerator.

**A bogus computer range may con the propeller heads in polyester but not the clever BOFH
who has a nasty sabotage surprise waiting in his pocket**

So I'm at this presentation where a manufacturer's showing its new range of mini-computers.

As expected, it's wall-to-wall propeller heads with 100 per cent polyester appearing to be the clothing order of the day.

And, also as expected, the vendor wheels out the new hardware while simultaneously reassuring the assembled clientele that this is not a REPLACEMENT of the kit that they bought a few months ago, just a parallel product.

The fact that last quarter's machines have been removed from the hardware catalogue (along with the support from the maintenance catalogue) is purely coincidental...As is the fact that the serial number on the new kit implies that it was actually manufactured SIX months ago. No, no, it wasn't a product-dumping exercise at all. Just coincidence.

Oh, and a complete change of architecture...

So we see the new model, with a new bus (which means that stockpile of peripheral cards you bought are about as in demand as XT thin-wire cards), 20 per cent increase in processor speed, 80 per cent increase in cost, 200 per cent increase in size and ugliness of logo, and immediately the braindead among the audience start drooling.

"As you'll see," our presenter says with a coat-hanger grin, "the SpecWPIOP Int figures for our machine are much higher than for any other manufacturer's machine of comparable price..."

"Ah," I interject, suppressing with great effort my sense of annoyance at their transparency, "could that be because you just made up the SpecWPIOP Int standard to take advantage of your new kit's design?"

"Certainly not," our presenter hotly denies, "the SpecWPIOP Int is an open industry standard!"

"And who," I ask, knowing full well the answer, "developed and opened this standard?"

"Well I have to admit, somewhat proudly, that our company has excelled in developing a standard which truly reflects the loads on an active system of varying users more accurately than something which performs simple integer test cases."

"In other words, you made it up?"

"No No! Bookmarking figures have, for some time, not taken into account the true loads on a system which may have users of varying types, from development, to database, to data entry. The SpecWPIOP takes into account all these things to produce a figure that is fully representative of the 'whole-system', or 'holistic-interoperative' approach, as we like to call it."

I look around me and notice that the guy's got about 60 per cent of the customers sold, with their proverbial pants already at half mast.

"So SpecWPIOP, what does that stand for?" I ask.

"Specifications When Pmmmmmdmd Idndn Ouidud Pddnls," he mumbles. "Pardon?"

"Specifications When Plugged Into Our Peripherals," he murmurs slyly.

"Oh! So what you're saying is that when you plug one of your SCSI disks, say, into another manufacturer's hardware, the processor is so busy dealing with the errors generated by your non-standard interface that it works much slower."

"That's not it at all," he gasps, incredulous. "Why, just looking at the system in action would convince anyone otherwise!!!"

He proceeds to power the thing up and it whirrs into life with an impressive start-up sound.

Worth at least half of the purchase price alone, when combined with the new full-colour start-up graphic!!!

"And if I could get a volunteer from the aud..."

I almost pop a hamstring in my hurry to be first out the gate and up to the podium. I can tell that I wasn't the volunteer that he was looking for - probably having primed some Infomercial dropout with questions to ask and 'Gosh, look at that!' responses to give.

"Ah," he murmurs, not wishing to let me near his kit, but not really having much choice in the matter. "How about you start up the Graphical User Interface by clicking on the little screen icon then?"

I do so and am actually very impressed with the speed of the start-up. As is the rest of the flock, who crowd in closer to get a good look...

Obscuring my hand briefly... quicker than you can say: "What is that, aluminium foil cuttings? Chocolate wrapper bits? Iron filings?" I've surreptitiously flicked a small handful of aluminium foil underneath the machine...into the thirsty holes of the cooling-inlet.

The subsequent short-circuiting, smoke and minor explosion rounded off the entertainment for the afternoon - ruining the new business prospects for the manufacturer and sending the presenter home with a 'shocking' new hairstyle - after he regained consciousness. Suffice to say that the rest is history - the model isn't being pulled from the market per se - another demonstration is being organised in a month from now when they iron out the "power supply problems", but at least it's restored, temporarily at least, the resale price of my peripherals to give me a chance to offload them on some poor, unsuspecting alternate customer of our vendor.

Ah well, you know what they say - all's fair in love and hardware acquisition...

You won't believe what's been going on the Boss's credit card...and it's not just the BOFH who thinks that'll do nicely - he's got a new flexible friend...

I'm scanning through the swathes of my early morning e-mail, culling out all the spam messages about credit cards, free home loans, career opportunities and new, improved sex sites.

Propagating our Web cache with smut apparently destined for the Boss is a sure-fire way to get immunity from a bollocking if you're caught browsing at it yourself during work time, and it solves the hassle of having to wait for the stuff to load over the smut site's crappy Ethernet connection.

True, loading the Boss's corporate credit card details into the robot was a little on the nose, but it all boils down to what you're willing to pay for a good cache service.

And the Boss sure is paying - I've had to have his credit card limit extended twice this month just to keep up with the volume of incoming material the patient and inquisitive robot has found.

If he didn't want to buy anything with his credit card, he wouldn't have got one in the first place. Nor would he have left it carelessly lying around in a sealed envelope, locked in his briefcase,

secured inside that filing cabinet drawer marked 'IT94 conference proceedings', in the cleaners' cupboard at the far end of the building. He was just asking for it to be used.

However, I'm pleased to say that the cache is responding well to the challenge now that I've whacked those two new nine gig drives into the server. In other words, it's a happy ending - or beginning...

"I've got a problem with these machine usage stats," the Boss blurts, entering the office in such a hurry I have to terminate my 'cache-occupancy hit stats survey' by switching my monitor off.

"What problem is that?" I ask.

"Well, according to this, my machine does a hell of a lot of traffic in off-peak hours."

"Really?" I respond, upset that my little smut-acquiring goldmine looks like meeting its end.

"Oh that'll just be DHCP mapping playing up again," the PFY jumps in. "It's just because our DNS isn't dynamic, so it's charged against your machine, but really is some other machine using the IP address you were using when the IP usage stats program was run!"

"Duh - really?" the Boss responds, so far out of his technical depth he's looking for a life raft and water wings.

"Yeah, it's nothing to worry about."

"Oh," the Boss says, happy in the knowledge that his desktop is faithful to him only. "So who is generating the IP traffic then?"

"Ah...that'll probably be our site's Web server," I jump in.

"But I thought you told me last week that servers weren't going to use DHCP?" the Boss quips, annoying me with an unexpected attack of accurate recall.

"No, no, I said that surfers don't use DHCP - because...ah...most of them don't even have PCs...and those who do don't take them to the beach anyway..."

"What have surfers got to do with our company?" the Boss blurts, even more confused than normally...

"Nothing that I know of," I respond.

"So why did you tell me about it?"

"Just passing the time of day..."

Our conversation is interrupted by the arrival of a beancounter wearing a worried expression, which can only mean that the credit card eagle has landed. Crash landed by the sour look on his face.

"It's about your company credit card," he mumbles anxiously.

"What about it?"

"It's £23,000 in the red!"

I'm a bit shocked at this figure, as I only cranked the card limit up to £10k, but put it down to a credit card company keen to generate revenue...

"That's preposterous," the Boss blurts.

"It's all here in black and white - but mostly red," the beancounter says, handing over some papers.

"What's this www.spank-spank.org...and too-tight-lederhosen.com? And who the hell is the Progressive Press in Amsterdam?"

A warning bell rings in my head as I don't recall any Web-site by that name. I grab the papers from the beancounter and find that Web traffic accounts for only about 10 per cent of the charges therein, the rest appearing to be for merchandise shipped into the UK...

"I have no idea," the beancounter responds. "But it's all above board on your card..."

"It can't be, my card's locked away safely, in a drawer in a cabling cupboard."

"A cleaning cupboard, I think you'll find," I mention, cheerfully.

"And in a filing cabinet," the PFY adds.

"Sealed in an envelope, in a briefcase," the beancounter finishes smugly, much to the surprise of the PFY and I.

So it seems there's a new player in the game - a beancounter gone bad. Excellent.

The Boss bumbles some crap about us not getting away with it, and rushes off to get his card cancelled.

"The horse has bolted on that one," the beancounter chirps happily. "Besides, I used his old card as leverage for a new one with a different bank."

"And...?" I ask, preparing for war.

"I sent the Boss's details in e-mail. Not encrypted with his public key of course, yours in fact - what an oversight!"

"So what you're saying is the Boss has an e-mail message he can't read..."

"That anyone with your private key intercepting that e-mail could..."

It's a wet and windy afternoon when the crack security force of the building break into the Boss's office and drag him up to the board for a good spanking. Apparently his claims of innocence fell upon deaf ears when enquiries revealed that the shipping address for the 'progressive' media was the Boss's summer house...

One down, too many more to go.

But at least we have an ally in the enemy camp...

The eye on the wall has seen all, so it's time for desperate measures to cover up the half measures of sherry left in the boardroom decanters...

Sooner or later, it was bound to happen. We know it, we prepare for it, but it still comes as a proverbial kick in the goolies.

Security wants its systems back. Well, actually not Security at all - we have a great working relationship - but its new manager - an ex-military type who takes the job far too seriously. He (outrageously) believes CCTV security systems should be Security's responsibility, and that Network and Systems Operations types shouldn't have unrestricted swipe card access to the building "to enable rapid support".

In other words, he's trying to make us join the great unwashed.

Our new boss is no bloody help. With the spine of a jellyfish, he backed down in record time.

I don't like it.

The PFY doesn't like it.

Something's got to give.

And give it does. The final straw comes when the new boss pops into the office and asks what we were doing in the boardroom last night at 6.35pm.

Obviously the answer- "Drinking ourselves senseless with a couple of members of the secretarial pool" - is out of the question.

So it looks like I'm going to have to ad-lib. And we're not talking sound cards here.

"Ahh...checking the connectivity of the individual ISDN desktop ports," I blurt quickly.

"Really? It doesn't look like that!" he cries, brandishing a frame-grabbed image from CCTV showing the PFY topping up a half-full sherry decanter with a reconstituted version of the original.

"That's disgusting!" I cry heatedly.

"Yes it is," the boss concurs, saddling up his high horse for the 11.30 hurdles. "As is this," he continues, flashing another image - of me this time - making up the PFY's shortfall (he's just young).

"And what do you have to say about that?" he challenges.

"Well, obviously I need to reduce my vitamin B intake," I cry.

"What?"

"I'm only joking. It's obviously a fake."

"Well, if it's a fake," he responds smugly, holding up a strangely familiar vessel, "you won't mind taking a quick swig of this."

"Not at all," I respond, pouring myself a healthy dram, or 57, and downing it in record time. "As I said, it's a fake - a plan by security to discredit us with misinformation."

"Obviously a video edit. Look at the pixellation around the thing. It's been digitised and re-enhanced."

"I...uh..." the boss mumbles, inquisition in ashes.

After he's slouched out in despair (not having the bottle, or even a decanter) to face up to the head of Security, the PFY comes over.

"Can't believe you bloody drank that," he gasps disgustedly.

"Ah, don't be silly - I put the full one at the back and swapped the seal with that one. The board's stupid, but not stupid enough to mistake that for sherry. Not until they've had a couple of priming decanters anyway."

A swivel from the camera behind the computer room viewing window alerts me to a potential problem.

"Reckon he can read lips?" I ask the PFY from behind my coffee cup.

"It's possible," the PFY comments, apparently yawning.

"Right. Emergency action is called for!"

The PFY and I race up the staircase to the boardroom to dispose of the evidence. But we are too late. The head of Security is already in the room and has hurled glassware everywhere in his haste to find the decanter at the back.

With any luck...but no - the sole surviving decanter is much, much clearer than the one I drank from.

"We're stuffed," the PFY whispers.

"Not quite," I blurt, remembering the access card system's configuration parameters. I swipe my card through the reader, then punch in an incorrect PIN number. And again. And again.

The fourth attempt triggers an alarm, and the Security boss rushes over to the door to swipe the door release from his side...but too late. The ten-minute lockout has occurred.

Quick as a flash the PFY pulls the phone and network connections from the room, then manually locks the access corridor to the boardroom.

"Hang on, he'll break the emergency release glass," the PFY cries.

"He would. If I hadn't replaced it with the bulletproof stuff years ago."

We pull a couple of chairs up and wait for the inevitable, swiping the door invalidly every nine minutes or so to keep the lockout in force.

To his credit, the head of Security held out well - the military influence no doubt. It takes nearly ten hours for thirst to set in. And a full two more before he unstoppers the bottle.

"I'd have tipped it on the ground," the PFY says quietly, at the pub a day later. "That would have solved it."

"Yeah, there's no understanding the military mind," I sigh, as I contemplate the names he's going to be called by his troops, who were too busy making video dubs of the proceedings to come to his aid - even if they'd wanted to.

Different horses for different courses...

A fellow bastard in Wales who doesn't have cable TV turns out to be the ideal excuse for procuring some extra bandwidth

I'm tunnelling a few episodes of an extra-terrestrial TV drama series down the Internet because a good-bastard acquaintance of mine in Wales (OK, a poor-bastard acquaintance as well) hasn't seen them all and wants to get up to speed before he rents the movie.

As a result of the (albeit compressed) video and audio stream, our connection to the rest of the world isn't performing up to what we laughingly refer to as scratch.

And there's NO POINT in getting into a discussion with the new boss about bandwidth requirements, as he's been trawling through the notes of his various predecessors (including the ones in crayon from the loony academy saying "THEY'RE OUT TO GET ME!") and has already informed me that there IS no upgrade path...

However, this doesn't solve the perceivable lack of response of transmission, but with any luck it'll pick up once I patch the video onto a live redundant bearer that our network carrier company ran to our building but neglected to configure as 'down'.

I mean, that's just GAGGING for it, as all of their competitors wouldn't have left a spare NTU in the building in the first place.

Of course, I justify the temporary unofficial upgrade by telling myself how much the carrier company is screwing us for. Who says I'm not the sentimental type?

I liven up the link and run a test. Sure enough, it's even on an active router port! I route the video through it, thanking the gods for a provider with more ports and money than sense...

It's just a matter of time of course, so I make sure that external caller-ID and subscriber look-up are configured into the phone. Sure enough, in a couple of hours, I get a call from our network carrier's customer rep.

"Hello, Belgian Steak and Waffle House...do you need a reservation?" I say carefully, in an accent somewhere between eastern Europe and East London.

"Sorry, wrong number," the caller mutters, then rings off. Two seconds later, he's back. "Belgian Steak and Waffle House...do you need a reservation?"

Now he's confused. He verifies the number he has in front of him against mine, then asks if we have computers on the premises.

"I theenk you mean the peepill upstairs," I say. "Day haf many computers."

He verifies that the company name is right, then asks how I'm on their phone number.

"Oh, that ees a long story," I say. "There was a beeg accident into the building, and now all the phones, they don't go so good seence dee man came to feex it..."

Realising that my accent is rapidly heading towards Mexican, I make my break. "So sorry, I haf some customer - can you call back afder lonch?"

So now I'm on limited time. I know that they're not going to disconnect me in case the problem's a result of work that THEY have done - or worse still, the connection is supposed to be in place but no one's told them about it - but I also know they're not going to let me have free bandwidth for long.

A sneaky plan is called for.

I call our customer rep (after disabling caller-ID look-up) and ask him what the hell is going on with our link speed.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Something's using all the inbound traffic!" I blurt. "Just after one of your guys came and fixed the link for us and screwed up our phones at the same time."

"But we don't supply your phones!" he blurts.

"I know you don't!" I cry, "but now they're all mixed up with the other companies in the building and no one's able to do anything!"

"But we never had a service call for you!" he wails. "Have you got a job reference?"

I switch my phone line to modem and flick it into manual connect so he gets an earful of garbage, then switch it back and forth so it sounds like a dalek reaching puberty.

"You haven't got a service call?" I ask.

"No," he blurts, while I check the CCTV to see if the boss's company car is still in the basement.

"But it was just recen..." I blurt, then switch in the modem for the rest of the call and slip off to the basement.

A quick spray of matt-black on the security camera lens later, I've got the boss's bonnet open and a pair of vice grips on his wide-open accelerator cable. Now all that remains is to slip the vehicle into reverse and disconnect the start-in-park-only switch.

Barely half an hour later, the boss's car rips into the telecomms room at about 30mph, more than sufficient to terminate all network and phone connections.

I rip down to the basement and help the boss from the car to a point where he won't see me retrieving Systems and Networks tools from the vehicle.

While he's in shock I add a couple of finishing touches to the NTUs with one of the few remaining fire axes the US company owners supplied as part of their corporate safety plan.

"It just ran away on me!" the boss cries. "Well, the whole building's out!" I say.

"Can't you get it live again?"

"Yeah, but it'll take all night at least and we'll have to enable the redundant link just to get the throughput. Besides which, both NTUs are destroyed, and they only make faster models now and..."

A day later, I'm watching the video of the aforementioned TV series as it comes to me from Wales. Link speed perfect.

"How long will we need that redundant link?" asks the boss.

"Phew," I mumble, "I don't know - how long is the complete Star Trek series?"

"Why?"

"No reason."

When the BOFH signs up for company therapy sessions, he wants to freely associate about problems. But whose? Blackmail's in the air...

I get in one morning and find posters around the coffee machine to the effect that the US owners of the company, under the expanding umbrella of their Health and Welfare scheme 'for all workers' (which eliminates half the staff for a start), are offering free therapy sessions to anyone who feels they need them.

"It's crazy!" I blurt to the PFY, as soon as he rolls in, holding one of the aforementioned posters.

"Why?" he asks, with the air of someone seriously contemplating taking up the offer.

"Oh, puhleeze. Who would turn down the opportunity of spending an hour of paid time whining to someone about how their mother didn't love them and their deep-seated problems concerning trains and tunnels?"

"Sorry?" the PFY asks, obviously a little short on his Freud appreciation.

"Look, half the staff already whine to each other about how hard they have it. This just legitimises the whole process!"

"You really have a problem with this don't you?" the PFY quips. "Perhaps you should seek some help with your feelings of..."

(One very long high-pitched scream later): "So do you get what I'm trying to impart?" I ask, opening the drawer that contains the PFY's testicles.

"Yes, yes," the PFY gasps, on his way to the ground. "But..."

"But?" I cry, opening the drawer for round two.

"But don't you think that management knows the staff spend lots of time whingeing..."

"And are trying to reduce it by making the whole process 'street-legal' so to speak?" I finish.

"Yeah. If they get real help, instead of a chance to grumble..."

"...they might become more productive?"

"Yes!"

"I see your point, but I don't think that management knows how much the staff like to complain. Still, this warrants keeping an eye on..."

And so it was that, two days later, I was getting first-hand experience of the therapy 'thang'.

"...and so what we use is a therapy called 'RET' - Rational Emotive Therapy, where we ask you to face your problems as problems that you, and you alone, have to deal with, challenging their reason for being there in the first place."

"Ah yes," I interrupt, to avoid lapsing into a boredom coma. "I've done a lot of therapy in the past, mainly 'TPC', but it doesn't seem to work - my problems are back by the next therapy session."

"TPC? I'm not familiar with that."

"TPC? Ten Pints and a Curry. Every Friday, down at the local boozier and then down the local Ruby."

"Yes, very droll," he comments, lounging back in his comfy chair. "Now perhaps we can talk about what brings you here?"

"Of course! I'm actually here to find out all the dirt you've amassed on our staff!"

"I'm sorry?"

"You know, the dirt - who's a bedwetter, who has a predilection for the company of furry rodents, that sort of thing."

"All the information I gather is confiden..."

"Like the boss being impotent?" I ask.

"How did you...?"

"All in your notes," I murmur.

"I don't keep them on computer!"

"But you do keep them on a pad in full view of the elevator CCTV cameras..."

"But they're in modified shorthand!"

"That abbreviated Pitmans?! It took eight minutes of processor time to decode on a machine with a technical vocab, phrase analysis and variance..."

"But..."

"Face it - I'm going to say you told me anyway, so why not cut out the middleman?"

"I can't. I swore an oath."

"The one about not dobbing in nutters?"

"We don't use terms like 'nutter'."

"Or like 'professional misconduct'?"

"What do you really want?"

"Dirt!"

"Oh, all right!" he shouts angrily.

"Your boss has an irrational fear of power staplers."

"That's not irrational. Almost everyone I know does! The PFY has nightmares about them. And drawers now, too, I shouldn't wonder..."

"And one of your telephonists feels she may be a nymphomaniac."

"Which one!?" blurts the PFY, bursting in from behind the door.

Honestly, that boy should eat less red meat...

"Small potatoes," I complain. "I'm after the real stuff no-one should know about..."

"There isn't any!"

"Breach of professional confidentiality means personal damages proceedings now, doesn't it?" I ask the PFY in an off-hand manner.

"Oh yes," he chirps, grinning evilly.

"All right," my personal therapist moans, throwing in the towel...

I really did feel better at the end of the session. So good, in fact, that I booked myself in every week...

"...for about two weeks, until word gets out that secrets aren't so secret," I mention to the PFY, as I start my TPC therapy early Friday afternoon.

"That won't be for a while will it?" the PFY queries.

"I dunno, ask me after six pints when the 'workers' arrive. I feel a 'cathartic' experience coming on in my therapy..."

"Sounds nasty..."

"Bound to be. Your turn to pay for therapy I believe?" I mumble, handing over my medicinal vessel.

That's the thing with therapy - you've got to want to get better.

When you need a few spares, why not depth-charge your boss' Minesweeper game and use the replacement parts to leave him shell-shocked

The boss is screwed. After I'd installed the software on his brand spanking new laptop, I slapped a "Warranty void if seal broken" sticker across the front of it.

The beads of sweat on his brow and twitching fingers - as he contemplates getting his hands on the thing - speak volumes about his state of mind. He's obviously in Minesweeper withdrawal - even though I replaced the version on his old laptop with one that always explodes a bomb in the first move.

I leave him to his personal trauma.

Sure enough, he's cracked under the pressure, and enters my office 15 minutes later.

"That bloody laptop doesn't work!" he bellows.

It's not surprising considering the PFY and I gutted all but the keyboard, power supply and screen to provide the heart and soul for our latest and greatest project, the IT cleaning droid - which is infinitely more intelligent than the floor polishing droids they release into the corridors at night. I wrote the code myself, even the image recognition and seek-and-destroy - I mean seek-and-clean - code. It's a work of art.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Well, I opened it up an..."

"You opened it up?!"

"Yes."

"And voided the warranty?!"

"I couldn't use it 'til I'd opened it up, could I? The keyboard's inside when it's closed."

"Oh, I see what you mean. I thought you'd broken one of those warranty void seals!" I cry, faking the kind of relief some people pay large sums of money for.

"Ah, well, there was one seal I had to break, but that was the one over the 'open' latch."

"You mean you didn't get an engineer to install it?!" I gasp.

"You installed it!"

"No, I only put the software on it via Target-Mode SCSI upload. You need an engineer to provide the inherent firmware personality modes." (Dummy mode on.)

"But it's a bloody laptop, not a mainframe," he snuffles.

"Yes, but the engineer has to set the localisation on the machine for you, and personalise the unit, passwords and stuff."

"I see. Well, you'd best do it."

"You're joking aren't you? They're not going to touch it with a broken warranty void sticker."

"Why not?"

"Because you could have set the localisation to Peru, or something. That'll all have been stored in permanent non-volatile, doubly redundant, device-specific, static RAM." (Dummy mode cranked up.)

"What does that mean?"

"It means all the components have stored the fact that your machine is installed in Peru, Antarctica, or wherever it configured itself for. If that location conflicts with what the GPS tracker says..."

"My laptop's got a GPS inside it!" he cries excitedly.

"Yes, but if the hardware conflicts with what it says, well, it may as well be a machine with no motherboard, memory, floppy or CD-ROM - it won't ever go."

True, Ray Charles could have seen that coming, but who gives a toss - it worked.

"W...w...what should I do?" he burbles, contemplating the full horror of a whole day without his favourite game.

"Well, we could buy in the parts and replace them, and I could perform the engineer install. But it'd

never be under warranty."

Quicker than you can whisper "executive decision" down a scrambled phone line, the boss has agreed to purchase the aforementioned items.

I, of course, slap all the old stuff back into the boss's machine - being sure to leave a couple of scratches on the casing and have a couple of screws left over so that it looks like a real engineer worked on it - then kick it into life (literally) and hand it back to the boss.

So everyone's happy. The boss has his new laptop, and the droid has brand spanking new hardware. I fire up the droid and get the PFY on the remote console to give my code a good, hard seeing-to. I've offered him a pint for every error he can detect.

"It won't go near walls," the PFY murmurs, without looking up from the console.

Dedication is his middle name. At AA meetings, anyway.

"No, it has an object back-up of a foot so people don't walk into it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it backs up a foot from any object."

"I see," he says, "and what about moving objects?"

"It keeps a foot away from them," I respond, anticipating his plan. "So you're not going to run it into a wall at top speed, nor is it going to let you run up to it and 'physically reboot' it the old-fashioned way."

"The thought never entered my head," the PFY replies, offended. "I was just wondering what it would do in this situation," he says, pointing at the video monitor showing the boss entering the lift with his new laptop.

"So you've not heard of a lag to prevent hysteresis?" the PFY burbles smugly (and drunkenly) at the pub later that evening.

"Uh-huh," I mumble, "where are we up to now?"

"Ah, I think we're up to where the droid backed up from the lift wall and into the boss, then backed up from the boss, over his laptop and into the lift wall. For the...11th time."

Ah...my job beats playing Minesweeper anyday.

After complaints about his 'comforting bass line', the bastard makes sure the boss gets the message...very loud and clear

The boss comes in with a pasty look on his face which can only mean one thing - he's got to do something he doesn't want to.

"Er, I've had a complaint about you," he mumbles unhappily.

"Really?" I respond politely, while reaching under the table for the 2-wood golf club which I keep for special occasions.

"Yes, yes, but I'm not sure it's valid," he blurts, trying to hide himself deep in the rough.

"Really?" I ask, foregoing the 2-wood for a 6-iron, considering the lie of the conversation.

"Errm, no. You see, he's complained about your music."

"What music?" the PFY asks. "That music," he replies, indicating the surrounding air.

"That music?" I ask, waving a hand around in a similar manner while reconsidering my options.

"Yes, he's complaining that it's too loud."

"Too loud?" the PFY counters disgustedly. "But we can hardly hear it."

"I use it for relaxation," I murmur. "It keeps me calm in the face of adversity."

Now that the implied threat is on the table, there's nothing left for the boss to do but back down. Or risk life and limb in the pursuit of an unattainable goal.

"I know that you can hardly hear it, but the same doesn't go for the people downstairs. Anyway, I can't believe that it's relaxing."

So it's life and limb on the line then.

"Offspring is a very relaxing band," I say. "Yeah, it's the comforting bass line," the PFY chirps. "Besides," I add, "it's at a low level."

"NOT IN THE BLOODY COMPUTER ROOM IT ISN'T!" the boss shouts, losing patience.

"Well, no, but if we turned it down we wouldn't be able to hear it through the soundproof wall." "The people on the floor below bloody well can, though! Why don't you put your stereo in here?"

"We tried that, but it kept popping the circuit breaker when we turned the volume past 3."

"THEN GET A NORMAL STEREO!"

"It IS a normal stereo," I gasp.

"NORMAL?"

"Yes, Notting Hill Carnival normal."

"Well it's not good enough.

I want it TURNED DOWN!"

This just won't do. The PFY and I are relying on the 'comforting bass line' to work its magic on a rack of disks that should have been retired, but for the stupidity of management who want both zero downtime and reliable service.

So it's back to the drawing board again. I slap a set of airport-issue ear protectors on, having learnt from the PFY's mistakes (the poor bastard set off the water leak detector circuits when he wet his pants after pressing the 'play' button with the volume set at 6).

Entering the computer room, I notice the error of his ways - he'd left the volume at 6 when he stepped in his own by-products AND he hadn't switched the bass expand circuits on.

I note that the amp's power supply is 'running a little hot', as we in the trade say. Not good. I break off the volume knob (now pointing at the infamous '11' setting, then slip back into the control room, just in time to see a wild-eyed boss burst through the door.

"I TOLD YOU TO TURN IT DOWN, NOT UP!"

"I tried to turn it down," I blurt, "but the knob broke off!"

"Why didn't you turn it off then?!"

"Because the amp was so warm I thought it might trigger the heat sensors and release the halon."

So, of course, he is screwed. He KNOWS this is a 'tragic workplace accident' with his name scribbled all over it, and he's not going to bite.

"Well can't you switch the power off from the breakers outside?" he asks.

What a wimp. "We can try!" I cry, rushing to the breaker cupboard. "All the ceiling outlets in the front are on red phase, so it's got to be one of these."

30 seconds later..."Red?"

I thought they were blue," the PFY chips in.

A further 30 seconds later..."So, it's yellow then," the boss cries, in the face of a cacophony of outage alarms.

"Worth a crack!" I cry, flipping a switch.

"No, that's the old disk rack," the PFY cries from the observation window.

CLACK! "Disk rack again!"

"My mistake!" I blurt, innocently, then flip the next switch.

"Right, let's see what the damage is," the boss cries, pushing past me to the computer room.

"I wouldn't..." I cry, but too late.

"You see the problem with kit like that," I explain to the PFY at the window, "is that turning off the

power also shuts off the cooling fan, whereas switching it off at its power switch will leave the fan on until the unit has finished cooling."

"So the kit gets hotter?"

"Let's see what the judges have to say," I respond, nodding at one of the heat sensors.

A couple of short, and fairly muffled 'whoop-whoops' later...

"Is the halon hold-off button still broken?" the PFY asks.

"Well, the judges' decision on that one is...final, by the looks of things. Still time for a quick wave though," I cry.

Of course, we let him out... eventually. After all, he's only new.

Someone has lifted some kit from under the BOFH's nose. Is it the boss? Is it the beancounters? No. There's a new Bastard in town.

I was mystified. The boss was giving me grief for missing kit, which was nothing unusual but this time I hadn't prepared my story. The simple reason was that it wasn't me who'd taken it. And this time it was a serious amount of kit that had gone.

Naturally, it's taken as read that a certain amount of spillage finds its way to BOFH Enterprises but very little actually disappears - the value tends to appear as miscellaneous lines in a beancounter's spreadsheet and besides, not much of this Unattributed Cost (as I believe the technical term is) finds its way into my pocket - mainly because it generally goes towards paying for a small holiday in Acapulco or somewhere equally humble.

"It's strange," I say to the PFY after we'd escaped from the boss's sanctum, our ears still ringing from the force of his invective. "It's strange that whoever is doing this has evaded all our carefully prepared traps (the electrified door handle and the strategically placed axe) and has managed to liberate some of our shiny new stock. He wasn't even put off by its careful labelling as 'defective'."

There were three possibilities: we'd had a break-in by a thief who knew exactly what he was looking for; the boss had woken up to the possibility that there was serious remuneration in 'defective' stock; or there was another Bastard somewhere on the premises.

I discounted the first possibility. Not only had none of our alarms gone off but an outside tea-leaf would surely have taken the colour TV (sorry, the High-Definition Multimedia Receiving Apparatus) that the PFY and I use during downtime or when the Test Match is on (which seem to coincide with remarkable regularity).

"Could it be the boss?" asks the PFY. "Do you think that the bollocking he's just given us was all for show?"

"Impossible. The boss is not just dim, he's 20 watt. I understand that he needs an A-Z to find his way home at night."

"And even then he gets lost," says the PFY, alluding to the night that the boss foolishly came for a drink with the boys, only to discover that extra-strength Polish white spirit is undetectable in strong lager (and after three of them so is shoe polish). "Still, it was only a £30 taxi ride from the wilds of east London."

That, incredible as it seemed, left only the possibility of one of my fellow workers, a breed for whom technical sophistication means changing the text colour in Office.

But which one? It was obviously no one in marketing - they scarcely had the intelligence to turn a door handle the right way. It was obviously not anyone in sales as they'd hardly be elsewhere while the pubs were open and not sober enough after they'd closed. The beancounters were a strong possibility - those Unattributed Costs were really getting under their skin - but they'd have chosen a more subtle revenge. It couldn't have been anyone from admin and building services...

Something clicked. There was a new guy there who a few weeks before had gone round asking questions, "just to test the security of the building". Naturally I hadn't given him the right answers but how could I have been so stupid...

Now I come to think about it, this guy seemed to be a cut above the rest but then so would an orang-utan. The only question was how to get the kit back, or, failing that, a contribution to the Bastard Holiday Fund.

Seeking inspiration, I idly flicked through the outgoing post log. One foreign-bound item caught my eye and I smiled.

The next day, I went down to building services and happened to overhear Kevin talking. By chance, he was dropping some big words like 'screen' and 'keyboard' so I knew we had our man. It was time for a phone call.

Back at mission control, I flicked on the intercom and heard Kevin's voice come over loud and clear, as a deep foreign voice said: "Mr Kevin?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Just call me Stefan. It's about this consignment of tights that you delivered to us."

"That's right, you got 'em?"

"We have, that's just the point. I was given to understand that...er, certain other goods were being delivered."

"But...but..."

"I hope you realise that the last person who double-crossed us is now part of a motorway infrastructure."

"But...but..."

"I'm sure you want to avoid any misunderstandings. So, if you return the sum we gave you plus, say, £500 for incidental expenses, we can avoid any unfortunate repercussions. Shall we say that you deposit the money behind the dustbin shed by 12pm today?"

There was a strangled "yes".

I switched the intercom off. "Your cousin's very good isn't he? I said to the PFY. "I'm sure he'll go a long way in drama college."

"Come on," he replied. "There's time for a quick game of Doom before we collect our winnings, er... Unattributed Costs."

It takes a bastard to catch a bastard.

When the BOFH bugged the boss's office he wasn't to know the kit he'd installed would double up as a vehicle to crack the head beancounter's nut

The PFY and I are in the office teasing users by toggling their switch ports whenever their pop-client opens a connection to the mail server when an urgent alarm starts ringing on the network monitor.

"BSD?" the PFY murmurs, "What the hell does BSD stand for?" Double-clicking on the icon concerned, he continues: "It's in the boss's office."

Sensing my suppressed panic, he returns to his original tack. "So what the hell's a BSD?"

"It's a new tailor-made piece of kit I conceived and installed," I reply.

"It's a network device, then?"

"Yes, in that it delivers an SNMP trap in response to certain predetermined criteria occurring."

"Criteria no doubt linked with its cryptic acronym?"

"Precisely."

"An acronym that stands for?" the PFY sighs, losing patience.

"Bullshit detection."

"Bullshit detection?"

"Yeah, bullshit detection. I've decided that I can't be arsed spending a couple of hours a day sifting through the Boss's office conversation tapes just to see if he's planning something, so I've developed a piece of hardware and software to do it for me."

"Which is?" the PFY asks, his curiosity peaking.

"Ah, a bit of voice recognition software that parses conversations for keywords used in close proximity to each other."

"Keywords, like what?"

"'Purchase', 'buy' or 'invest in' - in conjunction with 'new technology', 'updated software' etc., plus lots of other little bits and pieces that can only mean trouble."

"You mean words like 'maintenance budget'?"

"The very same. There's no legitimate reason why the boss should be talking about that unless he's going to increase it, and that's unlikely to happen following my efforts yesterday to migrate those beancounters from that archaic tower subsystem they use for hot back-ups."

"Your efforts to migrate users ... Oh, you mean when you set the machine on fire and pushed it out of the third-floor window?"

"I most certainly did not set the machine on fire! That was spontaneous hardware combustion - just like the human kind the tabloids talk about. Besides, throwing it out the window was the safest thing to do given that there was no fire extinguisher at hand."

"There wasn't one three floors below either, was there?" the PFY asks snidely.

"I don't suppose there was, but I can't see what that..."

"When the chunky, burning machine plunged through the open sun-roof of the head beancounter's vehicle, which just happened to be parked there - setting it on fire."

"Coincidence, pure and simple."

"Coincidence?"

"Yes, and I resent ... actually, is there a point to all this?"

"No, no," the PFY counters innocently. "Just asking. So, this bullshit detection, what's it running on? Not a piece of kit that the boss is going to discover - or discover missing from where it should be?"

"Well, that's the beauty of it. Because he's got so many machines in his office, he had a ventilation fan installed, which just so happens to be the cooling that other tower machine users have already been migrated from."

"Not that monstrous chunk of iron from the sixth floor that you said was using parts from Chernobyl and expelling dangerous levels of radioactive waste?!"

"The very same."

"I never thought they'd buy that."

"Well, not at first," I sigh, "But once I'd taken that black marker to the chest X-rays in the med centre they couldn't wait to get rid of it"

"True," the PFY grudgingly admits. "So, how'd you get it into the ceiling?"

"Well, Janitor George gave me a hand lifting it into the roof as he wanted the real fan for his

bathroom at home."

"A fair exchange," the PFY says. "So, what's the warning mean?"

"Well, it's a simple traffic threshold MIB: the more bullshit in the office, the more network traffic the machine reports. That way, no-one will give it a second thought."

"So what's it up to? What's the machine's owner name field say?"

"100 per cent, and Dave C."

"So, that means Dave C is in the boss's office talking up a storm about hardware that we should be buying, money that he should be spending etc.."

"He's a borderline DIY geek, isn't he?" the PFY asks warily.

"Correct. Rumour has it he installed his own keyboard once, but you know how users talk."

"But is it bad?"

"Oh, yes," I respond, leaning past him to point at the display. "See the 30-second average level? That's really the boss's level of disagreement."

"But it's at zero!"

"Meaning?"

"He's going to let Dave spend our budget."

We both break for the door at the same time to steer the boss away from the foolish.

But before we can get into place the God of Computing acts.

Later, the PFY and I piece together what had happened.

"So, apparently, Dave tried to fix the noisy aircon fan by prodding the roofing tile with the boss's umbrella, upsetting the BSD machine's delicate balance on the rafter and causing it to plummet through the roof and strike the DIY cowboy," the PFY finishes.

Now that's justice for you.

Web-only Episode: Christmas Eve, 1998

He was dead all right.

"You've gone too far this time" said the PFY breathlessly.

"Well, I guess I just under-estimated the amount of power going through the doorknob."

It was Christmas Eve and the seasonal prank had just gone slightly wrong. Honestly, Old Ebenezer Bastard had tried the old "electrified door handle for the computer room" trick a dozen times before and it had all been good seasonal fun. Still, this wasn't the first manager to die on him and it was sure not to be the last.

Ebenezer must have stayed a bit longer than usual in the pub that evening - this kind of event does tend to shock you a bit and he needed a few to steady the nerves. Of course, the fact that the young beancounter felt 'obliged' to buy him drinks all evening helped - and all because Ebenezer had happened to mention something about video footage from the office party. So corny, but so effective.

Anyway, the drink must have been sitting heavily on his stomach when he got back to his flat, as he could have sworn that the door knocker changed shape to look like the face of his old boss (before the scorch marks disfigured it, that is).

Putting the effects down to the ten extra pints of Brainfrazzle he'd had, he ignored the door knocker and went up the stairs. But there was a restlessness about him that night. In truth, it had been a long time since he'd enjoyed Christmas. He hated all the false bonhomie and the pleasant chit-chat from people with whom he hadn't anything in common; he hated the way that people spent vast sums on their kids when that money could have been quite easily diverted into the Bastard Holiday Fund. What was worse, some of his work colleagues expected him to buy drinks for them.

Even young Cratchit, his PFY, had been affected and was spending his days wistfully dreaming about Denise from the pool and a few quick snogs under the mistletoe. The young fool even wanted him to join him for a few drinks on Christmas Day. What did he have to celebrate, on his salary.

"Bah, humbug." Ebenezer said loudly to himself, as he heated up the instant dinner that would represent his one solid meal that day.

As he went to bed in that sparsely furnished, unheated room that he called home he saw something in the corner: this time there was no mistaking it. It was definitely the shape of his erstwhile Boss but there was a horrible, clanking noise that seemed to fill the room and make Ebenezer shrink with terror.

"Ebenezer Bastard" came the voice, and though it was recognisably his boss's there was a touch of the underworld about it.

"Ebenezer Bastard" repeated the voice. "I have been condemned to a terrible place, where men of unspeakable wickedness live out their days.

Ebenezer breathed a sigh of relief. "So you're not dead after all, you've just gone to work for Microsoft. I wonder..."

"Silence" thundered the apparition and the clanking got louder. "I speak of a place where you surely will be condemned for eternal torment."

"What do you want with me, spirit?" stammered Ebenezer, finding that the effect of ten pints of extra-strong lager was diminishing somewhat.

"This night you will be visited by three spirits: the Ghost of Tech Support Past; the Ghost of Tech Support Present; and the ghost of Tech Support Yet to Come. Listen to them - there is time yet to

repent."

"Spirit," said Ebenezer. "What is that rattling sound I keep hearing?."

"You mean this?" said the shade, shaking what appeared to be long tail.

Ebenezer Bastard peered through the gloom. He could dimly perceive a chain but tied to it were all manner of devices that had made his life easier: there was the claw hammer that was such an excellent "reconfiguring" tool, there was the anvil that he'd enthusiastically "tested" PCs on, there were power staplers galore, there was every item under the sun that had made his life easier.

"I see you recognise some of them" said the apparition with a grimace. "I used all these tools when I was a young bastard. Now my crimes have caught up with me and I must drag my tools around with me for eternity. But be warned, this chain is long and the burden is onerous but the chain that is being forged for you is already twice the length and three times as heavy."

In emphasis he shook the chain until all the objects leaped up and down and the whole room seemed to rattle.

"I must depart now but remember, three spirits..." and with a low moan he disappeared.

Ebenezer's courage returned.

"Bah humbug, ghosts indeed. That beer must have been stronger than I thought".

And with that thought he staggered off to bed and fell asleep without undressing.

It was just after midnight when he awoke and peered into the gloom. What appeared to be a small child was hovering at the foot of the bed.

Suddenly, the moon moved from behind the clouds and Ebenezer could see that it was no child but an old man of child's shape, dressed in what appeared to be a white tunic. As his eyes got used to the gloom, he discerned that it was an old freebie T-shirt with CP/M emblazoned on the front. The apparition's legs and feet were bare but round his middle was tied some thin Ethernet cable.

"Are you the Ghost of Tech Support Past?" asked Ebenezer.

"I am," said the spirit.

"Long past?"

"No, your past."

The ghost waved his hand and suddenly the walls of the flat disappeared. Ebenezer and the spirit found themselves in a busy office, where a Christmas party was in full swing. The disco was booming out, sales people were chasing secretaries with bunches of mistletoe, the chief bean counter was slumped in a corner, the marketing manager was regaling the HR manager with the tales of the last campaign before last. The air was filled with the sound of laughter, shouting, chatter, breaking glass and a thumping disco beat: in short, a typical office party.

"It's fun isn't it," said the spirit, "but isn't there one person not joining in?"

"There is," said Ebenezer.

Down in the bowels of the building a solitary person was still in the computer room. Methodically working through the personnel records of the entire staff (the HR password having long been discovered), the young Ebenezer was ensuring that his Christmas overtime was not being wasted.

"Were you not invited to the party?" asked the spirit.

"No," said Ebenezer. "Not since the year when the fire alarm accidentally went and the sprinklers all came on. And of course, all the booze disappeared. For some reason they seemed to think it was my fault, just because I'd been seen with the alarm system technical manual that day. Miserable ingrates, after all I'd done for them."

Suddenly the vision vanished and Ebenezer found himself back in his flat again, his mind still filled with the wonder of what he'd seen.

He heard a noise from another room and peered round the corner. The room was filled with light and on a pile of PCs sat a jolly looking gentleman. His copious stomach seemed to fill half the room and his beard - for he appeared to be more beard than face - filled the other half.

"Are you the Ghost of Tech Support Present?" said Ebenezer.

The spirit laughed his assent.

"Take my hand," he said, "and let us look at the rest of the world this Christmas."

Suddenly, they were hovering over the City. Time and time again they appeared outside computer support rooms where teams of workers toiled diligently to solve problems as soon as they appeared. They worked with smiles on their faces, singing along to the boom boxes parked in the corner of their rooms.

At Megabank there was a particular tricky problem. "That's an easy one to solve," thought Ebenezer, "pull the mains switch and just say that there's a network outage. And because it's Christmas it can't be put right for a couple of days... and you still earn the Christmas bonus."

Instead he watched open-mouthed as his counterpart punched in the password and worked systematically trying to sort out the problem.

"Standards are slipping," he thought.

But suddenly, the scene changed. They were in a pub and his PFY was just buying a round of drinks.

"Here's to Christmas," he said to Denise, cheerfully raising his glass.

"And to us," she giggled.

"And to absent friends," said the PFY. "Here's to old Ebenezer."

"What, that old misery guts," said Denise. "I've never known someone hate the world so much. I wish he'd leave the company, why can't they get rid of him - no-one can stand him?"

"Well, he knows too much about what people have been up to. I certainly don't think the chairman wants all the details of his trip to Amsterdam coming out. Come on, where's your Christmas charity?"

Reluctantly, she returned the toast and the conversation turned to matters more interesting to young people.

In the distance, Ebenezer saw a shrouded figure approach. From the folds of his cape, a long, bony finger protruded and beckoned Ebenezer to him.

"Are you the Ghost of Tech Support Future that was promised to me?" he said.

The ghost nodded and again signalled Ebenezer to follow.

They trudged through the darkness until they found themselves outside a funeral directors' office.

Two undertakers were busily engaged in putting the finishing touches to a coffin.

"Good riddance to him I say," said one, with scarce regard for the sanctity of his profession.

"Though he'd never bleedin' die," said the other, with even less regard.

"When's the funeral?"

"Don't think it matters, there'll scarcely be anyone attending. Perhaps they'll just throw him in the ground and be done with it." They both cackled hysterically.

"Who are they talking about?" said Ebenezer.

The spirit pointed his finger and suddenly the coffin lid flew open. Aghast, the old misanthrope saw his own features.

He sat bolt upright in bed and saw the first glimmers of day coming through his curtains. It had all been a dream. And yet the events of the night had left him with a strange feeling.

He put on his shoes and dashed round to Cratchit, his PFY. He furiously banged on the door and demanded admittance.

It was a bleary-eyed PFY who let him in.

"Whassamatter?"

"I've just had the most amazing experience!"

"Don't tell me," chortled the PFY. "You've met three spirits like that bloke in the book and you're going to turn over a new leaf."

"Bollocks to that. In the long run, we're all dead anyway, might as well have some fun before we go. No, I've found out the admin password for the Megabank system, come let me show you how a real bastard behaves....."