

The BOFH-Stories 1999

Too Quiet.?

It's quiet. Possibly too quiet - The kind of quiet you get when you shove a thick chunk of copper wire in a circuit breaker, a nail in the phase circuit breaker and a bolt in the floor circuit breaker... then drop a screwdriver down one of the ventilation holes of the mainframe's power supply.

I make my way carefully through the emergency-lit computer room to my office, my only detour being a quick circuit breaker replacement tour and a stop at the bin to drop off a badly scarred screwdriver.

I always prefer to start the year off with a bang - or, to be more precise, a series of loud hums, a crackle or two, and a muffled BOOM from the sub-basement.

After all, it's just good manners to let the great unwashed know just who's still at the helm of this operation.

The PFY, meantime, is on holiday, exercising his Christmas bonus to its maximum potential. After all, it's only a matter of time before the Boss realises that there's a duplicate of his credit card out there (again) and calls up the card company.

I did my bit for the PFY's R&R by pushing the Boss's latest credit card statement, envelope and all, into the shredder. Apparently he was under the misguided impression that receiving mail at work is far safer than getting it at his dockside apartment drop box... a mistake that's likely to cost him.

Speaking of the Boss's mail, it's about time to distribute all his waylaid Christmas vendor freebies among the IT troops in a manner not altogether unlike a modern day IT Robin Hood.

"What? Is that it?" a particularly ungrateful antipodean contractor (who couldn't find his bum with a mirror and a torch without a 1:1 scale map) asks after I hand him a bottle of red wine that has better disinfectant than drinking properties.

"Sorry?"

"It's a little, er, cheap, isn't it?" he snuffles.

The things you hear when the PFY isn't around with a nailgun.

"Gee, sorry Mike!" I cry. "I guess it's not like home where you get your pick of the flock for the night as a Christmas bonus."

He lets the slur pass, and grudgingly accepts the bottle, not realising just how well I remember the time, after an agency knees-up, when he dropped me off at the farthest tube station from my destination...three minutes AFTER the Tube stopped running.

Trusting no one, he stashes the bottle in his desk-side footlocker, giving me the chance to stuff a

large piece of foam packing over the cooling inlet at the back of his desktop machine.

Thermal overheating time bomb set, I wander off to distribute more New Year cheer.

And not a moment too soon, as the power is restored and the building springs back into life.

When I've run out of blocks of foam and cheap bottles of wine, I grab some of the good stuff and go on my REAL goodwill rounds, dropping off gifts to the telephone operators, the cleaning staff, and, lastly, the building maintenance guy. Know what palms to grease and when - that's my motto.

Having ensured that no one's going to investigate my long-distance phone bill, find the Boss's shredded credit card statements or wonder what's protected by the Armageddon-proof lock on the door marked 'Plant Room No3' in the basement, I return to my office.

As luck would have it, the Boss is waiting for me there with an annoyed expression on his face. It's only a 'generally-annoyed' expression, which means that he's probably not found out about his credit card yet, let alone me calling up his credit company and cranking his limit up so far he'd get nose bleeds just thinking about it.

"What's this about you blocking up the cooling vent of Mike's machine?" he asks.

Bastard!

"Oh, that - it's not sponge, it's...noise damping material."

"?..."

"Noise damping - the material has a gaseous porosity which allows air flow but reduces sound output by a factor of around 10 decibels per megalitre of vacuum-rated European Standard air."

"Err, really? So it's just to cut down noise?"

"Of course!"

"Hang on a minute!..."

I suppose it was a little too good to be true...

"Yes?"

"Why haven't you installed any on my machine?"

I don't believe it...

"Oh, I was just getting round to it - your one is in that old monitor box over there."

He ferrets around in the aforementioned box before pulling out a bit of packing.

"This? It's a bit of machine packing."

"No, it's a sound-reducing, air-cleaning filter."

"Then why has it got 'recycle this packing carefully' printed on the side of it?"

"Because... it was packed in old newspaper and they couldn't print over the top of it."

"Oh... so how do I use it?"

"Well, you make sure that it's hard up against the fan inlet so that no, er, 'unfiltered' air can get through."

"Right, well, I'll let Mike know then," he bumbles as he wanders out to destroy his machine.

"No, no!" I cry. "Leave that to me - I'll sort him out."

And sort him out I will.

BOFH '99. Hooray for Payday. Or maybe not..

Thursday. Pay Day. I love Pay Days. In fact, work is always better on a pay day. People are nicer, complaints are rarer, bank managers are friendlier - a guy could get used to this.

A bastard, however, could lose the touch - that finely honed reflex that enables him (or her) to sort the wheat from the chaff (user-wise). Complacency is the enemy.

Still, the brown envelope containing a cheque is a useful reminder of what we do this for. Smiling happily, I fumble with the self-adhesive seal on the envelope (the glue must be the same stuff they use to hold tiles onto the space shuttle), before losing my patience and ripping the envelope open from the other end.

Ahhh!, The smell of a freshly printed cheque...the feel of it as it slips out of the protective environment of brown paper. The temporary but overpowering feeling of goodwill for all things beancountry as I note the aesthetically pleasing sight of my company's name laserprinted on the top line, right above the amount of...WHAT THE HELL!?

THE THIEVING BEANCOUNTER BASTARDS HAVE UNDERPAID ME!

I have another look, just to make sure I've got it right. "The beancounters have underpaid me!"

"You're joking!?"

"I'm not! Look, they've rounded down the amount!"

"By how much?"

"27p!"

"Hang on, you're going to maim someone - possibly permanently - over 27p?"

"It's not that it's 27p, it's the principle of the thing. STEALING from me! It's unheard of! It's the thin end of the wedge - before you know it, they'll be riding the lifts again. They'll be questioning

your expense claims, talking to you about business plans at lunchtime, and..."

About 10 minutes later I come to, with a rather nasty bruise on my head and a pain in my side.

"Sorry about that," the PFY calls from behind the door of the computer room, waving one of our low-output (aka 'warning') cattle prods.

He must have zapped me while I was under the influence of theft-crisis. "That's OK," I respond, "perfectly acceptable under the circumstances."

I go to let myself into the computer room to assure him there are no hard feelings, only to find my access card's been given 'lock-out' status.

"Sorry about that, too, but you know what you get like," the PFY calls through the safety glass.

"Of course!" I cry "No harm done," as I sneakily reach for my special reserve access card, noted in the database as a 'Fire and Civil Emergency' access card, which no one but me knows exi...

"Got that one, too..." the PFY murmurs apologetically.

You've got to give him credit, he's a chip off the old block.

I move away from the door to see if he's going to come out when he thinks it's safe, but he's not that stupid, either.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I set my rubbish bin on fire, then reverse the direction of the office ('remodelled') air-conditioner so that it's blowing air into the computer room instead of stealing air from it.

The halon 10-second warning goes off and the PFY rushes to the hold-off switch - the real one (disguised as an intercom pager button) - and not the decoy we use to frighten contractors.

I have him right where I want him. While the smoke detectors still sense smoke the halon system is still activated. While he holds the button down, the halon countdown is paused. Currently at seven seconds...

I hold the rubbish bin up to the viewing window and throw in some more paper and a back-up tape (to keep it nice and smoky) so the PFY can see I'm serious.

Out of earshot, he scribbles a quick note on the wall. "You could be right, 27p is an insult!"

Smiling, I pour coffee into the bin to extinguish the flames, then sit down at my desk. The PFY emerges from the computer room once the halon clear has been signalled.

"So, what are we going to do?" he asks.

"Well, I thought some form of example has to be made. Firm - but not, of course, brutal."

"You mean chilli sauce in the eye-rinse bottle, laxative in the water fountain or glue on the bog seats?"

"Well..."

"All three?"

"Warmer..."

"Route their traffic via the 3-Phase mains 'network'?"

"Almost there..."

"Put indelible dye in the rooftop water reservoir and trigger the sprinkler system on their floor?"

"Yes...to all of the above."

And so it was that half-an-hour later, the PFY's up a ladder, pouring a crimson cement dye concentrate into the reservoir, when...BDZZZT!!

To his credit, the PFY makes no sound as the cattle prod takes effect. Apart from the splash of course.

After I've fished him out, I disable his card, the halon system and the card known to the database as 'Installation Card (Disabled)'.

What goes around comes around.

BOFH '99. Disaster Recovery Blues..

The boss is going on about Disaster Recovery again, like the company's going to go to the wall if one of the buildings collapses in an earthquake or something. My comment that an earthquake during work hours might actually improve the company's performance did not generate the expected chuckle of assent.

One more for the seismic therapy in other words. And, as part of his enquiries, he wants to inspect all our DR planning and see just how well prepared we are for the eventuality.

I could tell him the truth, which is that we're about as prepared for disaster as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, but that would cause a lot of very unnecessary concern.

Not to put too fine a point on it, I told him a load of old bollocks. Certainly enough to satisfy middle-management types in any case: "Oh well, we're completely prepared with off-site media and media inventories - back-up recovery plans, disaster recovery agreements with hardware manufacturers, along with three 'cold-site' venues in our distant offices to run up a recovery system in about 36 hours, give or take half a day or so," I burble.

"Add to that our redundant cabling links, agreements for emergency cable and satellite service from the major carriers, the network side of the recovery would be the simplest part. The slowest bit would be reading the tapes into the various server machines. Client and desktop machines would be added on an as-needed basis, depending on the employees concerned and their immediate importance to the company plan."

"Excellent!" the boss cries, eyes shining with delight. "Well, I suppose all that's left is for a quick tour of the facilities!"

So now I'm up a thinwire without a terminator. The boss is bound to find out sooner or later that it's all bollocks and demand to know why.

The PFY notices my air of resignation (to having to listen to the boss rabbit on about 'professional integrity' and not job evacuation) and asks what the problem is. I fill him in on all the sordid details.

"We could just take him to one of the cold site centres and tell him that they all look like that, then get the off-site media bloke to say that they don't permit site visits," he suggests.

"The media guy might work, but the cold site's a goner."

"Too cold to be fired up?" the PFY asks.

"No, too hired out to other tenants."

"What?!"

"Well, they're normally right in the heart of the business districts. So I usually rent the space to some other company and pour the dosh to a more deserving project - in this case boosting the bandwidth of the outgoing network connections."

"Uncharacteristically altruistic of you," the PFY murmurs.

"Yeah well...But it's all over now. He's bound to..."

"Not necessarily!" the PFY shouts with satisfaction, with what looks like a glimmering of a plan in his eye.

Two days later, the boss joins me in the back of a limousine for the trip to our site. "Bloody dark in here," the boss mutters. "Can't even see out the windows."

"Yes," I ad lib. "This is a loaner from the Media Storage place - they take no precautions as they have important clients."

"Oh," the boss utters smugly, self-importance boosted. "So, where are we going?"

"We're going to the nearest site, which is about two hours away. I thought we'd tour one site a day if that's OK with you."

Two hours later we glide down a ramp into the sub-basement parking area of the first DR centre. I help the boss into a newly refurbished freight elevator (security reasons) and we drop a level to the DR centre.

"Reminds me of somewhere," the boss mumbles, slightly more confused than his normal operating level.

"We got the DR centres to look familiar so that relocation and orientation is easier on the staff."

"Really? That's quite a good idea!"

We enter the DR computer room and have a quick look around. "It's a bit quiet isn't it?" the boss asks.

"Well, cold sites are typically only fired up in an emergency - mainly to save power and maintenance costs."

"Of course."

The rest of the tour goes smoothly and we make our way back to the office.

"Where to tomorrow?" the boss asks.

"I thought we might leave early and get to the Welsh Centre...pick you up at your place at 6am if that's OK."

Once the boss has gone I tap on the driver's window. The PFY's visage appears as the smoked glass descends.

"Wales tomorrow," I murmur. "Move the kit around a bit, put some Welsh maps up with coloured pins at strategic points, and leave a box of leeks in the freight elevator. Oh, and for Pete's sake, get a bit more of the city in, will you? Two hundred times round the block is just asking for trouble!"

Right, now to translate some machine names into imitation Welsh for the boss's edification (i.e Clomputhenay, etc.).

This DR Stuff - it's all work, work, work!

BOFH '99. Back to the Helldesk?!?

However, there is little philanthropy in this act, but more opportunity for a little hell-raising. I'm so bloody nice, I deserve a medal! Out of the kindness of my heart, I have volunteered to look after the helldesk in their time of need. It appears that thanks to winter chills and staff holidays, the helldesk is chronically understaffed.

The PFY, bless him, is cut from the same selfless cloth as myself and has offered to keep watch for - I mean, assist me in looking after - the users.

Nothing much has changed since we were here last. Well, it is daytime now, and I'm not carrying a sack and a crowbar, but apart from that it's pretty much the same.

"This," I say to the PFY, "is a telephone. You've seen people talking at them before, and now it's your turn to give it a go."

I ignore the PFY's hand gesture which, under normal circumstances, would denote something to the effect that "you have a sexually fulfilling relationship with your right hand" (which, incidentally, I have interpreted as, "I am in desperate need of a damn good kicking - perhaps you could see your way clear to organising me one in the near future?") and get back to the job at hand.

"You take lines 1, 3 and 5. I'll take 2, 4, and 6," I snap.

"What? I thought we were just going to divert all the calls to the Religious Thought-for-the-day message line and rifle through their desktop machines for anything useful or incriminating!" the PFY whines petulantly.

"A complete waste of time," I respond, "since I swapped all the good hardware with the shite stuff in the comms-closet PCs to allow us to have a multi-user Quake II challenge from any floor in the building."

"You mean we can't even play Quake on these things?"

"Afraid not. These machines would be lucky to load ANSI graphics, let alone SVGA stuff."

"But..." the PFY pouts.

"No buts, we're going to use our time profitably by getting to know our users once more. We've been far too isolated from them this year - it's time for us to renew our ties!"

All this altruism is making me feel a little queasy, but I gulp down the nausea and continue.

"RIGHT!" I shout. "Synchronise excuse calendars, page 47, Hypotropic Osmotic Leeching."

The PFY's eyes glaze over momentarily as his attention-span safety cut-out trips, but he's back with me in record time.

"I'll just call it H.O.L," he murmurs, blinking rapidly as full consciousness returns.

"Alrighty! Let the games commence!" I cry.

"Games? What games?" the PFY asks.

"You'll find out..."

"I still don't know why the boss didn't veto this," the PFY cries. "I didn't think he'd be stupid enough to go for it."

"He wasn't," I answer cheerily, "but he's been transferred to the Leeds office after a little incident earlier in the week."

"Oh yes?" the PFY asks, curiosity piqued.

"It was tragic."

"REALLY?" the PFY asks, interested.

"It appears that he may have disgraced himself at that Harassment Procedures meeting that the US people made all management types go to."

"The one they imported all those Huggy Feelies from head office for?"

"He didn't say he thought it was a How-To course?"

"No - apparently he had something with him at the meeting that didn't go down well. In fact, that's perhaps the best way to describe it."

"You mean he had a..."

Apparently so. He made some wild claim that someone must've chucked Viagra in his coffee, but I ask you..."

"Weird," the PFY concurs. "Speaking of which, coffee?"

"Yeah, but stay away from the 'instant decaf' till I've had time to dispose of it."

"You complete..."

Our conversation is interrupted by the first call of the day. "Hello, how can I help?" I ask in tones that can only bode goodwill to all comers.

"Hi, my machine keeps losing the time, and my workmate says that it's probably the battery inside the machine!"

"How old is the machine?" I ask.

"Three months."

"Normally batteries don't fail that soon," I respond.

"I think the problem may be that when your machine boots, it sets its time from our network time server, only it's setting the wrong time because your time zone setting isn't GMT."

"Well... >clickety< >clickety< YES! It's set to Winnipeg! Where on earth is Winnipeg?"

"I believe it's in Canada," I respond knowingly.

"Thanks very much!"

"You're welcome!" I respond, then hang up.

The PFY meantime, is gobsmacked.

"What was that?" he cries in disbelief.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? That's the game. Winner takes all - first one to crack has to shout the beers on Friday."

"It's not much of a game. Doesn't sound like much fun!"

"What, and MONOPOLY IS?!"

"Well, no, but it's not that sort of game!"

"I think you're CHICKEN!" I taunt.

"No way!" the PFY shouts. "You're used to it."

"All right, I'll take line 1 as well, giving me twice as many potential callers. Happy now?"

The PFY nods, then grins as Line 1 lights up.

Perhaps I've bitten off a little more than I can chew...

BOFH '99. Omniscience?

So I'm in a downtown cafe, grabbing a moment's respite (well, a couple of hours, let's be honest) from the maddening crowd - with Mission Control's phone diverted to my unlisted cellphone number, when the phone rings.

"Hello, Networks and Systems," I cry pleasantly, in the manner of one still competing for the 'who can be the nicest to users' competition...

...which I'm certainly not, having won off the PFY by performing a lot of 'space reclamation' on the data servers then leaving sound-byte constructed voicemail messages 'from the PFY' claiming all responsibility and no remorse for doing it. The ill-will towards him at the moment is such that the Boss thought it best he take a little time off.

"Where are you?" the Boss asks, voice muffled by the sounds of traffic from outside my current location.

"In the machine room!" I cry, as indignantly.

"Really? Then what's that noise in the background? I can hear cars!"

"Yes, yes, that's just the Multimedia Demo package that starts every time this new bloody server gets booted," I ad lib. "I'd pull the speakers out but we need them for initial de-bug sounds."

My output bullshitometer is registering three out of 10, so I feel that this excuse will probably suffice for the boss.

"Oh," he responds, confirming my suspicions. "Well I need to get into the computer room as I'm showing some new employees our computing operations. So if you could just pop round and let us in..."

Now call me old-fashioned, but the LAST thing I want is the Holiest of Holies exposed to drooling half-wits with no idea of how or why computers work.

Being a forward-thinking type, I'd planned for the access eventuality by locking out both Mission Control and the Computer Room from all but myself.

"I'm afraid there's some problem with the electronic lock system and I can't seem to get the doors to release," I tell him. "So it seems I'm locked in and you're locked out."

"I see," the Boss murmurs slowly, possibly getting a nasal indication of a rodent in close proximity. "I'll just try the emergency release."

A couple of loud bangs later, the boss picks up the phone, wheezing heavily. "The BLOODY GLASS won't break!" he gasps. "What sort of emergency access is this?"

"I don't know, but it sounds good for security," I mention, knowing that this is bound to get his back up.

"I'm going to call in Building Maintenance to get to the bottom of this - you just hang on in there!" he cries decisively, obviously wanting to make a good impression on all the newbies with his ability to fix difficult situations.

Which means I'm going to have to go back to work after all, as there's only so long that the armoured glass and reverse-threaded access panel screws are going to keep the maintenance guys at bay.

I grab a cab and slip into the building the back way, sneak out the freight elevator and end up behind the Boss and a set of like-minded technical in-breds whose combined IQ wouldn't even make a supermodel's waist measurement.

"Hi!" I blurt, thinking of the PR value of being nice to potential users.

"Where'd you come from?" the Boss asks, gesturing to the buildings bloke that he should keep on drilling now that he's about half an inch into the armoured glass (only another inch to go).

"The computer room!" I cry. "I managed to get the back door open by swiping my card through it repeatedly - probably some read error, or something."

I make a big deal of blowing into the swipe reader, then try my card in the door. It opens, of course, and I surreptitiously reverse the lockout on the doors, then let the crowd into the computer room.

"This is the err..." the Boss starts, noticing that I've come along for the tour, too, and am looking extremely interested in what he's going to say. "Err...tell you what, why don't we let someone from the front line fill you in!"

Suffice to say my presentation was a resounding success - especially after the Boss demonstrated workplace danger by stepping onto one of the floor tiles we leave loosely supported (to stop maintenance contractors from straying) and plunging face first into a machine rack.

On the way out, one of the huggy-feelies from Human Resources meets me and gives me the boss's invite to the 'welcome to the company' drinks that afternoon, seeing how the Boss is probably not going to be able to attend...

And just when you think life can't get any better, the PFY rings to say he knows what happened and that he'll RELUCTANTLY keep his word - a bet's a bet - later that night.

Mental note number two is to swap drinks with him the moment his attention is diverted at the pub - the thought of a laxative overdose doesn't appeal at all.

BOFH '99. Private Health...

Out of the kindness of their cold hearts, company management have allowed us contractors to join waged and salaried staff in being eligible (at a reasonably hefty premium, of course) to join the company Health Care Plan.

Sod that. I should get a DISCOUNT for all the work I've put their way. If it wasn't for me, the company wouldn't HAVE a health plan - or at least not one with such a comprehensive Personal Accident Insurance section anyway...

"But it's dirt cheap!" the PFY claims, "and it's got personal accident cover which gives you unlimited time in a private hospital."

"Where no doubt they give you chilli enemas until you manage to discharge yourself," I respond, all too familiar with how good 'good deals' really are.

"No, they've got pictures," he cries, completely taken in by the shiny brochures. "Just look!"

I have to admit the pictures do look impressive, with large stately hospital rooms, battalions of neatly uniformed staff and sumptuous TV-dinner banquets, but I've seen far too many computer brochures to be taken in by advertising.

"It's just advertising bumph," I remind the PFY. "None of it's true."

"It might be," he murmurs.

"It's one of the commandments of computing!" I cry. Never trust the brochure until you've had the covers off!"

"But how can we see what it's like if we don't sign up?"

"Sign up?" the Boss cries, roaring into the room. "You mean the Health Plan? I've been a member for years."

"But what are the hospitals like - have you been to one?"

"Can't say I have," the Boss replies, bending down to pick up the 19-inch flat screen monitor I've indicated is his. "But when I do, you'll be the fir..."

Halfway through his lift, I pop the paper bag that I'd been holding. In shock, the boss shoots to attention a little quicker than he has for a while. "Agh!" he cries, dropping the monitor and clutching his stomach tightly.

Oops.

Of course, the PFY and I take some time off work to see the Boss as he recovers from his hernia op. And do a bit of shopping. OK, and have a few lagers as well. And a ride on the London tour bus - but after that, we went straight there.

At the hospital, we find that my suspicions are unfounded - the place is a state of the art set-up, with remote monitoring that would put our network topology to shame.

We brown-nose an administrative type to get a quick tour of the place, exhibiting a professional interest in their CCPMS (Centralised Comprehensive Patient Monitoring System).

"Basically," the admin-type burbles as we depart the Boss's room, "the system allows all patients to be monitored by a central computer which, in the event of any problem, dispatches a doctor or nurse from a localised aid station."

"I see," I respond. "And what happens if the doctor and nurse are elsewhere playing doctors and nurses?"

After a withering look, the admin-type continues. "The software is aware of staff positions at all times. I assure you that your manager is completely safe from mishaps."

Bugger. We were hoping for a hernia relapse (or five) to get us a couple more office-hours visits to the, er, hospital.

"We have thousands of cables from all over the hospital which terminate in the comms room," a furry-toothed geek from the monitoring room informs us. "The wires deliver all the patient data we need into the master computer and all patient details are available on our touch-screen here."

"Really?" I say, touching the box showing the Boss's name.

"As you can see," the geek continues, "these two windows are camera views of your manager's room, 22b. This box charts his temperature, pulse and respiration, this one his brain wave pattern - all are fed along the 22b cable sets to here, which saves us the tremendous outlay of having to buy individual monitoring units for each... Oh dear!"

The Boss's window has suddenly turned crimson with the words 'CARDIAC CALLOUT'. As the geek and I look on, a team arrives, strips the Boss down and gives him a couple of doses from the kickstart machine.

"Well," the geek adds, mopping his brow "as you can see, the efficiency of our team is second to none."

"Yeah," the PFY says, replacing a screwdriver, "but some of that termination in there is crap. Don't worry, I gave the Boss's cableset a seeing-to and reterminated it..."

The silence, as they say, was deafening. The geek now knows that the Boss got his batteries charged for no good reason, and that given an inquiry, the hospital - and his pet project - wouldn't fare well. He looks at us desperately.

"A tenner a piece should be sufficient for a couple of beers," I say.

"Per day," the PFY adds.

BOFH '99. The Company Newsletter

The boss's latest plan is that we're going to put out a news-letter (not electronic - that would be far

too progressive and a paper version is much more useful as it can hang around for years, way after the information has passed its 'use by' date) to boost the department's standing...

The theory is that, by publishing a couple of pages of "The latest technology is...", "We've just bought..." and "What you should know about..." on a bi-monthly basis, the workers at the rock face aren't going to notice that we give all the really good kit to management, and palm off the slow and mutilated crap to them. A cover-up in other words...

A brown-nose type from PR is called in to help us create a marketable image, covering all bases from soft-focus photography (the boss does look like his face caught fire and someone tried to put it out with a potato masher) to non-threatening pseudo-computer vocab and pastel-tint papers.

He also excels in choosing topics as far off the issue of service level as possible: how many miles of Cat-5 (high-speed connection cable) there are in the building, how many support staff have been on training courses, the value of our central computing resource, technology we're investigating...And, of course, the boss wants a quick article from me on new kit we're looking at, when we expect it to be installed, and useful user info...in other words, write the whole bloody thing.

Now, I like giving out info to the users almost as much as MPs like talking to their constituents so, obviously, I'm really looking forward to this idea. Not.

What makes it worse is that my directive is to make it so simple that anyone in the building can understand it. I'm just hoping he's not including the security staff in that statement as I don't think our laser printers produce output in crayon.

Nevertheless, with the input of the PFY, we manage to get enough information to fill the required two pages and whip it off to the printers as a rush job, asap - after clearing it with the boss, of course. So I have to admit to being a bit dismayed, even gobsmacked, when the boss bursts into the office the next day in a mood that can only be described as 'fit to burst'.

"What the hell's this?" he asks, waving something ferociously.

"The newsletter," I cry, not to be confused by the obvious.

"I know that, but it's nothing like the one you gave me to proof-read yesterday!"

"No, I had to translate it from the technical jargon you read into something the users would understand."

"But it's a bloody nightmare!" he shouts. "They're confused."

"Well, I have to admit it's possible that the simplification of the text may have caused one or two technical inaccuracies, but the gist of the information is there."

"TECHNICAL INACCURACIES?! You told them the toner cartridges are refilled with ink and that it's relatively simple."

"Well, I didn't think they'd grasp the idea of toner. And it is a simple job of drilling a hole in the cartridge and replacing the toner - if the drum and fuser are OK, of course."

"Yes, well, thanks to that article we've got a printer in the workshop that's only suitable for parts."

"Well, it's hardly a major problem is it?," the PFY chips in. "After all, they've got a projected lifetime of three years."

"That's not the point. Anyway, it wasn't just that article that was a problem - why did you tell people that they should wash their machines out if the network was going slow?"

"What?! Oh, you mean the analogy of a network connection being a pipe and that a bigger pipe lets more go through it?"

"Yes, but you said they should wash their machines out!"

"No, I simply said that, as an owner, you want as much water into your machine as possible, but I was talking about traffic."

"So, why tell them to connect a firehose to their machine?"

"An analogy - big hose, lots of data. Surely no one would've actually connected a..."

"Security will require a whole new set of machines..."

"Oh. Well, it's hardly my fault. You'd think that even they wouldn't do something as blatantly stupid as that..."

"Yes, but what about something NOT as stupid? Why did you tell them to install 'Infector' on their machines?"

"Infector? No, I told them to install 'Detector'. You'd never want to install Infector - that's a virus detector test package, and would screw up all the files in your..."

"Would you like to recover the CEO secretary's hard drive?"

"I'll get the PFY right onto it!," I say, as the boss storms out.

"So, you won't be writing that again then?," the PFY asks.

"Highly unlikely," I chuckle.

"Bugger. I had this really cool idea for letting everyone access your network shares as a distributed storage pool."

"Much too technical; just change it to 'leave your machine unattended and logged in when you go home'. And it's never too late for an addendum..."

"I'll get right on to it!"

Good lad - always willing to go that extra mile for the client.

Faced with a bit of kit that the hosts of Antiques Roadshow would get orgasmic over, the Bastard finds a rubber mallet can achieve things an engineer's screwdriver can't...

It seems I'm in the turd and there's no simple way out. Foolishly, I tried to fix an ancient but crucial piece of kit - so old it had a grandmotherboard - which had thrown up several errors a day for weeks. Admittedly, they were just 'warning' messages and the machine was still working OK...

But that's all fixed now...And, as luck would have it, the unit is cram-packed with old, chunky proprietary hardware clinging to the last vestiges of life by virtue of a shielding layer of dust and fluff that's built up over the ages...But not anymore...

The boss is, of course, the soul of understanding, appreciating the mundane hassle of deleting swags of unnecessary warning email, while applauding the aggressive manner in which I track down and solve outstanding problems.

"If it wasn't really broken, why did you fix it?!" he gasps.

"It's a quality of service issue," I respond, getting the ball rolling nice and early in the conversation...

"What do you mean, quality of service? It was working before, and now it's not!"

"It was only partially working," I sigh, "but it could have packed out completely at any time".

"And now it has!" he cries.

"See what I mean?" I ask, sliding into confusing-logic mode.

"YOU BROKE IT!" he cried.

"Look," I kindly explain, "we get caned by the users for unscheduled downtime don't we?"

"Yes?"

"And we avoid this by scheduling downtimes don't we?"

"Yes?"

"So this is a scheduled maintenance and the users shouldn't be using the systems now, should they?"

"Uh...no?"

"So they don't have anything LEGITIMATE to moan about?"

"I guess not," he answers, sounding just a little unconvinced.

"So, while I'm talking to you, I'm not fixing this kit?"

"Uh...no..."

The boss takes his leave in the kind of casual double-time managers often use to disguise the fact that they've ever been somewhere in the first place. Usually only employed after they've broken something crucial, which brings us back to...

"What's the bloody huge thing there?" the PFY asks, indicating a full-height 20MB hard drive in the bowels of the frame, probably consuming as much power as half the lights in the computer room. You can't blame the lad of course; he's too young to have heard of MFM disks, reel-to-reel tapes or 8in floppies - outside the Reader's Letters section of adult magazines that is...

"That," I say, "is what we used to, in the old days, call a..."

"Hard drive!" the PFY cries, copping a view of the '20MB' written on the side in permanent marker.

"Close, but no banana! It is, in fact" - picking up my trusty rubber panel-beater's hammer - "a service call about to..."

BANG! BANG! BANG! SKEEEEEeeeeereerrrrrrrr!

"...happen."

"And what did that achieve?" the PFY sighs.

"Well, before that unit failed..."

"Before you bashed it with your rubber mallet you mean."

"A mallet that leaves no discernible marks," I add. "Before that, it was a software config and unknown hardware failure."

"And now the engineer will think he broke it."

"After he fixes the hard-drive..."

"Exactly!"

A service call is placed, and in less time that it takes to fly around the world by balloon with a millionaire pilot (including stops), an engineer arrives with kit in hand.

"What - it doesn't come in a sealed bag?" the PFY gasps.

"How do we know it's new?"

"The only thing they get in sealed bags is their bedtime reading," I comment. "Besides, there are probably only three drives like that in the world and they're no doubt fixed manually by Swiss nuns, judging by their non-maintenance price."

The engineer fixes the unit - after returning to the office three times to find a replacement for the failed mystery component that had to be soldered onto the grandmother board - and we chuck it

back into service, much to the boss's relief. He's figured out the flaw in my logic, after verifying that my scheduled maintenance message was posted way after I'd broken the kit.

"So, it's all sorted out then?" he asks.

"Yep, back in service and working as per usual."

Satisfied that injustice has been done, he trundles back to his office to figure out a way of referring to this experience as 'good customer relations'. Meanwhile, I return to my desk and am about to start work when a mail message pops into my inbox with the subject of 'System Warning', from the machine of the moment. Sigh...if you're going to do something, do it right. I skip the rubber mallet this time and head for the metal version.

"Back in a minute," I tell the PFY. "Just got some 'alignment' to do." Maintenance really is an ongoing thing...

It's finally time for the BOFH's protégé to fly the nest and join the ranks of the 'one trouser leg higher than the other' Order of Bastards. And boy, has he been revising well...

It's a proud day for Bastards everywhere as the PFY prepares himself for admission to the Fraternal Order of Bastard Operators. Adjusting his black tie, he steps from the men's toilets into the back room of an all-night drinker.

A tear springs to my eye as he shakes hands with the four Charter members (of which I am one) and prepares to take his oral exam. "Who sponsors this bastard?" the Grand Bastard asks.

"I do."

"And you're satisfied that his thesis High Voltage and its Effect in Reducing Client Calls is an original work?"

"I am."

"Very well." He turns to the PFY. "All that remains now is for you to answer one question from each of the members."

A bit on the formal side, but rules are rules.

The PFY nods wordlessly.

"You've just started a new contract with a firm which pays well, but wants you to document the work you've done - obviously in the hopes of leeching your hard-earned skills. How do you keep the contract and your knowledge secure?"

First, the easy one.

"Ah, I would...claim that I was a devout member of the Church of the Unified Principle of

Hermitism, and as such, am not permitted to pass on ideas to others."

"I see...based on the premise that your employer can't discriminate on the grounds of religion?"

"Yes."

"There is such a church?"

"Formed it two weeks ago - a registered charity. I donate all my worldly goods and income to it."

"Very altruistic," the second member comments. "But what about this? You notice that the internal phone directory of your workplace has a full colour picture of the network topology as an appendix. How would you defuse this potential source of cowboy 'plug and pray' by the users?"

"I'd 'upgrade' some terminations to mains voltage and shuffle faceplate labels. Oh, and print an extra fifty copies."

"An extra fifty copies?"

"Yeah, I'd take them to Waterloo and sell them to French tourists as underground maps."

"Excellent," the third member smiles. "Your voicemail queue has overflowed, your helpdesk queue has escalated, and your boss enters your office to find you playing Quake II. What would you do?"

"Err...keep playing so that later I can claim I had post traumatic stress disorder from the game I started at lunch-time - then claim six weeks' compensation for work-induced stress if they threaten to dock my pay..."

"Yes...but I'm looking for a little more than that."

"Oh, you mean use the Application Download server to stick the game on everyone's desktop so I can claim they're all at it?"

"Yes, but I'm really looking for a..."

"OH OF COURSE! Patch the version of the one I download to the Boss's machine to use the Homoerotic-Theme Graphics, and have the game autostart every time his PC's microphone detects a different voice in the office."

"That will do nicely!"

Which just leaves my question. "Your tutor in bastardom has somehow found the wedge of cash you keep inside the supposedly sealed hard drive unit which lies supposedly inconspicuously inside an old AT, underneath your desk."

A sharp intake of breath lets me know that the PFY has just become aware of the practical section of this exam.

"THEORETICALLY, if this were to happen, and the tutor had spent this rather large amount of cash, what would you feel would be the most appropriate course of action?"

"Well, of course we're talking theoretically here," the PFY seethes, "so I suppose I would have to replace it with a similar amount of money from the CO2 extinguisher with the false bottom, which is bolted on to the wall-hook behind the tutor. Oh, did I say is? I meant was."

THE BASTARD!!

"Well," I cry happily, reaching for my briefcase and the electrical 'calibration' device therein. "I'm satisfied that his intentions are genuine, so if there's no objections, I think we should adjourn to the bar to cele..."

The human nervous system sends messages at speeds at several hundred miles per hour. Electricity, on the other hand, travels at about 800 times that speed. Per second.

And yet I still knew what was coming as my thumb touched the strangely rough surface of the keyhole on my briefc...

Later, in the bar, when I'd stopped dribbling and the world had dimmed from about 10,000 candlepower, I bought the PFY a quick drink to celebrate his graduation.

You win some, you lose some.

As the PFY speeds out of control, he gains some worthy respect from the Bastard. It seems birds of a feather will soon be flocking to the group therapy class...

So, the PFY gets in a little late (shame on him) and I have the sad task of informing him that the boss is keen to see him. Real keen.

"Why is that?" he asks, wondering why he's being graced with a private interview.

"Oh, some complaint," I respond.

"Complaint?"

"Yeah, the Linux-geek wannabe from R&D has complained about you."

"Which Linux geek wannabe?"

"You remember - the one you told to link /dev/null to his paging device."

"What happened?"

"Dunno, his machine mysteriously crashed about 10 seconds later..."

"But I didn't..."

"Of course you didn't - I did, but I said I was you."

"Oh."

"But what really surprised me was when you called back in the afternoon to fix his crashing problems, told him his CPU was hot swap-upgradable, and then sent him that replacement processor with a couple of its more vital legs missing. By the time he had got round to putting the old one back in, it was in the same state. Mysteriously..."

"I AM a bastard, aren't I?" the PFY gasps.

"Yes, I couldn't believe it myself," I concur.

"But why would I do such a thing?"

"I don't know," I reply. "It could be that he complained about your, I mean my, shoddy handling of a toner cartridge replacement last week. Or it could be that you were afraid of having to deal with Linux problems all the time. Or it could just be some manifestation of a deep-seated mental upset which you have."

"What mental upset?" asks the PFY.

"Far be it for me to go delving into your psyche, but you could be suffering from some base-level anti-sociopathic tendencies..."

"Sociopathic or anti-sociopathic?"

"Is there a difference?"

"I don't know..."

The discussion of the PFY's need to debase users with higher technical knowledge (and the reasons behind it) are cut off by the ring of the phone...

"Well, here's your chance to find out. That looks like your R&D guy ringing back to find out why ps and a whole other batch of utilities aren't working any more."

"Why's that?"

"Well, I'd be guessing, but I think you might have advised him to unlink his /proc directory."

"But you can't do that?!" refutes the PFY.

"Not with conventional weapons, no. But with that quickly hacked-up program you sent him, it was a piece of cake."

"Oh, but I've got to go see the boss!"

"Yes, I think you should. And I'd take the approach that you're being framed."

"He'll never buy it," whimpers the PFY.

"Oh, I don't know - I think he might, after you put that line in the inetd.conf file, which causes any

Telnet to port 187 on his machine to copy junk stdin to the kernel memory..."

"I'm out of control aren't I?"

"You are. You need help!"

"Where am I going to get it?"

"From a specialist. The company has a counsellor for that sort of thing you know."

"Really?"

"Yes, you remember - the one that called us borderline megalomaniac machiavellian types."

"Really?"

"Yes, shortly before you uploaded that virus to her machine under the guise of an email to make an appointment to see her..."

"So, when am I going?!"

"Looks like we both have to go to a group therapy thing tomorrow..."

"Can't wait."

"Ah well, health is health, and an ounce of prevention is worth three hours of holiday..."

The lights are on - all 2,996 of them - and no one's in. The boss's involvement in the hands-on scheme results in a fit of madness, a stretcher, straitjacket and a trip to hospital...

"Just dump it next to the other boxes." I cry over to the PFY as he brings up yet another box of comms gear. My attention was distracted because I foolishly picked up the phone and talked to a user. It was a straightforward wonky phone problem - nothing too difficult to deal with - particularly when the user has his hands on Network Tool #2, the wire cutter.

"Yes, that's right, put the clippers onto the wire, yes, and snap close." CLICK.

"Did you sort that user's phone out?" the PFY asks.

"I have now. Any more boxes?"

"No, that's the last one. What is all this junk?"

"Oh it's just a load of boxes with lights and beepers in them," I reply. "I'm going to put them in the boss's office."

"This wouldn't happen to be because he wants to increase his hands on?"

"Of course, if he wants to help monitor the network, who am I to stop him."

The boss beams with pride as the PFY and I install the last of the boxes, his rooms is now about to become ablaze with more than 3,000 flashing lights, all with corresponding beeps of various tones. "So this monitoring equipment is usually in the Comms cupboards then?" the boss asks.

"Sure," the PFY replies, screwing in the last LED, which is actually a fibre optic camera so we can see the effects of our experiment.

"Usually we check them for failures every couple of days, but with you on the case, we should be able to really cut down on network problems. It'll look great on the weekly reports."

"It looks very impressive, how do I know when they fail?"

"Oh one of the lights will go out. I'll check in later to make sure it's all running properly," I say as the PFY flicks the ON switch and the room explodes with the cacophony of beeps and the dazzle of lights.

As we leave the office I glance at the PFY. "So, ten quid says he won't last the day."

"You're on!" he replies, sensing quick money. He never learns.

Later in the day the boss's stress levels have obviously increased. He is storming around a lot more than usual and he's barking at everybody, except the PFY, and me. He doesn't want to admit he can't handle the monitoring equipment.

"So how are you getting on?" I ask as I cancel the entire fourth floor's network access, just when the boss is monitoring the equipment to catch it. A quick TCP message to the PFY primes him for a response.

"Oh fine." he replies. "So far I haven't noticed any problems."

Cue PFY. "Uh-oh, the fourth floor's down!" he shouts, furiously hammering irrelevant buttons on his keyboard.

The boss panics as I sigh discreetly. "We need to know what went down, can you go and see what lights went out?" I hand him a network resource chart. "This is a map of all 3,000 lights. Just tick off those which look like they're out," I add helpfully.

The boss is looking very worried now. If he packs in the hands-on scheme the CEO will surely notice and reprimand him for wasting time, so he trots off back to his office as I flick off the power remotely to four of the 3,000 lights and put most of the others on dim.

A few hours later still the PFY and I are standing outside his office as a user has been complaining that his power light is blinking. The result of boss's constant exposure to the monitoring equipment is satisfying to say the least. "WE'VE ALL GOT OUR LIGHTS TO DEAL WITH," he roars. "DOWN HERE I HAVE THOUSANDS OF BLINKING, FLASHING AND BEEPING LIGHTS, THEY BLINK AND FLASH AND BEEP. I CAN'T STAND IT ANYMORE, THE BEEPING AND FLASHING AND BLINKING!"

As the ex-boss is stretchered away, writhing uncomfortably in his straitjacket, the PFY looks

penitent. "Perhaps we were a little too hard on him. He was only trying to help."

It's a shame. After all this time, the PFY just doesn't understand that nobody should help a Bastard out in networking. Time for the cattle prod - and a strong laxative coffee later on.

BOFH '99. More Huggy Feely...

As a result of the PFY's evil machinations he and I are in one of those disgusting huggy-feely sessions where everyone tells everyone else how they feel about their place in the world. Or, in this case, the company. As if it isn't bad enough having to rub shoulders with users, we're supposed to share our thoughts with them.

And of course the tweed-suit who's chairing the session has loaded it with people who the boss feels are victims of the Systems and Networks 'aggressive policy of solving problems'. The theory is that the PFY and I will see the error of our ways when we come face to face with our former 'clients'.

"Now, who would like to start?" Tweedy smiles, looking around the group expectantly...

Ten minutes later, we're back in the office because no one had anything to say. Maybe the PFY's dictaphone put them off - but he only had it because he wanted to reflect upon the users' feelings afterwards...

The boss, noticing our rapid return, forgoes the 'I hope you've learned your lesson' speech. And distressingly, there is still no promise of an Easter bonus.

Being the dedicated type, I decide to put the disappointment out of my mind and do some preventive maintenance on the beancounters' asset audit server machine. After all, they were the ones complaining about our level of service the loudest before the PFY and I walked into the room. (The old sub-miniature microphone in the RJ45 'terminator' trick never fails). Apparently the machine is running slowly.

Our telling them yesterday that they're using twice as many sessions as they'd specced the machine for wasn't seen as constructive criticism.

"Careful with the hammer," the PFY cries, ducking under the backswing of one of my more enthusiastic applications of maintenance.

"Woopsy," I say guiltily, "got a bit carried away there."

"No harm done - to me anyway," he murmurs as he lifts up a floor tile and kicks the results of the 'maintenance' into the subfloor area.

"Takes a licking but keeps on ticking," I say, tapping the battle-scarred machine cage. And, inadvertently, pressing the power-off switch.

Bugger.

In my mind's eye I can already see the chief beancounter hitting the panic button to counter the

potential threat to asset security. Not being a believer in coincidence, he's bound to think the outage is a deliberate (which - at least in this case - it isn't) effort to perform some non-audit trailed modifications to the fixed asset inventory.

Sigh.

Like we didn't do that a fortnight ago. During the day. Logged on as him so if the audit trail is ever investigated... However, this isn't going to help much when he sets eyes on the server that looks as though it's done several tours of duty in Beirut.

Sure enough, he's not at all happy when the boss drags him into the computer room to assuage his fears.

"What the hell happened to that?" he gasps, seeing the battle-scarred casing. "It's all bashed about!"

"Well, nothing lasts forever - wear and tear..."

"It's only two months old."

"Two months is a long time in computing," I chip in.

"Besides, it was pretty battered when the courier dropped it off," the PFY adds.

"Why did you sign for it then?"

"Well, it seemed to fire up OK," I said

"Good grief, it looks like it's been beaten with a hammer. Are you sure the couriers did all that?"

"Well, the couriers did some of it, but the cleaning staff probably helped."

"We don't allow cleaners in this room," the boss interjects.

"Yes I know," I say sadly, "That's why I have to do it."

"So you damaged our machine?"

"I'm afraid so," I sigh. "I'm a system administrator, not really a cleaner."

"And I'm a lover, not a fighter," the PFY adds, obviously having tipped a little too much tape-head cleaner on his Weeties this morning.

The humour break is interrupted by the server plummeting to the floor, as the screws holding the shelf in place - loosened during maintenance - lose purchase on the rack.

The aftermath of this little accident doesn't bear thinking about, but, suffice to say, we're in huggy-feely central the next morning, and Tweedy and cohorts are in attendance.

"Now, who would like to start?" Tweedy asks benevolently.

"Ah, I would," I say. "I'd like to share my feelings."

Sigh...

BOFH '99. Barroom Blitz...

I stumble into work early (well, in time for morning tea) to find one of our boundary routers has crashed overnight, requiring the PFY to be called out to restart it. And, with the boss getting extremely tight on overtime, the PFY has been forced to take time in lieu for the late-night call-out, instead of being paid for it. At least, that's the official version.

The Bastard-interpreted version is that the PFY was out on night alcohol manoeuvres (network people must network), forgot about the Tube times and had to get a cab home - only he'd spent all his pennies in the relentless pursuit of boozing. He would have jumped on the chance to get a work-paid ride back to his humble abode, with time off to heal his battle scars.

Plan 17B from the Big-Bastard Book of Bludges: toggle the power to an important unit, wait an hour, turn the kit back on, then grab a free cab home, with in-lieu recovery time to boot...

Checking the top drawer of the PFY's desk, in case he'd been forced to 'upload some data' during 'call-out', all seems well, so I settle down to read the paper. A few hours later, the PFY stumbles in, looking like his face has been used as a doorknocker.

I eventually get the PFY's story - he was at the local pub doing some late-night 'birdspotting' and followed a 'migration' to an after-hours cocktail drinker. Upset by the Tom Cruise wannabe behind the bar, he'd apparently flicked a lit match onto the spillage of spirits on the bar...not what the big bouncers would call acceptable behaviour. You get that on the big jobs.

So, as expected, he's not feeling great, and wouldn't do our name any good if I sent him out with the Client Unserviceable Equipment list..."Ah, here's that Client Unserviceable Equipment I was talking about yesterday - if you could just visit them and check out what's wrong with their kit?"

What the hell. I'm sure he'll appreciate the chance to counsel a user on the correct approach to the contrast versus brightness dilemma on their monitor...I open a window to the CCTV in the fourth-floor cubicle farm, and crank up the inbuilt microphone to listen to the PFY's first mission...

"So your meetings always get scheduled an hour after everyone else's?"

"Yes. Do you think it's my clock setting?"

"Possibly," the PFY murmurs slowly. "But we should really seek out the root of the problem."

"Maybe it's daylight saving?" the user suggests, helpfully.

"No, that's just a complication. The real cause is most likely to be the inability to find the disk-based Time-Zone configs."

Ah, Find and Disk in the same sentence - he's going for the old F(ind)DISK approach.

"So it wouldn't be the RAM battery on the motherboard?"

"?" utters the PFY, recognising a tinkerer and discarding the FDISK plan.

"You know, that keeps the clock ticking."

"Well, if it were that, your clock setting would reset every time you booted your machine," the PFY points out.

"Oh."

"Mind you, it could be a battery capacitance problem!"

"Battery capacitance?!"

"Yes, you know about Nicad Memory, also called internal resistance?" the PFY says, appealing to the geekal lobe of the user's brain.

"Uh, yes."

"Well, batteries also have a capacitance, storing a reverse charge, which, when a machine is off, reduces the battery voltage, causing a reduced junction voltage in the oscillator controlling time generation."

DUMMY MODE ON!

"Duh-huh."

"So, what do we do?"

"Well, it so happens that I have a booster capacitor kit in the office, which can remove any stray capacitance in the battery..."

Five minutes later..."Isn't that a strobe light with a lead coming from where the lamp should be?"

"Ha ha ha," chuckles the PFY. "No, I admit it looks like that, but that's just a...Capacitance Shield."

"Oh."

"Now, we just connect these leads up like so, plug her in, turn your machine on...stand back...and switch her..."

One small explosion later..."Lucky we found that dodgy nicad!" the PFY gasps. "That could have caused problems."

"But my machine's ruined!"

"No, it's not - look, that processor would make a lovely pendant! And those DIMM cards - they'd be great in a mobile!"

"B...B..."

"No, no, don't thank me - just think yourself lucky we caught it in time! Oh!" he adds, catching

sight of a case on the desk. "Does your laptop have the same problem?"

"NO!" shouts the hapless user, clutching the machine to his chest.

"Well I'll be off then." Another dissatisfied customer...

BOFH '99. The cleaner connection....

So, I'm taking calls because the PFY's on holiday and I have no one to play Quake deathmatches against. It's the usual run-of-the-mill thing with several "power users" from PR ringing to find out why they can't print to the shared laser printer.

Being in a reasonably calm state of mind, I don't expose the callers to the verbal barrage of my thoughts on their inability to read the notices pinned on the noticeboards, stuck to the printer in question and sent via email to them over the past month or so before the printer's retirement from service.

And still they call. Even though the printer has been gone for a week. Even though there's now a person occupying the cubicle where it was.. even though that person tells them that the two-page-per-minute power-sucking monster has gone.

I keep a tight rein on my temper, knowing full well that it really shouldn't bug me that much. My resolve is sorely tested however, when I get a call from the bastard (L)User from Hell. The word incompetent doesn't even begin to describe his technical inability -- he couldn't find his arse with a road map, a compass, mirror and torch. In fact, if his brain activity dipped any lower it would be legal to harvest his organs. And the boss has taken him under his wing in one of his goodwill-generating missions. So far this week he's rung three times because his machine's been hacked (the caps lock key was on when he typed in his password). He also rang to report that his computer had been infected with the "not a system disk, hit F1" virus, and to tell us that our time server was three seconds out from the speaking clock.

Still, the boss is keenly aware of any shortcomings in our service. The phone rings.

"My machine's locked me out again!" he blurts.

"Is your caps lock key on again?" I ask.

"Of course not!" he snaps.

"And what does it say when you get your password wrong?" "I don't get my password wrong! I always write it down on the bottom of my keyboard to be sure!"

"Of course you do," I respond, humbled by the lengths users will go to to protect their work. "And what did the computer tell you when you got your password...er...right?"

"It didn't say anything!"

"I see. And did you check your password this morning?"

"Well, yes! I can't be expected to remember everything!" "And you pulled your keyboard out of the socket in the back of your machine?"

Some fumbling noises follow, after which..."no, I didn't." The bollock-o-meter is registering "Liar, liar! Pants on fire!", so I can guess what's going to come next.

"Oh, it's come right now -- must have been a glitch or something..."

Sigh.

"...But I've noticed that the keyboard plug is a little loose."

Right! That's it! "Yes it's..." I quickly turn to my Excuse of the Day calendar. "...Oh! It's an carbon dioxidation problem."

"What?"

"The oxidation from carbon dioxide in the air makes the plastic shrink. That's why your monitor probably makes creaking noises."

"Oh."

"You can fix it, of course. Do you have a pot plant in your office?"

"Yes, I have a couple."

"Well, chuck one behind your machine and one on the top of the monitor -- they'll extract the carbon dioxide from the air.."

"Of course! Well, thank you for that at least."

"No problem. Now be sure to give them a really good watering so they can generate that oxygen. Lots of water."

Five minutes later the boss is in with the bad news about Mr Incompetent. He survived. And he only lost a monitor and popped a circuit breaker. He couldn't even electrocute himself properly. So now I have to rush a replacement monitor to him.

I get back to my office after installing it to hear the phone ringing. He's upset because the screen colours are up the spout. I almost tell him about the two disk drive magnets I taped to the base of the unit, just to get him to leave me alone, but that's just giving in. And I'm no quitter. It's time to send in a cleaner.

Later on, the boss fills me in on the gory details. "...And, apparently, he tripped and dropped a large bucket of water on top of his machine," the boss bumbles. "Which is a hell of a coincidence when you think about it"

"So he'll need another monitor?" I ask.

"Actually no. The cleaning guy was helping to mop up the mess and accidentally slammed Dave's hand in the drawer -- three times!"

"Oh. Well, all's well that ends well. Anyway, can't stop, I'm going for a drink with Mike."

"The cleaning guy?"

Some questions are best left unanswered..

BOFH '99. Banana Dictator?!?

It's a Tuesday morning and a new boss has started (the old having taken 'early retirement'). The office periscopes are up to see what the new one is going to be like. I bide my time, knowing that he's bound to show his face sooner or later.

There are a few potential types that seem likely - the 'hide-in-the-office-and-annoy-nobody' type, the 'tell-me-what-you-REALLY, HONESTLY think' huggy-feely type and, worst of all, the Banana Democracy Dictator type.

Hide-in-the-office appears to be on the cards as he hasn't shown his face to the troops yet...

A large box arrives in the office with my name on it.

I'm not expecting anything - except perhaps the small cheque from the management placement agency that I get whenever they supply us a new boss (about three times a year).

A quick recce of the box and its packing slip shows that it's about a company's-worth of client software for a database we don't have. Seconds later the courier arrives with another box, which I divine to be the missing server portion. Uh-oh.

Having not ordered it, I efficiently return it to sender.

Its origin becomes apparent when the new boss bowls up with instructions on how, where and when to install it.

"Oh, I sent that back because I hadn't ordered it," I cry.

"Ah yes. Well, I ordered it yesterday," he chips in quickly, "and I'll be ordering all hardware and software from now on."

BANANA DICTATOR ALERT!

"I see. And what was the software to be used for again?"

"I'm going to get our financial systems moved to alternative software that's far easier to learn and administer." (He's got a mate who works at a small financial systems company that he's letting get a foot in our company). I don't like it.

"I don't see how that would be an advantage given that all our current staff know the software we're using."

"Ah, but this is ISO98000 certified," he enthuses.

"98000?" the PFY cries. "But we're were only up to 9000."

"Well 98000 was a combination of ISO9000 certification and the lesser-known 8000 - which dealt with secure financial transactions," he burbles. "Now make sure this stuff gets uploaded for installation double time."

I smell a grey furry animal with a liking for food scraps.

Just to be sure, I run a quick scan of ISO titles. After having been woken for the third time (ISO stuff is notorious for its insomnia-curing ability), my suspicions are proved correct.

Then I start wondering...that voice is strangely familiar.

I examine the software in more detail. Inside the flashy CD covers are swags of hand-labelled write-once media. Curiouser and curiouser. And, the Web link to the site is a dead-end page with "Site being revamped" on it.

Hmmm... I decide to confront the boss.

"Yes, yes, they're a global company with blue-chip clients so they don't have enough time to install SSL-secured Web pages with Java-enhanced search algorithms," he responds.

Good answer. The sort of response you'd expect from a b...

"My machine's having problems," I mention to him in passing. "I think the floppy drive needs cleaning."

"Really?" he says. "It's probably...um...transient hysteresis loops in the head media."

"You're sure?" I ask, my suspicions confirmed.

"Positive. And you'll need to clear the hysteresis with a resonant magnetic distortion rectifier. Do you have one?"

"No."

"Well, I suppose you could use a hammer and a screwdriver at a pinch," he mutters. "You just slip the screwdriver into the drive until you feel a slight resistance..."

"...And bash the living crap out of it until you're down to the handle?" I ask.

"W-Yes, how do you know?"

"You're a bastard," I reply.

"No I'm not!"

"Yes you are. And you're unregistered..."

"No I'm not - I'm a MMBMFH," he says smugly. A Member of the Masonic Bastard Managers From Hell, no less!

"I see. How does it work then?"

"Well, you form a handful of 'manufacturing' companies, produce dodgy code, then get a job as a manager somewhere (using the references obtained from your companies), then buy up your code as the solution to everything at an artificially inflated price, then accept a rapid redundancy (with benefits) when the whole business slides down the toilet."

"Which only leaves me two questions," I say.

"What's in it for you, and when will the bomb drop? Let's see, A couple of grand 'external consultancy fees', and next Wednesday?"

"Next Wednesday?!"

"Yeah, I'm sure there's a virulent virus on the install media."

"I'll get right on to it!" I cry.

Always good to work with a pro.

BOFH '99. Creative Cooling...

So the boss has found out that I was using the four-way processor machine to keep my lunch warm, and isn't happy.

I would've got away with it, too, if I hadn't asked for extra brown sauce and it hadn't leaked from the brown paper bag onto the motherboard of the machine.

R&D aren't happy because they were using the machine for stress-loading some Web page software to see how the machines would handle stacks of connections.

I wasn't all that happy myself - not when I found out that the problem was actually caused by the processor's heat output burning a hole in the bag concerned. A definite mark-down of the hardware performance...

So now the boss is on the warpath, attempting to make sure that no other piece of kit is being used 'inappropriately'.

And wouldn't you know it, he manages to stumble - in his inept way - across the hose that connects the cooling inlet of the chunky old mainframes to the computer room's centralised vacuum-cleaning system.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!" he screams.

"Ah, it's a centralised vacuum-cleaning system."

"What's it connected to this machine for?"

"Well, you know how temperamental processors are with dust and stuff? I just run the vacuum

system through it to make sure none collects inside the machine."

"But that's the machine's INLET!" he squeaks.

I decide to come clean. "Remember when I told you the centralised vacuum-cleaning system was packing up?"

"Yes. And?"

"Well, it did. And, by a one-in-a-million chance, the bag burst when I was there, which is when I noticed that the mainframe was an excellent source of suction."

"You're using the mainframe as a vacuum cleaner?!?" he screams again, worst fears realised.

"Well...yeah."

"Are you insane?! What about the fire risk?"

"No worries. We always empty the machine when dust starts coming out of the floppy drive. Besides, the boards are so sparse the processors rarely even get warm!"

"I don't believe this!" he murmurs sadly, shaking his head.

"So I suppose we shouldn't tell you about the air conditioning ducts then," the PFY mentions gently.

"The air conditioning ducts?" the boss cringes, not really wanting to know the full horror that might await his question, but unable to stop himself.

"Well, we're keeping a bit of kit in them - but only the stuff that runs really hot," the PFY concedes.

"I...", the boss mumbles, having a short out-of-mind experience. "Why?"

"Well it runs too hot for the computer room, so if we put it in the cooling ducts, it runs OK."

"And what happens in winter, when the air is hotter?"

"Oh, we thought we'd cross that bridge when we drive under it - as Teddy Kennedy would say."

Images of fires spreading through the building take their toll on the boss and he wanders off mumbling.

"Machines in the ducting? A little far-fetched isn't it?" I ask.

"Yeah, well, I was pushed for time. Besides, it was either make something up or tell him about us using the financial archive tapes for streamers at last year's Christmas party."

A gasp from the doorway indicates that the boss had returned to the land of the sentient. A quick glance at his face tells me he's going to take the harsh approach to solving this.

"Of course, I blame the management," I cry.

"Me too," the PFY comments, following the Bastard Book of Bludges: "Pass all criticism/responsibility up."

"Yes, I wouldn't like to be in management when the auditors find out we've destroyed our old financial records."

"Me neither," says the PFY. "It might look like the company was trying to hide something from the Inland Revenue."

"Haven't they got an anonymous tip-off line?" I ask.

"You don't scare me!" the boss cries. "I can't be held liable for anything that my predecessors should have known."

"Of course you can't!" I agree. "No, it'll be us for the high jump - followed a few days later by the collapse of the company's core computing because of ignorance on the part of the remaining IT staff. I'd hate to be the manager of that little mess."

"Well, it's the head of IT's fault for not paying more attention, then!" the boss cries.

"Yes," the PFY comments dryly. "I'm sure he's going to take the fall and not just palm the blame onto a subordinate."

"I'll just get my resignation done then," the boss sighs as he stumbles off, a broken man.

"Oh, and can you turn over the chicken and mushroom pie on the applications server for me?" the PFY calls. "I don't like them too crispy..."

The dastardly duo employ some very underhand tactics to weed out 'unsuitable' applicants for the boss's job. Let's hope they're wearing the right coloured trousers...

So, in an effort to make the workers feel more involved (another brainwave from the huggy-feely crew) the PFY and I are asked to browse through the CVs of prospective bosses and give our comments.

"Let's see, under hobbies, he's got philately..." the PFY reads.

"...coin collecting, and, hey, trainspotting. And he's previously worked in...a university and a...bank."

"I see. And does it mention his film career?"

"His film career?"

"Yes, he obviously starred in A Life More Ordinary."

"Mmmm?" the personnel droid mumbles.

"Nothing. Next please," I cry.

"Righto!" the PFY responds, shoving the CV into the shredder. "Next is a...guy from Leeds, whose hobbies are lard sandwich making and chicken worrying and whose musical taste runs to the Bavarian Burping Choir."

"I somehow doubt that your remarks are founded in fact," the droid comments witheringly.

"No," the PFY agrees. "It's actually lard and chip butties."

"That means he's upper-class Leeds."

"My WIFE's from Leeds!" the droid snaps nastily.

"Really," I cry, unable to stop myself, "What position did she play?"

"WHAT!?"

"Rugby! You know, only rugby players come from Leeds."

"I think you hit a nerve there," the PFY says after the droid storms out, slightly upset.

Quicker than you can say "fail over to the back-up", we have a replacement droid - the heavy-duty model they usually only send to tell you they'll be happy to accept your resignation.

"Right, let's have a look at these applicants then," he says, picking up the next one. "Let's see, 15 years in IT, management experience, Microsoft certification, several courses in network and systems management..."

"Sounds too technical to me," I mutter.

"How can a manager be TOO technical?!" he asks.

"If they're too technical, they end up interfering."

"I hardly think that's an excuse to..."

"...then they spend all their time repairing the balls-ups they caused, and NONE of their time preparing those full colour 3D graphs on disk usage, cost benefits etc, which Upper Management gets all gooey over. So senior management start wondering who the HELL appointed this incompetent drone in the first place."

"Hmmm. You have a point," the HR-droid says, recognising a threat to job security. "What do you suggest?"

"NEXT!" I cry, shoving the CV into the bin-based encryption device. "I'm sure there's SOMEONE with the right skills."

"OK," the PFY cries, holding up a photo. "Next is THIS gent."

"I SAY!" I blurt, unable to restrain myself. "LOOK AT THOSE SLACKS! What colour is that, do

you think? Dusky pink or rampant purple?"

"Looks rampant to me," the PFY says. "A left-handed golfer...?"

"You mean gay?" the HR-droid says. "What the hell does it matter if..."

"Well, it doesn't matter to us, but you know how homophobic our CEO is."

"I can't believe..." he responds, wondering which decade he's in - but then folding - "...I suppose you're right."

"That was a bit dodgy, wasn't it?" the PFY asks later.

"Dodgy isn't the word. For a start, I coloured-in his outfit."

"You bastard!"

"And secondly, he's a mate of the CEO. I can't wait to mention that HR didn't want him because they thought he was gay."

The rest of the day progresses in a similar way, with us rejecting a stack of applicants including anyone who's attended more than one Microsoft training course (might be brainwashed), a bloke who drives a Lada (low expectations), and lastly (I'm proud of this one) a man who lives in Balham (the boredom factor).

"All set for tomorrow?" I ask the PFY at the end of the day.

"Yeah, I've managed to bash out seven CVs that look good enough to pass muster."

"Did you slip them into the 'in' tray at HR?"

"Yeah, under your stack - was the self-confessed glue-sniffer one of yours?"

"Yep - I thought we'd be really positive about him so that it doesn't look like we're always vetoing people."

It's funny how, with a little effort, your outlook on your position can change.

BOFH '99. Interviewing for new bosses...

So after our stringent CV cull for a new boss we shortlist some potential bosses, one of whom doesn't in fact exist outside our fertile (or is that furtive?) imaginations...

Still, that leaves us with three possibles that the HR hardliner has lined up for interview.

First out of the pan and into the fire is an ex-technical manager whose 'technical' ability extends, with effort, to recognising which way up his Tube pass goes.

We meet in an interview room in the Huggy Feely department and listen to the HR droid rabbit on

about what the company does, how widespread it is, what it's worth...

The interviewee's eyes glaze over (after all, he hasn't got a cut-down shoot-em-up game loaded onto his personal disorganiser with which to play the PFY).

Noticing the sudden absence of monotone, I look up to find the HR droid staring at me expectantly.

"Hmmm," I say, feigning deep thought, "just one question - if you were appointed, where would you see your role in the purchasing of technology for use in the company?"

"Good question," he answers, almost succeeding in not sounding condescending. "I would obviously have a great deal to do with the analysis, installation and testing of new equipment. I know how you technical people like to remain focused on the job at hand -- sorting out user problems and that sort of thing - so I'd probably get my hands dirty on the technical side, leaving you free to pursue your helpdesk calls and user enquiries."

"I see," I comment ambivalently. "Well, that concludes my questions - perhaps you'd like to take a tour of our facilities."

"That would be excellent!" he cries happily, assuming that a guided tour means the job's as good as his.

"Fine," the HR droid responds. "I'm sure Simon's assistant would be more than happy to take care of you."

The PFY nods and leads contestant number one away.

Contestant number two arrives and he's much the same as the first, except probably not as technically competent - if that's humanly possible.

I settle down to listen to some more company history...

"I'M SORRY. I must have drifted off!!" I cry, jerking awake with a start. "I've been putting in some late nights on the...uh...high availability...er...tape racking system."

"Any questions for this candidate?" HR droid asks.

"Just the one," I murmur, repeating the question I asked of number one.

"Well I'd have to have a reasonable amount of input in the selection process - verifying that it's value for money, what the company wants, that sort of thing. Outside of that I suppose it's up to you to determine what the users need."

Close, but no cigar.

"Perhaps you'd like a tour of the facilities," HR droid pre-empts. A nod to the PFY is as good as a wink and he's gone in a second.

The third candidate is cut from the same cloth as the first two. He leaves for his tour as the HR droid turns to the remaining applicant's CV. "I have to admit that this one does look impressive," he says, "but I think that if he's any good we probably need to get him and the first applicant back for

a second interview."

"Oh, the first applicant won't be coming back," the PFY says casually.

"And why's that?"

"Well, you asked me to, you know - take care of them..."

"Yes - show them around!"

"Oh! I'm afraid I may have misinterpreted your intentions."

"You haven't tested the halon system with someone in the computer room again have you?"

"Uh..."

"My God!" the HR droid cries. "I can't believe this!"

"Neither can I!" I blurt. "Do you know how much halon costs? And what about the ozone layer?"

The HR droid looks like he's set to explode...which is why it's important not to tell him that the PFY just took the candidates out the back way and told them that we'd be in touch shortly after hell froze over.

"I can't believe you thought I meant..."

"That's what I thought you meant!" I cry.

"But we're a company, not some underworld money laundering operation!"

"But what about when the CEO..." the PFY gasps.

I shake my head quickly (as planned) and the PFY shuts up.

Two days later, the appointment has gone through and there's a code of silence between the three people on the appointments team.

He thinks we won't implicate him, and in return he selects, without interview, the candidate that we wanted... who doesn't really exist.

BOFH '99. The boss that wasn't....

It's a lovely day for computing, having -- as we do -- no boss, and the PFY and I are milking it for all it's worth.

Well, when I say no boss, I really mean no physical boss. The logical boss device has been installed and configured for use -- /dev/roger for short -- and /dev/rroger for when he tells dirty jokes).

He spent his entire first day "meeting the clients", then called in sick on his second day. I've bought about a week's delay before questions start being asked in earnest -- for example, if anyone's actually seen him about. Meantime, he "telecommutes" regularly with the PFY and me.

"Just got an email from him," I tell the PFY. "Looks like he's OK-ed my junket to the States to investigate some...I dunno. I'll make it up when I get back. Has he sent you any email yet?"

"I'm just working on it," the PFY responds. "Looks like I'll be spending a lot of time checking RJ45 sockets on floor-points around the DP pool. In the interests of connectivity."

"You sick perverted bastard!" I murmur enviously.

Our plans are interrupted by the chief accountant.

"Ah, have you seen Roger?" he asks, looking about.

"He's off sick," the PFY replies.

"On his second day?"

"Yeah, apparently he's caught one of those 48-hour viruses. But he's left his home number in case you need to contact him," I say, passing over a bit of paper with an outer London number scrawled on it.

He takes the paper, mentally weighing up the option of dropping the new boss a line, then wanders off.

"He's bound to ring," the PFY murmurs.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure he'll have hours of meaningless conversation with the geek manager persona I've loaded into my PC's voice recog and response program."

"Your what?"

"Voice recog and response -- it's a program to listen and respond sort of like a human. Like a sophisticated version of those old Lisa and Psychiatrist packages."

"He'll smell a rat..."

"Not necessarily. The program's configured to confess that it's been taking a large amount of prescription pills to ward off its illness -- some of which might have an adverse effect on its thought processes"

"So it would be like talking to..."

"...Someone with little or no recall of events; a drunk, a druggie, a software vendor who gave you a cast-iron warranty."

"Hmmm..." the PFY murmurs, unconvinced.

I make a couple of quick calls to ensure my travel and accommodation is booked, confirmed and

non-refundable in case the worst happens. And Roger's just suggested I upgrade to business class so that I'm rested and able to take in all the information presented to me when I get there.

But it was doomed to end. And this time it's at the hands of the head of IT, with only a small amount of notice for us to prepare for it. He didn't take too kindly to the boss's idea of users getting support only when they beat the PFY or me in a Quake II Deathmatch. Well, that and the deluge of purchases from the technical bookstore which previous bosses wouldn't buy just because they cost an arm and a leg.

"RIGHT!" the head of IT cries as he bursts in with an IT budget's-worth of literature invoices, "THIS IS THE END!"

"Yes," I sigh, slipping on a black armband. "It's terrible!"

"Cut down in his prime!" the PFY sniffs sympathetically.

"Why do the good ones always die young?" I wail.

"What the hell are you talking about?" the head snaps.

"Roger...!" I gasp, choking back the tears "...Gone!"

"Cut down in his prime!" the PFY repeats.

"What do you mean?" he asks, looking concerned.

I push over our special edition tabloid front page.

"'Computing Manager hit by Software Delivery Van'.

Oh dear...But this isn't the same paper I got this morning."

Bugger it!

"Ah...this is the new late-commuter edition," I respond, thinking faster than a clock-chipped heatsunk PIII, "with last-minute updates."

He peruses the article looking for some indication that it's not the case, while I make a mental note to throw in a couple of death notices into tomorrow's paper to make it look legit.

"Aren't you supposed to be in a taxi now?" the PFY asks, right on schedule.

"Oh, you're RIGHT! MY COURSE!"

"Your course?" the head of IT asks.

"Yes, yes, I'll be late for the plane -- the PFY will fill you in -- it's what Roger would have wanted!" I gasp.

"No, I think he would have wanted the van to miss him," the PFY mumbles in the distance.

The gentler arts have not escaped him.

I'm sure he'll do well in the next round of interviews.

BOFH '99. Serial Whiner Alert!

"Well, I don't know about YOU," the PFY comments smugly, as he returns to the office reasonably late in the afternoon, "but I've done a very profitable day's work!"

"So have I. Look, a prerelease of Quake III in full operational mode, even though my graphics card isn't supported on that platform!"

The sadness of what I have said stops me in my tracks and reminds me of the furry-toothed geeks who tell computing war stories up at the bar at conferences...I make a mental note to book myself in for some electro-convulsive therapy at a progressive club that I have occasion to visit when the mood grabs me.

"Anyway," I resume, "what are you crowing about?"

"I," the PFY chirps, swaggering like Paul Gascoigne exiting a late-night drinker, "have just recabled an entire floor's worth of machine-to-wall socket patch cables."

"Why?" I ask, innocently, already guessing the answer.

"Perhaps..." he responds, pausing for dramatic effect, "...it's because THESE cables aren't anywhere near Cat-5 spec."

He holds out some patch cables that, I have to admit, I DID get for a suspiciously low price many moons ago...

"Very proactive of you," I counter, admitting defeat on this occasion. "Just tell me it wasn't the third floor."

"Why? They're the ones who complained about the network problems in the first place."

Experience, as they say, is the best teacher, even if the tuition fees are rather high at times. He is young, but he will learn.

"Did you replace Maureen's cable?" I ask.

"Of course."

"Maureen, the serial whiner?"

"You're jok..."

The PFY's response is interrupted by the phone.

"That'll be Maureen," I say "You've broken all the programs on her computer."

"No I haven't!"

"£10 says you have."

"You're on," he replies, confidently.

"You've broken all the programs on my computer!" she whines, over hands-free.

I grab the tenner from the PFY, trying not to look smug.

"I only replaced your networking cable," the PFY replies.

"It must have broken my programs," she replies "They were working all right this morning."

"What's not working?" the PFY asks.

"All my programs. The machine won't let me in!"

"Have you got your screensaver password correct?"

"Yes."

"And the CAPS LOCK light isn't on?"

"N...yes. But it's always on!" she lies.

"Try pressing the caps lock key to turn it off, then try again."

"It's not going to work...Oh, the machine's fixed now"

"Now that your CAPS LOCK light is off?"

"Yes, but I gave the wire a wiggle before I tried again. It's probably the wire..."

She rings off and the PFY hangs up, shaking his head.

"Double or quits she rings back within 10 minutes?"

"OK!"

Ten minutes and another £10 later, the PFY is trying to help Maureen understand why the new cable could not have deleted all the files she was working on this morning. Another 10 minutes and £20 after that, the PFY is explaining to Maureen that a new cable can't break her e-mail, and the reason she has no e-mail is because no one's sending her any. The PFY promises to send her a test message.

Five minutes and £40 later the PFY says he's not playing double or quits any more, and is explaining that HE misspelled 'verification', and that it's not the cable introducing spelling mistakes into the network traffic.

"What the hell am I going to do?" the PFY asks, after the new boss comes in (very harassed) to ask

what the hell the PFY has done to this woman's machine.

"What is your sin?" I ask.

"NOTHING! I just replaced her cable! If I'd known, I would've avoided her like the plague!"

"She'd have've noticed that everyone else's machines have fewer problems than hers -- now that they have new cables..."

"Well how do we fix her problem?" the PFY pleads.

"We don't," I say, picking up the phone, "We relocate it."

I call the boss back in and tell him that we've just found out that some of the cables were faulty. Being green and keen, he offers to take her up a new one. The poor bastard. Later, as the PFY and I are leaving, we hear the boss helping Maureen through her caps lock login dilemma again...

"I s'pose I owe you a pint then?" the PFY asks.

"MANY pints!"

Experience -- a great teacher, but the tuition fees...

BOFH '99. Who's tucking who?

So I'm peering inside a PC at the PFY's request - apparently he's seen something he doesn't like. And if he doesn't like it, it must be in bad shape...

I proceed to check off everything in the diagnostic list. "Hard drive, check; P-II 300, check; 128 Meg Memory, check; 512K L2 Cache, che..."

I pause. What would appear, at first glance, to be an L2 cache module is, in fact, a plastic replica of the real thing. I test this observation by removing it from the running machine. I reboot, and get the same diagnostic report.

"We've been ripped off!" I gasp to the PFY, after noticing the company's inventory sticker on the side of the machine.

"Who'd you get these from?"

"I...," the PFY responds, "...didn't get them from anywhere."

"Well, I didn't order them, we're the only people cleared to purchase computing equip...**THE BEANCOUNTERS!**"

"You guessed it," the PFY commented. "They ordered the kit themselves because the stuff we buy is 'too expensive' -- they can get these £200 cheaper."

"And a few components shorter..."

"Then they whack an inventory sticker on it and put it in use. Only, these ones don't appear to be working so well..."

"Hangs, crashes, that sort of thing?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's clock chipped, isn't it?" I ask, knowing the answer.

"Yep - and they try to get away with it by running a six-volt cooling fan at about nine volts through a couple of resistors."

"Off the 12-volt line?"

"The 11.7-volt line on this model, yes."

Sigh.

"And, don't tell me, they want us to fix it now?"

The PFY gestures to a pile of machines in the corner.

"Stuff em!" I yell, making an executive decision that's bound to annoy some executives.

"What's all this?" the boss asks, right on time, having been wound up by one of the senior bean counters, who's come for immoral support.

"It's a non-approved computing purchase."

"Approved, non-approved; what's the difference? It needs a service!" he blurts.

"Approved equipment is equipment that we've checked, kit that's passed field and benchmark tests."

"My laptop hasn't passed your tests, and it's running OK!" the head beancounter chips in.
"Although the backlight's a bit dim."

I skip the obvious response - fish in a barrel and all that...

"It may well be OK but, unless it's passed our tests, we're not required to service it," I murmur, as the PFY pulls out the IT Departmental Policy Document, indicating the pertinent portion of text. The boss is powerless to counter that one.

Fifteen minutes later, the beancounter's dropped his machine off for testing. Fifteen minutes after that, we've dropped it from ceiling height onto a table.

"Did it leave a mark?" I ask.

"A small one," the PFY notes, looking at the testbench top.

"But you'd better test it again, to be sure..."

Sadly, the owner enters the room shortly thereafter, in time to witness us throwing darts at his machine.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?"

"Floating point tests," I murmur. "All that's left now is the Spec Int."

"Spec Int?" he asks, gazing at the dented remains of his machine.

"Yes, it's a benchmark rating."

"I KNOW WHAT IT IS!" he shouts.

"Well, we're just about to test it now."

"And HOW are you going to do that?"

"I'm going to see if INTEgrates with another SPECies - namely, the dog from next door's building site."

"This is bloody ridiculous! Give me my machine!" he snaps. Which, incidentally, is exactly what the hinge at the back of the unit does as it plummets to the ground.

"IS there a floormark test?" the PFY asks. "That's a new one on me."

Surprisingly enough, the beancounter storms off without responding, destined, it appears, for the head of IT's office.

"OK: large pile of excrement in close proximity to wind movement device. We've got machines to test! Quickly now, pass them up to me, and make sure you note the benchmark each one leaves, and let's be thorough!"

"Quite right" the PFY concurs. "Wouldn't do to be unprofessional, would it?"

BOFH '99. Bored Once More...

Bored, bored, bored. I'm bored. The PFY's on holiday, and there's no-one in the building who's any match for him at Quake II. There's only one thing for it. I'm just going to have to make my own fun.

"They're bloody magic!" the head of security remarks joyfully, in response to my enquiry about our new proximity activated access cards. "The users don't have to ferret around in their wallets for their swipe cards, and we don't have problems with dirty swipe readers -- they're brilliant! And we can track people throughout the building. It's great!"

"And it's helpful to us too," the head of personnel blurts excitedly, "interfacing it to the phone system so that your phone automatically diverts to whichever room you're in at the moment is a godsend!"

"So I take it we're all happy and I should go ahead and pay the invoices from the telecomms and security people?"

The boss considers it for a slight moment, weighing up the trolleyload of brownie points he stands to gain from this decision before casting the deciding vote...

"The tracking WILL be used only by security, won't it?"

"OF COURSE!" I cry -- knowing that the vendor's product is no match for the tracking software we've been using for the last two years.

"There'll be only two viewing stations -- the Head of Security's office and the Ground Floor Security desk."

"In that case, where do I sign?" he asks, smiling.

Smiles break out all round as the boss slaps his OK on the bottom of the fairly modest invoices.

"What does 'TEST SITE' mean exactly?" he asks, slightly concerned at some fine print on the contract.

"It means we get the software at a discounted rate because we agree to notify them of any problems in the product."

"PROBLEMS with the product?" the boss asks warily.

"Yes, you know like we have with ALL the kit -- only this time the vendor WANTS us to tell them about it, and they'll fix them!"

"And they're giving us a DISCOUNT for this?!" he cries, not believing our good fortune. I reassure him, he seems satisfied.

Not wanting to waste any time, I grab the approved invoices and take them up to accounts.

The sad thing about systems like this is that they normally never reach their full potential until someone like me, with time on his hands, thinks outside the square, for the good of all. Well, for a bit of a laugh, anyway.

I wait a couple of tedium-filled days until security has collected the old access cards and decommissioned the swipe readers before putting my plan into action. First, modify the phone system's 'Follow Me' function to call the LAST room you were in, instead of the current one...

Next, vary the proximity on doors so that you have to be right on top of one before it releases.

The stage is set, the characters ready...

I choose the CCTV monitoring the door with the least proximity sense, which happens to be beside the coffee machine, slap a video into the recorder and wait for the boss.

Half an hour of impatience is rewarded when the boss wanders through the door, and makes himself a very hot black coffee. I crank the sensors depth to 0mm and the boss ploughs into the

door with his steaming styrofoam.

Beautiful!

I unlock the door to let him out, then phone him as he leaves the room -- he knows it's for him because he's reported the late 'follow me' to me twice already...and ploughs into the door again. I think I might be onto a 'Funniest Video' winner here.

A loud thud announces the boss's arrival at Mission Control along with a faint trickle of red on the glass at around nose height.

I hate myself, I really do.

It's not pretty. The boss is ranting at me, which upsets my concentration so much I overwrite the video I've just made. Bugger!

"AND ANOTHER THING! WHY THE HELL DOES MY PAGER GO OFF EXACTLY 30 SECONDS AFTER I ENTER THE BLOODY LOO!?" he snaps.

"I... it must be a bug," I respond, wondering if security is extracting a portion of urine from the boss as well...

"HAVE YOU NOTED IT?" he asks.

"Well, we usually let the user do that on the bugs noteboard"

"RIGHT! Where's that then?"

My conscience is making noises but, NO! I WANT THAT PRIZE!

"Ah, on the wall beside the coffee machine" I respond, rewinding the videotape"

One thud later he's gone.

Two thuds later, they take him away in a wraparound suit.

And the worst of it is, I'm still bored...

BOFH '99. A Mental Lapse...

"Are you bloody MAD?" the PFY asks as we return to the office after going a couple of rounds with a mixed bag of technical and non-technical staff who'd ambushed us outside the elevator on our way to lunch. "A bloody MEETING?!?"

"Yes," I murmur thoughtfully.

"You HATE meetings!" he blurts.

"Well, HATE is a strong word. INTENSE dislike is more accurate. But that's beside the point -- I

saved us having to spend half an hour listening to their wandering thoughts on what should be in our LDAP directory."

Yes, it's true. Thanks to some remark about information publishing by the Head of IT, there are two parties lobbying for what'll end up in our new LDAP server. On the one hand we have the individuals who believe that even their office phone number is their own private info and not be published, while on the other we've got the 'privacy 'nudists' who want to bear all in the directory, listing home numbers, spouse's name, birth date, in an effort to make the world a happier place."

"OK, but still, it's not like you to call a meeting."

"In the past I've been reluctant to attend meetings; however, that's only because I didn't initiate the meeting concerned. THIS meeting, however, with a large number of disparate attendees, will be worth its weight in 128 Meg DIMMS."

"Come again?!?"

"Behold!" I cry, indicating on my desktop the windows of the three separate meeting scheduler programs in use in the company. "On the one hand we have the standalone meeting software, on another, scheduling software built into a mail server, and lastly, some fly-by-night product that Noah used which is so old it had a Y-ONE-K bug! And NONE of them interoperate well. The first two disagree by an hour thanks to daylight savings variations between the two machines, and the last one can handle hours, minutes, days and months, but sadly not years, which means the fly-by-night data import/export routine is bound to flag that the meeting time proposed is either a weekend, or has a meeting scheduled in it -- the legacy of a meeting in some former year!"

"It doesn't get cleaned out at the end of the year?"

"Nope!"

"OK, but this no-interoperation means what?"

"That after several abortive attempts, THREE separate meeting times are going to be set, which I will have to attend."

"But you HATE meetings!"

"Yes, but I LOVE watching movies on my portable DVD player which, once I slap on a keyboard, will look almost exactly like some cross between a palm and laptop! I'll be sure to 'type' something every time one of them sounds like they've come to the point once, or possibly twice per meeting. Meantime they'll be so busy 'discussing' their point of view with the other attendees that I'll never see what I'm up to."

"What if they come to a consensus?"

"Don't be silly -- these are users! Besides, if it looks dodgy I'll throw the idea of retina scans and bank account numbers onto the fire to keep things nice and hot."

"Sooner or later they'll agree!"

"Puleeeeeze!" I cry. "I'm already running an LDAP to finger gateway, so when they eventually

figure out what they do and don't want I'll just remove that data from the finger information data and we'll be back in business! After 'working solidly for a week to install the new software' of course."

...Three movies later...

"So no consensus reached then?" the boss asks, running a quick meeting post-mortem at mission control.

"Well, we almost reached one. But then someone suggested listing previous convictions and medical conditions."

"Why the hell would we want to do that?"

"Well, I believe the argument was that as that information was supplied in a person's CV it might belong to the company -- and someone might want to know if a co-worker had an alcohol problem before they invited them to an Xmas shout."

"That's just ridiculous!"

"That's what we decided in the end. Then the same person asked if next-of-kin, blood type, then HIV status should be listed for health and safety reasons..."

"They can't be serious!"

"Well as it happened, we decided against that eventually."

"Do you think the next meeting will iron out the wrinkles?"

"Bound to!"

...Later...

"So we're all agreed then?" I ask the final meeting.

Murmurs of assent all round. The PFY arrives with a parcel for me.

From the mail order DVD site.

"Excellent, so we'll just store name, room number, phone number, sexual preference, photo, nude photo and breast size?" I say, slapping "Enemy of the State" into my 'laptop'.

BOFH '99. Medical Matters.

"You look rough!" the PFY chirps as I drag myself into work, a mere 26 hours late.

"Yeah, out with a Slave Trader the night before last.

"And it was that bad you took a sicky?"

"No. I don't take 'sickies'. I was telecommuting."

"Yeah, right. Use the porcelain modem, did you?"

"That's quite enough of that," I interject, still a little queasy after the tube ride.

"So what transpired?" the PFY asks.

"I only had a few ales."

"A few?"

"Well, a few followed by a few. And then a few more. But it was the curry that did for me. I just can't do it any more. I have to face facts about my body's ability to leech toxins from itself: I think I may be allergic to curry."

"Don't say that!" the PFY wails.

"It's no use fighting it," I respond, "a man can stand only so many chicken vindaloos."

"Are you sure it couldn't be the booze?"

"No - I can have a couple of lagers and wake up fine. But EVERY TIME I have a ruby, I feel ill in the morning."

"Could that be," the boss interjects as he rolls into the office under a full head of administrative steam, "because every time you have a curry you're plastered?"

"There's a certain amount of logic in that statement," I admit. "But the culprit has been identified..."

"As booze," he states firmly. "Anyway, you'll have a chance to put your theory to the test. We're all going to lunch with a supplier, who wants to sell us low-cost disk by the Terabyte."

Oh well. After all, a curry is a curry.

Our sales professional burbles at the boss while the PFY and I power through a plate of pakoras washed down with ginger beer.

"So you're selling SCSI," the PFY interjects.

"No, not SCSI. Our topology is based around a more robust..."

"Proprietary?" I ask, smelling blood in the water.

"Ah, it's proven technology..."

"DSSI!" I cry, going in for the kill.

The torpedo hits, leaving an 'uh'-shaped hole in his face.

"So, let's just recap what we're NOT talking about," I continue, reeling off technical twaddle until

the boss wanders off to the little manager's room in despair.

"We're not buying," the PFY murmurs.

"No," I concur. "We've got all the old tech we need."

"Hmm..." The salesman has clearly faced this situation before. "Can I get you gentlemen anything?"

"Well, I'd like another ginger beer for starters," the PFY smirks, pouring the remains of his last glass down his gullet.

"Me too," I agree, "and hold the ginger."

TWO HOURS LATER...

"So, let's go over this one more time," the boss blurts. "We should buy a couple of Terabytes of this disk to put on our old Vax system? But no-one uses it, it doesn't make sense!"

"Yes it does; listen," I explain softly - trying not to breathe in the direction of the boss, in case he smells the evidence of the last 10 pints of my 'ginger' beer.

"There'll be fewer complaints if no-one uses them."

"Uh?"

Looks like I'm going to have to abandon logic and proceed direct to the jugular.

"Think 'Mean Time Between Failures'. Think 'Customer 'Uptime Expectation' and Delivery of Service'. 'Enhanced Modularity'. Think 'Vendor Independence' and 'Phased Installation'. Think 'Replacement Life Cycles'." I pray a silent prayer to the god of Management Buzzwords.

"Well, I suppose if you put it that way..."

His gracious defeat is interrupted by a heavy-handed tap on the shoulder from the PFY, who has all the symptoms of a bad case of liquor mortis. There's a steely look in his eye and, before I can lay hands on him, he's up and at 'em.

"Y'KNOW WHAT YUR PRBBLIM ISH?" he slurs, giving the ISO-approved employee/employer signal for 'Please disregard the following, I appear to be intoxicated'.

"Hey! Isn't that Pamela Anderson?" I cry, diverting everyone's attention while I kick the PFY's silence-knob. Well, it shuts him up anyway.

The next day dawns and I'm in a bad way. The PFY's in a bad way. Even the Boss is in a bad way (the sales bloke paid the waiters at the curry house to slip shots of their special Bolivian vodka (half Antifreeze) into the Boss' diet Tango).

"I take it back," the boss whispers quietly. "I think I might be allergic to curry too."

"Me too," the PFY agrees.

Next time we go to Luigi's. You can't go wrong with a nice bowl of pasta. And a couple of lagers to wash it down..

BOFH '99. Staff Induction?...

So the boss rolls in one morning with about 20 people in tow, bearing some 'good news' for us. The same good news that bosses bring EVERY six months...

"Simon," he burbles pleasantly (always a bad sign), "these are the new staff that we've acquired in the past six months. I'm just running them through the IT induction course."

"Course?" I ask. "As in, obstacle?"

The boss chuckles magnanimously. "Simon fancies himself as a bit of a joker, ladies and gentlemen."

"Yes," the PFY concurs, slipping in from behind the assembled crowd of inductees, "like that time he slipped the darkroom timer, some curly wires and a couple of distress flares into your briefcase before you flew to Dublin..."

The boss winces at the mention - and I could almost swear his buttocks clenched in nervous recollection.

"That wasn't very funny," he mutters.

"Well, it made me laugh," the PFY cries.

"Anyway," the boss continues, glaring at the PFY. "I'd like you to show the group around the computer room."

As a sign of good faith, he hands over one of his most cherished possessions, a penlight laser pointer. Weird - this is like Obi-Wan passing Darth his light sabre "for cleaning".

Sadly, however, Obi-Wan's exit destroys the moment as he makes his way into the doorjamb, ricocheting into the corridor with all the panache of C3PO.

Still, there's trust being displayed here for some reason.

First, he gives me unsupervised access to a busload of newbies AND he's handed over something he values highly. Not that he doesn't value staff highly, of course, it's just that they're easier to replace. The laser pointer cost 30 quid of HIS money, which is why it's so disturbing to me when I accidentally - and I have witnesses to verify this - drop it down the gap between the lift door and the lift shaft. Sniffle.

Meanwhile, the sheep are following me, so I'd better put on a good show. "And this is our back-up system," I cry, indicating the monster robotic instrument as we move into the heart of the computer room, just to dispel any rumours that we don't perform this vital function.

"What was that bin under the back-up machine for?" a curious member of the audience asks once

we leave the inner sanctum and return to mission control.

An interesting question - I had asked the PFY to stop back-ups so the users wouldn't witness tapes being 'exported' from the jukebox into the bin.

"Ah, that's to catch the tapes that are going to off-site storage," I ad lib. "We're waiting for the proper tape export cartridge, but in the interim..."

"Then why did that other guy just pour them all into the big bin?" he asks.

"Security reasons."

"SECURITY?!"

"Of course! If we shipped our tapes out in a tape box they'd be a sitting duck for theft!" I cry. "This way, no-one knows when the data's leaving the building."

"Well, it's just been tipped into a rubbish truck!" he responds, indicating a truck outside the window.

"It only looks like a rubbish truck," I sigh. "It wouldn't look at all convincing if a data storage company collected our rubbish now would it?"

"But they're collecting everybody's rubbish," he continues.

Funny how you go off people isn't it?

"Yes, yes, AGAIN, it would look suspicious. Quite a lot of things aren't what they seem. This handscanner, for example."

"That's not a hand scanner - it's a panini toaster!"

I sigh again, more deeply this time.

"LOOKS like a panini toaster. A volunteer from the audience please?" I ask.

Five seconds later...

"Ohmigoodness!" I cry (over the screams). "It's a real panini toaster! The PFY must have installed the scanner in the break room by mistake! And, oh no! The release catch is jammed!"

Ten minutes later, when waffle hand has been taken up to sick bay..."Any other questions?"

The silence is deafening, indicating another successful induction.

I take them back to the boss so he can give them the IT summarisation speech, then wander back to mission control.

"Ah, just come to get my pointer," he says.

What the hell. "It's sitting on top of the back-up stacker in the computer room," I respond, tapping

away at the console of the doors system.

"But my card's not working!" he cries.

"Oh yeah. Here, I'll let you access it via the hand scanner..."

BOFH '99. Arty Murray Arrives..

Here we go again....

I smell trouble as soon as I walk into the office.

It's 11:30 on the dot. Well, no-one could possibly expect me to get in early, given that I'd just come back from a trade show and that I'd had to go back home first to drop off my ill-gotten gains. Or, put more officially, the advanced, top-of-the-range kit that's going to be used as a testbed for advanced interactive digital multimedia (and any other buzzwords that spring to mind and sound appealing on investment proposals) services. Right now the test plan seems to involve rigging up the kit so that we can show the latest DVDs to selected chums (for a small fee, naturally) but that's the nature of draft plans.

On arrival, I'm gasping for a cup of coffee. I function only once I've had a shot of the strongest Java. The PFY keeps moaning that the amount of the stuff I drink is leaving me totally wired, although as far as I'm concerned, I'm completely 802.11 until I've had my first couple of shots of caffeine in the morning.

The PFY is looking worried as he meets me by the door of the office. "The boss wants to see you urgently," he says, jerking a none-too-clean thumb in the direction of our newly-appointed lord and master. "He's been yelling for you all morning."

That is a worrying sign. Our boss has been part of the merry fray for only a few weeks but there is every sign that he's boss type 37b (knows bugger all about technology and spends so much of his time crawling up to the chief executive and the head beancounter that he's forgotten how to do anything that actually resembles work).

His ignorance is staggering. I managed to spend several hours the other day playing Doom with the PFY because I persuaded him that he and I were testing the Dial-up Object Oriented Machine. And then there's the time that a contractor (who, by some amazing stroke of chance, bore a marked resemblance to my cousin) persuaded the boss that Arcnet was tomorrow's magic technology, and that he really should invest in some state-of-the-art kit that the contractor just happened to have in the back of his Escort. Personally, I can't wait for the audit this quarter, particularly when they find the e-mail that I "sent" to Mr. 37b warning him against the deal.

But that's something to look forward to in the future, I'm more concerned at the moment with what the boss is thinking of now. The PFY is right to look concerned; any meeting in the morning involves what we call a BLI (before lager intake) idea - the worst sort to have, as the thoughts simply don't flow so freely as PADOTF (pissed and dribbling on the floor) ones.

"Ah, Simon," beams 37b (a bad sign) when I eventually make my way into his oak-panelled domain. "I've been thinking" (a really bad sign). "The network's been running rather sluggishly

lately and it needs a bit of a tweaking" (an extremely bad sign - you never want to hear the word 'tweaking' from someone who even has trouble changing the channel on the TV). "I think it might be an idea for someone to come into the office and have a look at ways in which we could improve the network". Yes, it's an idea, but I'm not entirely sure it's one I'd like to entertain or, for that matter, one which is likely to prolong his status as a living, breathing carbon-based lifeform.

Anyway, of course the network's been a bit slow recently. Doesn't he realise just what demands real-time video has for networked bandwidth, even if you multicast it properly? (And anyway, those video pictures of the marketing director and his PA in the sickroom, after she was "taken ill" at a company bash, were well worth a few megabits per second down the backbone, so to speak). The last thing I need is some snotty-nosed, toad-faced consultant coming in here, taking a cursory look at our systems before filing a hastily-flung together report that completely rips off the company. That's my job.

I'm suddenly aware that the boss is still speaking.

"...and at the show I met this very interesting chap. Told me that he would be happy to take a look at the way our network was constructed, said that if he couldn't think of ways of saving money, we wouldn't have to pay him. I told him that we were future-proofing our network by using a new technology called Thinwire and his eyes lit up. I think he was impressed that we were so advanced - he even said that there wasn't much he could teach me."

This gets worse. And not just because the Boss *knows* the word thinwire - let alone thinks I'd let it in the place...

"So I've invited this guy over tomorrow to have a look at the way we do things. His name's Arty Murray and you should help him in any way you can."

ARTY MURRAY!!

The man of legend. It's the first time that I've come anywhere near an encounter with the Bastard Consultant from Hell, and it's not a prospect that I'm looking forward to.

It's time to formulate a plan.

To be continued...

BOFH '99. The End?.

It's with a heavy heart that I secure myself in the control room to write these lines. The reader will have to forgive my writing style as this is my first attempt at writing.

I have, for some time, been aware of my supervisor's habit of recounting our adventures to the readers of Network Week, and feel that it would be remiss of me, as his faithful assistant, not to recount this sorry tale.

It was a typical Friday morning. I was engaged in some user education in accordance with the Recommended Daily User Allowance of electricity. My 'tutorial' was interrupted by the cessation of mains supply to the desktop. Freed from the grip of electricity, the user escaped past the Bastard,

who had his finger on the now-open circuit breaker.

"Much work on?" he asked, somewhat distracted.

"Nothing," I respond, indicating the recently departed user.

"Then it makes it all the easier for me to propose you sneak away for a couple of days."

"This isn't that camping holiday joke again, is it?"

"Afraid not. Ever heard the name Arty Murray?"

"No...Hang on - isn't he the guy who calls himself a 'network artist'?"

"Piss artist more like. He slimes in on a boss or two at a trade show then, with their permission, does remote probes of WANs and LANs (as an 'independent security consultant') then combines this information with stuff sneaked to him by the management contact concerned."

"And...?"

"And, inevitably, he fabricates some security vulnerability and recommends outsourcing ALL IT operations to some crap start-up company that he's associated with that couldn't ping localhost and get a response. THEN, when that company goes belly-up, snakes the job for himself. Thing is, you might never know your job was at risk! If I could beat that man, if I could free computing society of him, I'd be prepared to turn to some more placid line in life - user support, helpdesk manning, morris dancing at televised events."

"Surely not!"

"Nah, just taking the piss. But he's a menace, and he's been HERE. I've tracked him over the past few days. We've had our run-ins, and now he's coming for me and mine. It's personal!"

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Do? Elementary, my dear PFY! We're going to leave the place unattended for a couple of days until he reveals himself. He won't be able to resist the chance of playing with the kit."

And so we did. Booking two tickets to the Third World (Luton), we made to absent ourselves from the office. Instead we snuck back and fired up the Emergency Operations Centre on the 6th floor, passing the time aiming our disused sat dishes at our rival's receivers and sending high-gain bursts at them.

"Jeez!" the Bastard cried on the second day, halfway through our Indian takeaway. "LOOK!" he cried, pointing to a flashing red icon on the building monitor. "It's him, in the ROB faller!"

"ROB faller? What's a faller?"

"It's the opposite of a riser," the Bastard snaps. "Where the waste water and sewage go. To stop people going in there I break one of the sewer seals every year. That, combined with the lack of floor grilles, provides a treacherous drop, which is usually enough to stop even the most curious in their tracks."

"Why?"

"'Cos that's where I keep my stash of liberated kit and non-petty cash. You know I don't trust banks with ill-gotten gains."

"ROB faller?"

"There's four fallers in the building, Left-In-Front, Right-In-Front, Left-Out-Back, Right-Out-Back."

"So what's in the Right Out Back Faller?"

"Dosh. All my dosh. Years of it. Stuffed into what, to all intents and purposes, looks like a large sewer line."

"Arty Murray's found it?" I gasped.

"It would appear so. I'd best investigate!"

"I'll come with you."

"No, you stay here. I don't want anyone thinking that both of us have left the office." With that the Bastard, armed with his torch-shaped cattle prod and a set of jump leads, strode out.

I waited for some time. I fired up the CCTV monitors to follow his progress - to no avail. The CCTV circuits were dead.

Sprinting to the corner of the building with only a battery-powered stapler for protection, I found a half-open door, marked "Reichenbach - Buildings Maintenance", obviously some form of pun.

Opening the door fully, I saw evidence of a struggle, a splintered rail here, a drop of blood there.

There was worse to come. A floor and a half below, caught on a pipe fitting, I saw a strip of cloth that could only have come from the Bastard's T-shirt.

I gazed into the black abyss and shouted his name. My voice echoed back at me, but no-one answered.
