

The Bastard Operator From Hell

The Complete Edition

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Chapter 1

The Original BOFH

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1.1 Genesis (Striped Irregular Bucket #1)

I'm really bored. You know how bored you get when work's going on and on and on, and nothing interesting is happening, and you're listening to a radio that picks up ONE station on FM, and it's always the station with the least records in the city, about 5, and one of them is "You're so Vain" which wasn't too bad a song until you hear it about 3 times a day for a year, and *EVERY* time it plays, the announcer tells you it's about Warren Beaty and who he's currently poking, someone you'll never sniff the toe-jam of, let alone meet, let alone get amorous with. And EVERY time someone mentions Warren Beaty, someone says that he used to go out with Madonna too, and have you seen "In Bed With.."

AND THEN, someone ELSE will say "It wasn't really about Warren Beaty, it was James Taylor" and the first person will say "What, 'In bed with Madonna?'" and they laugh and everyone else laughs, and I slip out the Magnum from under the desk where I keep it in case someone laughs at a joke that's so dry it's got a built in water-fountain, and blow the lot of them away as a community Service. I figure that I'll get time off my sentence if I ever kill someone by accident who's got a life.

So visitors are getting pretty thin at the moment, and the Quick-Lime Pits are filling up rapidly, and all I've got to do is the full backups and maybe I can go home.

So, to relieve the boredom, I get some iron filings and pour them into the back of my Terminal until it fizzes out (Which doesn't take all that long, surprisingly enough), then call our maintenance contractors and log a fault on the device. Sometimes they'll send someone who knows what they're doing, but it's a lot more fun when they don't - which is about 98% of the time.

So they maintenance guy comes in, and I can tell he's NEW because the photo on his ID actually LOOKS like him, not like the head engineer, whose photo's a black and white tin-type (he's that old).

Maintenance Contractors always dress up nice, with a tie and everything because they believe that a customer will trust a nicely dressed guy with their million dollar equipment *just* because he's got a nice tie..

Because he's NEW and ALONE, he's what you call an appeasement engineer, the new guy they send so they respond within the 4 hour guaranteed response period. (Things are getting better and better) Your average appeasement engineer is about as clued-up on computers as the average computer "hacker" is about B.O, and their main job is to make sure the power plug is in and switched on, then call back to the office for "PARTS". The really keen ones will sometimes even take a cover off the equipment and pretend that they see this stuff all the time. I wonder what sort today's is...

"You got a dud terminal?" he asks pleasantly

I tell him yeah, and bring him into the control room.

"Which one is it?" he asks, confused by the fact that only one of them is smoking.

"It's the Model Three" I say, giving NOTHING away.

"Ah, the old model three!" he says knowingly, without a clue what a model three is, or which one of the three terminals it is, which isn't surprising, as I just made it up.

"We get a lot of Model Three problems" he says nodding "So what actually happened?"

Sneaky, but not good enough. I'm not going to point it out to him.

"It just went dead" I say, in luser mode.

"I see. Could you just recreate what you were doing so I can check the unit out when it's ready for operation?"

Very Sneaky. I decide to let him off the hook.

"Look, I've got to go to the toilet, there it is over there" I say, pointing at our Waffle-Iron.

"But that's a Wa..." He says, then stops. He's a beginner, and it's just possible that the company has a line of terminals that look like waffle irons. He bites.

"Sorry" he says, smiling again "for a minute there I thought it was a Model 2!"

A reasonably good save, but it won't save him. "Huh, it's nothing like a model 2! *THAT'S* the model 2" I say, pointing to the espresso machine.

He nods and I leave, which means he's got to take the iron to bits, otherwise he knows I won't believe he's worked on it. I give him a couple of minutes to get the element exposed then wander back in.

"So how does it look?" I ask, concerned-like.

"Well, I think we could have a processor problem.." he says concentrating on prying the element up.

..concentrating so much that he doesn't notice me plugging the iron in.

"Shouldn't you be wearing an earthing strap?" I ask innocently.

When he thinks I can't see, he creeps his hand over to the wiring frame and says "Well, It's just as easy to hold onto earth like this"

"But what about the risk of a cross-the-body shock with no resistor in series with you?" I ask ever-so-more-innocently

"Oh, it's ok" he says "the unit's unplug..."

>click< >BZZZZZZZEEERRT!< >clunk!<

I ring the maintenance help-desk again...

It's Rhonda

"Hey Ronda!, Ah, I'm going to need another engineer and a new Waffle Iron over here; for some reason your engineer opened up my Waffle Iron without switching it off." I say

Rhonda knows me. It's the third call and the third appeasement engineer this year. You'd think they'd learn.

"You're a real prick" she says, annoyed

"Tell ya what Rhonda, why don't you come and fix it; it's a Model Three..."

1.2 The Birth of BOFH - Striped Irregular Bucket #5

I'm still bored.

But at least now the radio's off, it was on it's 12 repeat of "Wildfire" THIS WEEK, and it's only Tuesday; shit I hate

that.

So anyway, I quicklime the engineer to remove any fingerprints and then FedEx him back to headquarters and set about waiting for the new engineer.

Now the second engineer only has to come out after another 4 hours, there's no death of engineer penalty clause, (but I'm thinking about asking for one) so I've got to fill in some time. This guy's going to be a technical engineer, the sort that comes in with a raggedy tie where he got it caught in the drum printer at 3000 rpm a couple of years ago, and he'll have the grazes on the face that indicate that he didn't get the gate open in time...

I know those sorts...

So I fill in a couple of hours by killing users off and deleting their files, then waiting for them to call...

"Um, I can't find my files" the wimpering simp on the phone says

"Files? What files?"

"The files in my account. My thesis, my research - all gone!"

"Gone ay? What's your username?"

"TURGEN"

"TROJAN?! LIKE THE CONDOM?"

"No TURGEN. T-U-R"

"OH Turgen, like TURD, but with a GEN instead of a D... Ok lets see" I make vague clicking noises my dragging the quicklimed man's fingers back and forth across the keypad. "Uh-huh" >drag drag< "Yeah.." >dragedy poke< "AH! - You haven't got any files"

"I KNOW!"

"Well, what are you calling ME for? We don't make the files you know, we just look after them. And chopitty-chop too, your thesis looks like it's due in a couple of days.."

I hang up - he'll call back. Meantime I open up a copy of "VMS BASTARD OPERATORS MANUAL FROM HELL" I'm reading the article I sent in about getting rid of those trouble users...

"... Modify the user's password minimum from 6 to 32 letters, give the password a 1 day lifetime, set it so that they HAVE to use the password generate utility when they change their password (so their password will always be something that looks like vaguely pronouncable line-noise), add a secondary password with the same as the above, then redefine their CLI tables so that the only command that works is DELETE, and all other commands point to it."

Beautiful.... Shit I'm good!

He calls back.

"MY FILES ARE GONE!" he screams, panicking.

"Did you have a backup?" I ask, as sweet as pie

"But that's what you people are supposed to do!" he sobs

"Yeah, well we did - but then we switched to those 8mm tapes, and they're the same size as the ones in my video camera, so I've been using them to tape the neighbour's sex romps..."

I hear the revolver go off, but what the hell, it's 5pm, and not my problem...

1.3 Still Birthing the Bastard Operator.. (Bored #3)

So the second engineer rolls up, but the FedEx man has been and gone, so he misses out altogether.

This guy's a techno, (you can tell by the tie) but he's smart (no grazes), so I'm going to have to be wary.

"What's the problem?" he asks, in a business-like manner.

"It's the Model Three" I say (what the hell, it worked before)

"What the f*ck's a model three?" he asks confused.

He could be just testing me, but I decide to come clean. He doesn't notice so I just walk funny for a couple of minutes and then show him the terminal that I'd poured the iron filings into.

"It just went dead!" I say (having previously vacuumed the iron filings up, of course)

So anyway, he gets to work opening the cover and making board replacement noises. I decide to help and point out a fuse that's blown on the power supply board.

"Oh, I haven't got the parts for that - I've only got a replacement board." he says in a confused manner. "Which one was the fuse again?"

I point it out to him.

"Wow! And what does it do again? You know, I've been working at the same place for 6 years, and I've never seen one of those fuse things. It's amazing what you learn isn't it!"

"What are you again?" I ask, already suspecting the answer

"Chief Engineer"

Thought so.

"Say, do you know anything about waffle irons?"

"A little..."

>Click!< >Fzzzzzeet!< >Clunk<

1.4 The Bastard Operator From Hell #1

It's backup day today so I'm pissed off. Being the BOFH, however, does have it's advantages. I reassign null to be the tape device - it's so much more economical on my time as I don't have to keep getting up to change tapes every 5 minutes. And it speeds up backups too, so it can't be all bad can it? Of course not.

A user rings

"Do you know why the system is slow?" they ask

"It's probably something to do with..." I look up today's excuse "... clock speed"

"Oh" (Not knowing what I'm talking about, they're satisfied) "Do you know when it will be fixed?"

"Fixed? There's 275 users on your machine, and one of them is you. Don't be so selfish - logout now and give someone else a chance!"

"But my research results are due in tomorrow and all I need is one page of Laser Print.."

"SURE YOU DO. Well, you just keep telling yourself that buddy!" I hang up.

You'd really think people would learn not to call..

The phone rings. It'll be him again, I know. That annoys me. I put on a gruff voice

"HELLO, SALARIES!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I've got the wrong number"

"YEAH? Well what's your name buddy? Do you know WASTED phone calls cost money? DO YOU? I've got a good mind to subtract your wasted time, my wasted time, and the cost of this call from your weekly wages! IN FACT I WILL! By the time I've finished with you, YOU'LL OWE US money! WHAT'S YOUR NAME - AND DON'T LIE, WE'VE GOT CALLER ID!"

I hear the phone drop and the sound of running feet - he's obviously going to try and get an alibi by being at the Dean's office. I look up his username and find his department. I ring the Dean's secretary.

"Hello?" she answers

"Hi, SIMON, B.O.F.H. HERE, LISTEN, WHEN THAT GUY COMES RUNNING INTO YOUR OFFICE IN ABOUT 10 SECONDS, CAN YOU GIVE HIM A MESSAGE?"

"I think so..." she says

"TELL HIM 'HE CAN RUN, BUT HE CAN'T HIDE'"

"Um. Ok"

"AND DON'T FORGET NOW, I WOULDN'T WANT TO HAVE TO TELL ANYONE ABOUT THAT FILE IN YOUR ACCOUNT WITH YOUR ANSWERS TO THE PURITY TEST IN IT..."

I hear her scrabbling at the terminal...

"DON'T BOTHER - I HAVE A COPY. BE A GOOD PERVY AND PASS THE MESSAGE ON.."

She sobs her assent and I hang up. And the worst thing is, I was just guessing about the purity test thing. I grab a quick copy anyway, it might make for some good late-night reading.

Meantime backups have finished in record time, 2.03 seconds. Modern technology is wonderful, isn't it?

Another user rings.

"I need more space" he says

"Well, why not move to Texas?" I ask

"No, on my account, stupid."

Stupid? Uh-Oh..

"I'm terribly sorry" I say, in a polite manner equal to that of Jimmy Stewart in a Weekend Family Matinee Feature "I didn't quite catch that. What was it that you said?"

I smell the fear coming down the line at me, but it's too late, he's a goner and he knows it.

"Um, I said what I wanted was more space on my account, *please*"

"Sure, hang on"

I hear him gasp his relief even though he'd covered the mouthpeice.

"There, you've got *plenty* of space now!"

"How much have I got?" he simps

Now this *REALLY* *PISSES* *ME* *OFF*! Not only do they want me to give them extra space, they want to check it, then correct me if I don't give them enough! They should be happy with what I give them *and that's it*!

Back into Jimmy Stewart mode.

"Well, let's see, you have 4 Meg available"

"Wow! Eight Meg in total, thanks!" he says, pleased with his bargaining power

"No" I interrupt, savouring this like a fine red at room temperature, with steak, extra rare, to follow; "4 Meg in total.."

"Huh? I'd used 4 Meg already, How could I have 4 Meg Available?"

I say nothing. It'll come to him.

"aaagggggghhhhhH!"

I kill me; I really do!

1.5 BOFH #2

I'm sitting at the desk, playing x-tank, when some thoughtless bastard rings me on the phone. I pick it up.

"Hello?" I say.

"Who is this?" they say

"It's me I think" I say, having successfully attended a telephone skills course

"Me Who?"

"Is this like a knock knock joke?" I say, trying anything to save myself having to end this game.

Too LATE! I get killed.

Now I'm pissed!

"What can I do for you?" I ask pleasantly - (one of the key warning signs)

"Um, I want to know if we have a particular software package.."

"Which package is that?"

"Uh, B-A-S-I-C it's called."

>clickety clickety d-e-l b-a-s-i-c.e-x-e<

"Um no, we don't have that. We used to though.."

"oh. Oh well, the other thing I wanted to know was, could the contents of my account be copied to tape to I have a permanent copy of them to save at home in case the worst happens.."

"The worst?"

"Well, like they get deleted or something.."

"DELETED! Oh, don't worry about that, we have backups!" (I'm such a *shit*) "What was your username?"

He gives me his lusername. (What an idiot)

>clickety click<

"But you haven't got any files in your account!" I say, mock surprise leaping from my vocal chords.

"Yes I have, you must be looking in the wrong place!"

So first he spoils my x-tank game, and *now* he's calling me a liar...

>clickety click<

"Oh no, I made a mistake" I say

Did he mutter "typical" under his breath??!? Oh dear, oh dear..

"I MEANT TO SAY: That USERNAME doesn't exist"

"Huh? >wimper< It must do, I was only using it this morning!"

"Ah well, that'll be the problem, there was a virus in our system this morning, the... uh... DE VINCI Virus, wipes out users who are logged in when it goes off."

"That can't be right, my girlfriend was logged in, and I'm in her account now!"

"Which one was that?"

He tells me the username. Some people NEVER learn..

"Oh, yeah, her account was just after we discovered the virus..." >clickety click< "...she only lost all her files"

"But..."

"But don't worry, we've got them all on tape"

"Oh, thank goodness!!!"

"Paper tape. Have you got a magnifying glass and a pencil? SEE YOU IN THE MACHINE ROOM!!!! NYAHAHA-HAHAHA!"

I'm such a prick!

1.6 BOFH #3

So I'm working so hard I barely have time to drive into town and watch a movie before I told people their printing will be ready. The queue's WAAAAAY too long to have everything printed (and sorted) by the time I told them, so I kill all the small jobs so there's only 2 left and I can sort them in no time.

Then, after the movie, (which was one of those slack Bertolucci ones that takes about 3 hours till the main character is killed off in a visionary experience) I get back and clear the printouts.

There's about 50 people waiting outside and I've got two printouts. That's about average for me. I thought I'd killed more tho. Anyway, I put out the printouts and walk slooowly inside, fingering the clipboard with "ACCOUNTS TO REMOVE" in big letters on the back. No-one says anything. As usual.

. . .

I'm sitting back in the Operations Armchair, watching the computer room closed circuit TV, which just happens to be connected to the frame-grabber's Video player (sent off for repair, due back sometime in '97) when the phone rings. That must be the 2nd time today, and it's really starting to get to me!

"Yes?" I say, pausing the picture.

"I seem to have accidentally deleted my C.V!" the voice at the other end of the line says.

"You have? What was your username?"

He tells me. What the hell, I AM bored.

"Ah no, you didn't delete it - I did."

"What?"

"I deleted it. It was full of shit! You didn't ever get more than a B- in any of your subjects!"

"Huh?"

"And that crap about being a foreign exchange student, that was your girlfriend and we both know it!"

"Huh?!!"

"Your academic records. I checked them, you were lying.. Besides which, you forgot to include your criminal record.."

"How did y.." He clicks. "It's you isn't it? THE BASTARD OPERATOR FROM HELL!"

"In the flesh, on the phone and in your account.... You shouldn't have called you know. You especially shouldn't have given me your username.." >clickety< >click< "Neither should you have sent that mail to the System Manager

telling him what you think of him in such graphic terms..."

"I didn't send any.."

>clickety< >click<.....

"No, you didn't did you? But who can tell these days? Not to worry though, It'll all be over VERY soon.." >clickedy click< "..change my username back, and..."

"b-b-b.." he blubs, like a stood-up date

"Goodbye now" I say pleasantly, "you've got bags to pack and a life to start over..."

I hang up.

Two seconds later the red phone goes. I pick it up, it's the boss. He mumbles the username of the person I was just talking to, mentions something about a nasty mail message, and utters the words "You know what to do..", with the dots and everything.

Later, inside the Municipal Energy Authority Computer, as I'm modifying the poor pleb's Energy Bill by several zeros, I can't help but think about what lapse of judgement - what act of heinous stupidity - causes them to call. Then, even later, when I'm adding the poor pleb's photo image over the top of the FBI's online "MOST Wanted Armed and Dangerous, SHOOT ON SIGHT" offenders list, I realise I'll probably never know; but then life goes on.

A couple of hours later, as I see the SWAT vehicle roll up outside the poor pleb's apartment I realise that for some, it just doesn't.

But tommorrow is another day.

1.7 BOFH #4

It's a thursday, and I'm in a good mood. It's payday. I think I'll take some calls. I put the phone back on the hook. It rings.

"I've been trying to get you for hours!" the voice at the other end screams

"Not, it can't be hours" I say, putting "Blade Runner" back into it's cover and looking at the back, "it was more like 114 minutes. I was on a long phone call with the big boss, trying to get you users some better facilities"

Hook; Line; and Sinker...

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"That's ok, I'm a tolerant person" I make a mental note to change his password to something nasty in the next couple of days.

"Um, I need to know how to rename a file" he says.

Oh dear... Hang on, it's payday isn't it?! I'm in a good mood.

"Sure. You just go 'rm' and the filename"

"Thanks"

"No worries" (Now I'm in a *REALLY* good mood. I think I just might write that script to make saving impossible on rogue at random times like I've been thinking about)

The phone rings again.

"Hello?"

"Hi there" I say

"Is this the Operators?"

"Yes it is" I say, nice as pie

"Could you get my printouts out please. I need them urgently, and I printed them over 5 minutes ago"

"Your username?" I ask

He gives it to me, and I write it down for later. "No worries at all!" I say, and head to the printers.

There's a HUUUUUUUGE pile of printouts there, and sure enough, his is at the top of the pile. I pick it up, split it out of the rest and pour our ink-stained cleaning alcohol all over it, run it over a couple of times with the loaded tape trolley then slam it in the tape safe door some times as well.

Beautiful.

"Here's your printout" I say "Sorry about the delay, we've got a few printer problems."

He takes a look and shits himself.

"Well, can I print it again?" he asks, worried

"Sure you can" I say "But no promises, the printer's a bit stuffed today"

"Well can I print it on laser - is that working?"

"Yeah of course, but that'll cost you" I say, oozing compassion for the geek

"It doesn't matter about the cost, THIS IS URGENT!"

I slide-on back into the printer room and put in the toner cartridge we save for special occasions - the one that prints thick black lines down the middle of the page and is all faint on one side. It took me quite a while to make it like that too. The printout shoots through and I bring it out immediately - I don't want to miss this!

"W-w-what's happened to my printout?" the geek squeals at me. Lucky I wrote that username down - I'm really starting to develop a taste for torture.

"Well nothing. I mean sure, it's a little soiled, but that cartridge has already done 47 thousand pages and been refilled 17 times. It's quite good compared to some we get"

Geek pays up and starts blubbing.

"Hey now. There's no reason to cry! Have you got a disk with your work on it?"

He gives me a box of diskettes and I step inside and buzz them thru the bulk eraser. I come back out again.

"Sorry, I just remembered, our machine is on the fritz, you'll have to take these to the other side of campus to the machine there, it'll print them ok, and it had a brand-new toner yesterday."

"GREAT!"

"No worries. Oh, and hold the disks above your head the whole way there, the earth's magnetic field is particularly strong today."

"Huh?"

"No arguments, just do it."

He wanders off, hands held high. Shit, I hate myself sometimes!

1.8 BOFH #5

I'm bored senseless, so I pass the time by reading users email. I must admit that today's lot is PARTICULARLY boring, not one good message in all of them. I was expecting at LEAST some veiled reference to a grope in a storeroom, but nothing. So I'm bored senseless by the usual drivel about some relative's surgery and how the weather is over the other side of the world - that sort of crap.

To relieve the boredom, I remove a e-mail party invite from a user's mail and post it under the sender's username to alt.singles.with.severe.social.dysfunctions on news, and make a note in my diary to be there with my camcorder. Should be a blast!

Next in line is the online medical records database, in which the company doctors store the current medical histories of the staff. I grep it quickly for "herpes" and "syphilis" and send the results to the local scum newspaper. I cover my tracks by adding an entry to one of the doctor's online electronic diaries for yesterday saying "\$500, Med Recs To Paper" I think that's all it should take.. That'll be the last time he doesn't shift appointments to make room for me..

I move some tapes from the racks to the trolley to make it look like we really use them, then start looking thruarchie listings for a hidden x-gif site. I find one then start a batch job running under some user's account to get them all back, charged to him. I make sure he's got enough disk for the job by removing any files not related to the task at hand. Like all those "Doctorate Final Report" papers that have got quite large in the last couple of weeks.

I go back to the mail now, as something's bound to have happened. I do a grep on all mail files for the words "pregnant" and "family way", and post them anonymously to the local general interest newsgroup.

Then, before anything can happen, the power goes out! The next second, the phone rings.

"Hello?" I say, annoyed - the coyote was just about to kill roadrunner again!

"Has the comput.."

I hang up. This is a matter of life or death. Quick as I can I rip the computer power cable out of the UPS and plug the TV in. Damn! Wylie missed again!

Meantime, all the alarms are going off like crazy as the disks spin down, but that's ok, because my Mac and Terminal are hardwired to the UPS in any case; and I'm at the Beer Factory level in Dark Castle too!

The phone rings, so I pull the PABX breaker on the UPS switchboard and it stops. Now to look like I'm working. I break out the puck and the hockey stick and play a little one-on-wall. From the observation window it'll look like I'm being blindingly efficient, as per usual.

10 Minutes later, the power is back and we're two HDA's down, but what the hell, I haven't lost a man, I'm onto the final screen, and there's more cartoons!

The phone rings, it's a luser. (What a surprise)

"Computer Room" I say, being efficient

"Hello, When will the compu..."

I hang up.

I'm doing well in the screen, all I need do is get past the wizard who throws spells at you and I'm in!

The phone rings again. I put it on hands free

"Computer Room" I shout, still deep in the game.

"I've lost my files" a user whines over the loudspeaker

"You bet you have" I say, as my concentration lapses just long enough for me to get zapped by the wizard.

"What was your username?" I say, all sweetness and smiles

He tells me, I look, and he's right. Shit, and I didn't even do it!

Not to be outdone, I change his login directory to the null device, set his path to "" and redefine the command "news" to execute a script in his old login directory to send a nasty message to the equal opportunities officer, then delete itself.

Now that's trying!

1.9 BOFH #6

It's Friday, so I get into work early, before lunch even. The phone rings. Shit!

I turn the page on the excuse sheet. "SOLAR FLARES" stares out at me. I'd better read up on that. Two minutes later I'm ready to answer the phone.

"Hello?" I say.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN, I'VE BEEN TRYING TO GET YOU ALL MORNING?!"

I hate it when they shout at me early in the morning. It always puts me in a bad mood. You know what I mean.

"Ah, yes. Well, there's been some solar activity this morning, it always disrupts electronics..." I say, sweet as a sugar pie.

"Huh? But I could get through to my friends?!"

"Yes, that's entirely possible, solar activity is very unpredictable in its effects. Why last week, we had some files just disappear from a guy's account while he was working on it!"

"Really?"

"Straight Up! Hey, do you want me to check your account?"

"Yes please, I've got some important stuff in there!"

"Ok, what's your username..."

He tells me. Honestly, it's like shooting a fish in a barrel. Twice. With an Elephant Gun. At point blank range. In the head.

(Do I really need to tell you the clicky clicky bit?.. I think not)

"How many files are in your account?" I ask

"Um, well there should be about 20 in my thesis writeup, 10 or so with the data for it, and another 20 or so in a book that I'm writing"

"Hmmm. Well, I think we caught it just in time. You've still got 2 files left... .cshrc and .login"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaagggggggghhhh!"

He sobs into the receiver a bit - it really turns my stomach.

"What can I do?" he sniffs

"Ok, do you have any of your stuff backed up on floppy?"

"Some, but it's weeks old!"

I fire up the bulk eraser.

"Ok" I say "How about I come out and load all that data onto your account pronto so you can get some work done?"

"That'd be great, but it's all at home" he wimpers. "I spose I'll just load it all in myself tonight"

"Sure. But remember what I said, solar flares are bad for disks and machines. Protect your disks from solar activity to prevent them losing their data"

"How do I do that? Wrap them in tin-foil?"

"NO! TIN FOIL'S THE WORST THING! YOU KNOW WHAT TIN FOIL DOES IN A MICROWAVE DON'T YOU?!"

"Yes.."

"Then don't use it. There's only one thing that protects disks from solar activity.."

"What's that?"

"MAGNETS! Wrap your disks up in a pillow case with lots of magnets - Solar Flares hate that"

"Wow! Thanks"

"No worries at all..."

1.10 BOFH #7

So I manage AT LONG LAST, to get a couple of hours off for lunch, AND, because I can't leave my desk unattended, I get the janitor in and have him sit in my chair. I tell him that all he has to do is make sure the receiver doesn't accidentally get put back on the hook. He agrees and I'm off.

First stop, the bank. I change a \$50 note into coins and then ask to see a balance of my account. Then I yank the power lead out of the teller's vdu. It dies. I say I'm in a hurry and is the manager around?

He rolls over like a man-sized twinkie and asks what the problem is. I say that all I want is a balance of my accounts. I cross my fingers. YES! He finds the vdu lead out, plugs it in, and logs in, TO THE MANAGER'S ACCOUNT. Now's my chance - I slip up against the counter, slopping 200 coins across the counter. The manager ignores it, but all the tellers dive for the money. I watch, unobserved, as the manager types in his password at the breakneck speed of one character a minute. At that rate I should've got \$100 worth.... He finishes typing. "MONEY". What a toughy! Well, that's my mortgage taken care of tonight...

A user that I recognise from "D(letion)-Day '89" approaches. I think he's going to talk to me!! Even the bank manager is shaking his head furiously. But it's too late, he stops.

"Um, excuse me, Could you tell me what is the best computer to buy to do my thesis on?"

?!

Right.

"You've heard of Commodore 64's?" I ask

"Yes?.."

"Avoid them like the plague! Not many people know this, but computers aren't made to handle that much memory - it's over 64,000 things, more in some cases. It's a recipe for disaster!"

"Oh!"

"Try something safe and proven. A ZX81 with dual cassette drive if you can get it. The 1K ram model. Write that down. Don't buy a disk drive - You know how they're always failing, but music cassettes last forever!"

"Hey thanks!"

"No worries. What was your username again?"

He tells me. Just in time for D-Day 92. You'd think they'd learn.

I get back to work and the janitor's asleep at the terminal. I ask him if he wants to work here too, but he likes the ability to bust in on people when they're in the toilet...

I put the phone back on the hook, and straight away it rings. I hate it when it does that, it takes me AGES to get my walkman phones in.

It's the hottest hosemonster I've ever met, and she's got a computer problem! I love it when that happens!

"What's your username?" I ask

She tells me (as if I didn't know)

Quick as I can I read all her e-mail (mostly boring stuff), then grep everyone else's mail files for her username.

Nothing. Excellent!

"What's the problem?" I ask, all smiles and charm.

"I can't save my documents, it says something about space."

"Not a problem for long" I say, and delete everyone else on the same disk as her. "You should be fine now.."

"Thank you so much" she gushes. I make a mental note to do something to her account again tomorrow. "No worries."

The phone rings almost before I've got it on the hook.

"My files are all gone!" a voice whines out at me.

"When did this happen?" I ask.

"Just now..." he says, through the tears

"I see. Well, I wouldn't worry, there's three days till the end of the semester, if you work day and night until then, you should get at least a C--"

He sobs a couple more times then hangs up. What a wimp.

THE PHONE RINGS AGAIN!

"The screen on my PC is really dim" The woman at the other end says "Should I wind the brightness knob up?"

"NO!" I scream "Don't touch that knob! Have you any idea of the radiation that comes out of that thing when the knob gets wound up?!!!!"

"Well I..." she says, all uncertain

"TAKE MY ADVICE!" I say "There's only ONE way to fix a dim display, and that's by power surging the drivers"

The words "power surging" and "drivers" have got her. People hear words like that and go into Dummy Mode and do ANYTHING you say. I could tell her to run naked across campus with a powercord rammed up her backside and she'd probably do it... Hmmm...

"Have you got a spare power cord?"

"No.."

"Oh well, never mind, we'll have to do the power surge idea... Ok, quick as you can, I want you to flick the power switch of your PC on and off 30 times"

"Should I take my disks out?"

"NO! Do you want to lose all your data!?"

"Oh! NO! Ok.."

I listen carefully.. ..

...clicky..clikcy...clikky..clicky. ...clickey.. . . BOOM!

Amazing, it probably made it to 27 - the power supply usually shits itself at 15 or so...

"MY COMPUTER BLEW UP!!!" she screams at me down the line

"Really? Must've been a dodgy power supply! Lucky we found out now! Is your machine still under warranty?"

"NO!"

"Dear oh dear. Well, Best get it repaired then. Did you backup your files?"

"Yes, to the system, Yesterday, but all this morning's work is gone!"

"Oh dear. What was your username, I'll just check that your backups worked ok?"

She tells me....

1.11 BOFH #8

I'm at my desk as usual, and a user calls.

"Hello Computer Room, Simon here, How can I help?" I answer

"I can't get into my account!" A user mumbles at me.

"What was your username please?" I say

They give me their username. No worries. I look in their account.

"No worries, it was just a badly made login file. I've fixed it, you should be able to login."

"Thanks!"

"No worries. Have a nice day!"

WHAT IS THIS? you're asking yourself. Has the Bastard Operator from Hell turned over a new leaf? Sold out?! GONE INSANE?!!! Nope. The Bastard Operator from Hell is being LOGFILED. And if that's happen- ing, I'm being bugged as well. So I'm being nice till I can find the bugs. It shouldn't be long - bear with me.

Ah. One in the phone handpeice. Basic. But then the boss is a sneaky sort, so there's probably a couple more. Ah! And another in the base of the phone and one inside my keyboard. Time for a mad coffee-spilling frenzy. This is a big job, so I bring the whole jug over and wait for a witness. The System Manager comes in.

"Where's that report of mine?" he asks in a surly manner - he's obviously pissed that I haven't implicated myself yet. Antagonist Identified. As the Principal of "BASTARD OPERATOR SCHOOL" (me) will tell you, "There's no problem so large it can't be solved by killing the user off, deleting their files, closing their account and reporting their REAL earnings to the IRS"

I pull his printout from under the coffee jug where I put it, and the coffee splashes all over the phone and keyboard, which for some reason were stacked on top of each other.

"Woopsy!" I say, mock horror on my face. The System Manager's face tells me I was right in my guess.

"Don't think you'll get away with this!" he snarls and stomps off.

I click on the Ethernet monitor and watch the traffic coming out of his PC.

Ah! A memo, authorising the termination of my contract, going to the laser in the Director's office. I make a few alterations to the file in the spool directory and let it go to it's destination. I run my dinky little program that deposits -512 to the PC and our mainframe shits itself.

Later, while booting in single user, I'll remove that nasty logfile business.

Next, I wander into the comms room and plug my earphone into the spare RS232 port in the Directors office. It's amazing how simple it is to bug an office once it's got data lines going to it!

Director: "Are you sure about this?"

SysMgr: "OF COURSE!"

Director: "You don't want to reconsider?"

SysMgr "NEVER!"

Director: "Very well, I'll fax it to staffing now.."

SysMgr "EXCELLENT!"

Two seconds later the System Manager strolls in smiling. "Well, I'll really miss you Simon.." he says, full of himself.

"Oh?" I say, all sweetness and charm "Where are you going?"

"No Simon" he says, with glee "YOU'RE going!"

"A PROMOTION!" I say "You've finally written that letter to the head of staffing telling him he's a bum-sucking arse bandit and that you quit?"

"No..."

"Are you sure? It's much better than the one about me being fired.."

"Y.." His eyes widen slightly

It's like clubbing a seal to death with a foam cushion. He runs to stop the fax. Only, having just resigned, >clicky clicky< his card key no longer works...

Ametuers...

The Phone rings. It's the same guy as before

"I can get into my account now, but I've run out of disk"

"Hang on, I'll see what I can do"

>clicccky<...

rm -r *

1.12 BOFH #9

I'm driving to work and I'm stuck behind this old guy, the classic slow driver from hell, whose car red-lines at 20 mph and can't take corners at more than 5. I honk my horn but his hearing aid's probably turned way down to "whisper", so I'm stuck.

I make a mental note of his license plate. In fact, I did that 60 times a minute for 15 and a half minutes. Oh dear.. oh dear.... Looks like another call to the DMV Database to register a vehicle as stolen by out of town arms dealers...

I get to work, flick the excuse page over. "ELECTROMAGNETIC RADIATION FROM SATTELLITE DEBRIS". Fair enough, it looks like it's going to be a good day.

I log into "FUCKYOU", (the help-desk enquiries username) and go into mail. There's 3 new messages, the first of which is 117 lines long, so it's obviously a storyteller. Shit, I hate that. Instead of saying "My account needs more disk space" they tell you about how they're doing this bit of research for a lecturer and how it's got to be in yesterday, and they almost had it but their second cousin twice removed had a perforated herpes scab and lost a lot of blood and had to be rushed into hospital... etc etc. I delete the message.

Second message I read, but it's one of those people who can't handle the mail interface and send a null message, so all you get is headers. I reply to the message saying "No worries, we can do that by next Tuesday". Hope it was important.

The last message I leave for tommorrow, because Saturday would be a dull day if I ever had to work then.

The phone rings. I thought I'd fixed that!

I put it on hands free so I can slop some pizza into the microwave.

"Yes" I call

"Something's wrong with my Boot disk, I can't login to the server"

"Have you got your disk with you?"

"Sure!"

I go get the disk and put it and the pizza in for 5 minutes on "ULTRA-NUKE".

Six minutes later, he rings back.

"It still doesn't work, and now my disk makes a funny noise and smells."

"OH SHIT! It's that electromagnetic radiation from satellite debris again!"

"Really? I think I heard about that!" (What a tool!)

"Yep, I'm sorry, you'll have to buy another disk"

"Oh, that's ok, I don't mind, the old one was getting worn. Thanks"

"Sure, no worries. And be sure to run it through our virus checker FDISK when you get a lot of important data on it..."

"I will! Thanks!"

"That's Ok - it's my job!"

Xcbzone is running really slow so I kill off a whole lot of database backends that seem to be hogging all the cpu and get back into my game. Much better.

(It isn't easy on the frontline, work work work...)

I go to the cafeteria for a quick 2 hour snack - they're so nice to me there. They always have been, ever since that computer glitch that registered their kitchen as an organ recipient - very messy. I grab a couple of cans of coke and some cheese things and cruise on back to the office via the first year computer fundamentals lab. I look in the window on the scene that unfolds it- self to me - a lab full of first years with no demonstrator.

WELL I'LL JUST HAVE TO HELP!

I walk on in.

"Right, I'm your temporary replacement demonstrator and today we're going to put our assignments aside for half an hour to learn about the REMARK function, or, as it's known to the computer literate world, rm..."

I should've been a teacher you know - I've got this way with people...

...

1.13 BOFH #10

I get invited to a lecture as a guest speaker in "Computing Operations Fund- amentals", so I leave the control room in the capable hands of Sam, the janitor and cruise on down.

The lecture starts and goes ok, then there's a 10 minute period where students get to ask a "real operator" questions that they have about operations.

I get out my pad and pen. "Before we get started" I say, "could you just call out your username before you ask me a question, I find it easier to apply your problem to terms you would understand better" The lecturer eats all this up - the personal touch really gets to them. "First Question, You over there..."

"What do you think of the privacy of individuals on a shared system?"

"What was your username please?"

"CMS1103"

>Scratchy scritch< "Computer Privacy... Hmmm. This is a toughy really. You mean stuff like reading the email between you and your counsellor about you not wanting to come out of the closet?"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGH!"

"AH! Well, he seems to have left - must have picked a bad COMPLETELY RANDOM example. Next question. You, over there..."

"CMS1136. I was..."

"Ah yes, 1136 the only person on campus who subscribes to alt.sex.buggery.by.sailors.dressed.in.mums.clothing"

"It's purely for research purposes!"

"I'm sure it is. You do a lot of story posting for a researcher don't you?"

"NNGggggAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGHGH!"

"Next please..."

...

..

Two minutes later, the lecture theatre's empty. That's the problem with students today, they just don't want to learn.

I go back to control and Sam's asleep at the console again. I think he's after my job. I make a mental note to tap into the salary database and cancel his health and accident insurance payments. You can't be too careful..

I put the phone on the hook for the first time this afternoon and it starts ringing almost immediately. THAT'S IT! I redirect it to 911 catch a bit of shuteye. That'll teach them. OOPS! Almost forgot to turn over the excuse calendar. "STATIC FROM NYLON UNDERWEAR" Nope, too plausible - although in some cases I could do an on-site check. Nah, can't be stuffed. I'll pick another one. "STATIC FROM PLASTIC SLIDE RULES" Now THAT'S one with a challenge!

I un-redirect the phone and drag the rubbish bin so it rests on the printer's stacker - another job well done. The phone rings - this could be the big one!

"Hello?"

"Hi, Um, how do I spell-check my file?"

"Simple, just type 'spell' and the filename"

"Thanks"

I'm so bloody nice this morning. Especially as I know that my version of spell INTRODUCES errors instead of detecting them. Things like changing friend to freind and vice-versa. What the hell.

The phone rings - it's them again.

"There's something wrong with spell"

"What makes you think that?"

"Because my file is all corrupt now!"

"That doesn't sound like spell to me. Are you logged into thru PC?"

"Yes, but I can.."

"Please, leave the technical diagnosis to me... Now, is there a plastic ruler somewhere on or in the desk?"

"Um >clunka<, yes..."

"Right. You've got a static buildup on your hard-drive caused by the changing electrostatic field generated by the ruler - the same thing that makes bits of paper stick to it when you rub it up and down your arm..."

DUMMY MODE ON

"Oh. What do I do?"

"You know how you get paper off a ruler by hitting it on a table lots of times? Well do that with your PC. Say 20 times - lift it about a foot off the desk & drop it."

"Oh. OK"

>crash<

>crash<

>crash<

"Um, the screen went dark"

"That's ok, it's supposed to do that - keep going. And when you're finished, do the screen as well, that static may have gone up the wires to it."

>crash<

>crash<

>crash<...

I hang up. I get up and go out to the public area to put honey in the floppy drives when a guy who looked like Lee Harvey Oswald runs up to me and shoots me, only the sound comes from the machine room, and I can hear the ex System-Managers chuckle....

Later, in the ambulance, I realise. I forgot to get the guys username...

Then everything goes dark

1.14 BOFH #11

The darkness cleared as we got out of the tunnel and it occurred to me that I couldn't be all that injured. Then again, maybe I was. Someone was going to p..

I died.

Of course, a true BOFH considers this not really as dying, but more of going home for the holidays.

Five seconds later, I'm getting the upside of 15Kv across the nipples. (These ambulance guys sure know how to party).

Bastard Operator from Hell LIVES!

Three weeks later I'm back on my backside and feeling rested at relaxed behind the console again. The rest has done me good, I feel *great!*. I catch up on everyone's email then let the students know I'm back by performing an impromptu preventative maintenance in the middle of lab time by kicking the restart switch (They love it really)

I flip today's excuse card, "GLOBAL WARMING" YES YES YES! What a welcome home!

It's the end of the month so all those automatic email reminder programs will be sending messages all over the place. I set the system clock back 7 days to buy some peace and quiet and swap the printer ribbon for the three year old one with holes in it.

I sort through my snail mail and crack open the BOFH Monthly Newsletter, "kill -9" and check out the articles therein. There's a nice peice of making OS2 slow, boring and painful, but it looks exactly like the OS2 installation instructions to me... Ah, who knows. I head straight to the BOFH Wizard section to see if any of my articles were published. All of them!!! Even the one about the c compiler that randomly removes one line from the source code it's compiling!

The phone rings.

"The Screen on my PC is blank!!!"

"It's the power cord" I say

"No, I checked that. When I switch it on, it does nothing!"

"It's the power cord" I say

"No, I checked and it's all plugged in properly. There's no lights on the keyboard or anything"

"It's the power cord" I say

"Oh Hey! I just noticed, the cord's not plugged in properly!"

"The power cord?" I ask

"Yes... Woopsy"

"No worries at all" I say "Is it all working well now?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm sorry, you WERE right all along"

"Yes, we're getting a lot of this, it's due to the current Global Warming problem. It causes random thermal expansion and contraction resulting in temperature induced movement of friction based holding mechanisms.."

I listen carefully. Nothing. In other words, ...

"You can fix it permanently tho" I say

"Really? How?"

"Well it's all to do with lowering salt deposits on the metal contacts"

"Oh!" (Dummy mode irrevocably engaged)

"All you need to do is just take the power plug out deposit some dilute mineral salts on it. Do you have some dilute mineral salts on you?"

"Uh... no?"

"Ok, no worries, just stick it in your mouth drool into it. But make sure you wipe the plug first to get rid of any germs, and TURN THE SWITCH OFF ON THE MONITOR before you do - we don't want a nasty accident!

"Oh. Ok!"

>Fzzzt< >clunk!<

I hang up as the receiver hits the floor. Disk space is too good for them.

1.15 BOFH #12

I get to work and I'm a bit tired so I plug a thick hunk of copper across the three phase supply and throw the switch. The room is plunged into darkness as the circuit breakers trip and for once the machine room is silent.

I like it!

I pop the phone off the hook and close the curtains on the observation window. Now it's *really* dark in there. I wouldn't be surprised if someone had a nasty accident in here..

I lift a couple of floor tiles up in the darkness and call our maintenance contractors saying the mini popped the breaker again, then replace the fuses in it with a couple of nails and short the power supply to ground. You can't just hope for this sort of thing, you've got to MAKE it happen.

15 minutes later the engineer arrives and falls down the hole. I pop the floor tiles back on just as the System Manager (a new and very thorough individual) comes in, telling me to watch out, someone could really hurt themselves in the dark...

I nod & tell him that we can't really afford all the downtime, and should I just throw the breaker and hope that there was no major fault. After thinking about the negative publicity we're getting already, he makes the last decision of his short career and tells me to go ahead.

Later, when the smoke clears I examine the smoking remains of the mini. Not a pretty sight...

"Strange that the breaker jammed shut, isn't it?" I say to our manager as he packs up the personal things in his office.

"One in a million chance. A pity that someone saw what you did and posted the whole story to comp.misc. You'll be lucky to get a job managing a car computer after all that publicity..."

I go back to the machine room and throw the rest of the breakers to liven everything up, then login and start deleting

users' email. I spot an interesting off-the-record sexual proposition from our male consultant to a member of the men's swim team which will make a good motd, so I copy it there, modify root's owner name to be "Winker" and password to be "ljkadlkajflkj" (then call the big boss to report a suspected intrusion). Should be at least a couple of hours of login time before we can sort that out. In the meantime, people are just going to have to read that message... I realise the message has been read when I hear the gunshot from behind the consultant's closed door.

I edit the online helpdesk information and change the phone number to the System Manager's - he'll probably appreciate the extra calls at such a sad time...

I hear another shot and realise he won't be answering any calls today.

I put the phone back on the hook and flip today's excuse card. "Poor power conditioning". Too plausible. "STATIC BUILDUP". Still a bit too plausible for my liking, but I don't want to run out of cards before the end of the year, so I decide to run with it.

The phone rings almost as soon as I've got "Top Gun" in the video machine so I pause the video and put the phone on hands-free.

"I think I've bought a bad floppy disk"

"Yes?" I wonder if I've suddenly become the consumer watchdog?

"Well, I've got this disk and it won't format. All the others in the box did so I thought I must have a bad disk"

"Why are you calling me about this?" I ask

"Well, the disk says guaranteed; where do I go to get a replacement?"

Ah! Of course.

"Well, let's see. Are you sure it's the disk, and not just some problem with static buildup?"

"Huh?"

"Static Buildup, you know, static electricity that's passed from you to the computer"

"But I'm wearing a wrist strap!"

Around about now I realise I'm deep in dweeb country. Wrist straps aren't fashion accessories in *my* part of town...

"Of course you are, but your average wrist strap has a 1 meg resistor in series with it, a *really* poor earth. What you need is a direct earth connection. Hang onto the frame of something that's earthed properly."

"What, you mean like our stainless steel work bench?"

"Excellent. Now, have you got a paper clip to discharge the static with?"

"Hang on. Yeah"

"Ok, with your other hand, poke the clip thru the ventilation holes at the back of the unit, and just touch the contact at the end of the thick red wire."

"The one going to the power supply?"

"Yep, that's it"

"....Hey, isn't that the li... >kzzzt!< >clunk<"

Another call solved by the helpdesk from hell...

1.16 BOFH #13

I'm busy with my new shell replacement login script, and it's almost foolproof. Let's just say it pops up with:

"Yes means No and No means Yes. Delete all files [Y]?"

upon login. I'm really starting to worry about the number of account breakins we've been having recently.... The manager isn't though. His main concern appears to be the number of computer-related fatalities on campus. Funny world, isn't it?

I flip the excuse card. "DOPPLER EFFECT" Sounds implausible enough that it's plausible - with a little work of course.

The phone, the bane of my existence, rings.

"Hello, Computer Room" I say, being helpful

"Is this the Technicians?" The caller asks.

Amazing the number of deaf people that use these things. What the hell, I'm bored..

"Yes it is" I lie (Nixon would've been proud)

"I've got a problem with my floppy drive, it doesn't seem to be reading all the time"

"Hmmm. How old is the drive?"

"About a year.."

"And it sometimes fails and sometimes works, but it's starting to fail more and more?"

"YES!"

"Yeah, it's the Doppler effect of magnetism.."

"I thought that only happened with light and sound?"

>Bullshit mode ON<

"Yes, well it's been found that on a spinning surface, like a disk, the particle's magnetic alignment changes, especially when the head is stationary and slightly magnetised in respect to it."

"Duh. Oh" >DUMMY MODE ON<

"So, what you need to do is to demagnetise the head. Have you got a disk head demagnetising loop?"

"Uh.... No?"

"OK, we'll have to do it the hard way. Have you got your original diskettes for your software?"

"Yeah."

"Right, chuck them in the drive, one by one, and format them."

"WHAT?!"

"Don't worry, it won't work - remember the drive is failing. All that happens is that the virgin magnetic field of the disks realigns the magnetic field of the head, because they weren't written by a doppler effected drive."

"Oh, yeah!"

"So, when it gives you a write error and asks if you want to continue, you say yes. Do it with all your original diskettes, then, to complete the demagnetising process, run a head cleaning diskette through the drive as well, which will pick up the stray magnetic particles clinging to the head."

"Oh. Ok. Thanks"

"Don't thank me - IT'S MY JOB!" I say, hearty in manner.

I put the phone down, it rings again. It's the big boss.

"Simon, could you come to my office please?"

>ALERT!<

Quick as I can, I press the panic button on our LAN-Analyser, or to be more precise, the "Generate 90% random

traffic" button

"Sure, would you like me to come now, or..

The other phone rings. I chuck it on hands free

"Hello, Computer Room, Simon Here, How can I help?"

"THE NETWORK IS DOWN, ALL OUR PCS HAVE SHIT THEMSELVES!" the voice on hands -free screams into the mouthpiece of the other phone

"I see" I say calmly "Yes, our Monitor shows it up, it looks to be a bad segment of thinwire - please hold the line while I unplug it"

I press the "I just got a raise" button (AKA "Stop Traffic Generation") on the Lan Analyser, and almost immediately the user shouts back "Excellent, it's working now, thanks"

"That's ok, don't mention it. Have a nice day"

The big-boss has been listening to all this, so I reckon that the trip to his office won't be so bad after all. I tell him I'll be right down as soon as I secure the net and hang up. On the way down, I invent a new buzzword which always keep management happy. Complete Transient Lockout. Sounds much better than pulling the plug. Like Master-Reset sounds better than off-switch.

I get to his office and the staffing officer is there too. Uh-oh.

"Simon - How would you like to be our System Manager?"

?!!!

"Well... I don't know, I like that hands on.."

"Extra 10 grand a year, Varisty Car.."

"Monaro?"

"Ok"

"Sold!"

...And so ends the saga, as it should have at #10.

1.17 The Bastard System Manager From Hell #1

I get into my office and it's my first day - I want to make a good impression, so I empty my IN tray into the bin. Now that's what I call efficient!

I get a call from the big boss - he's been getting complaints about the Trainee Bastard Operator from Hell. I ask him to forward all the complaints to me and that it would be best to let me deal with them. I ring the operator and get him to make an appointment with me.

Two weeks later, he does, and I show him the complaints that have accumulated so far.

"Seventy Three complaints in your first three weeks!" I shout "It's good - but it's NOT Good Enough! You should be getting at least 10 complaints a day - AT LEAST! Now, let's see what you're doing wrong: You get a call from a user - what do you do?"

"Kill them off?" The TBOFH replies

"NO! How can you kill them off if you don't know their USERNAME? Your FIRST priority is to get their username. Then what would you do?"

"Kill them off?"

"NO! Get them to tell you what their problem is!"

"Why?"

"Because later I can say they didn't explain their problem to you properly! It's a great defence - works every time. A user rings me up to complain; I listen to their problem, then say "OH, WHEN YOU SAID 'MY PC DOESN'T WORK' HE MUST HAVE THOUGHT YOU MEANT 'HOW CAN I MAKE MY PC NEVER WORK AGAIN AND DESTROY MY LIFE'S WORK AT THE SAME TIME?' - IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME!" then they tell me how implausible that is, I say how terribly sorry we are, then fake some connect and CPU time records so their monthly bill is about the same as the Uruguayan national debt... Understand? So, after you've heard their problem, what do you do?"

"Kill them off?"

"NO! Then you make up some excuse. Have you got an excuse card calendar?"

"Uh. No.."

"And you said you were qualified to operate a computer! You'd better have mine." I pass my computer card calendar over, flipping it to page one - "ENTROPY"..... ..I like it. "Now, you give the cretin an excuse then what do you do?"

"Kill them off?"

"YES!" (He certainly has a fixation) "Then what?"

"Hang up?"

"NO! Then they'll call you back when the problem recurs. Your job is to make them FEAR calling you. How can you work when people are calling? So, you make them pay for calling in the first place. What would you do?"

"Delete their files?"

"Yeah, it's a start, but then they may call back when they get new files. You want them NEVER to call back. What could you do?"

"Swear at them?"

"No. I can see we'll have to demonstrate. Have you got a metal ballpoint?"

"Yes"

"See that wallsocket over there. Take the refill out of the pen and poke in into the wallsocket."

"But it's live!"

"Would I really make you do it if it were live?"

"Oh" >fiddle< >fiddle< >BZZZZZZZZEEEEERT!< >THUD!<

Of course I would.

He was no good anyway. No killing instinct.

1.18 The Bastard System Manager From Hell #2

So I'm interviewing for new Operators, and, as the Bastard System Manager from Hell, I have high standards. And as the Immediate Past Bastard Operator from Hell, I have even higher standards.

I get the first applicant in.

"Ok" I say "I'm just going to ask you some simple questions to gauge your knowledge of Computing and Networking in relation to the Operations Field"

"Sure"

"Right. Question One. What's the best way to stop an individual posting nasty articles to news?"

"Close their account"

"Good - But can you elaborate?"

"Delete all their files, Change their password to 'Knobhead' and Erase any backups of their account"

"Excellent. What is a killfile?"

"Uh. It's a list of usernames/topics/news items etc that you wish the news- reader to automatically skip so you don't have to wade through rubbish"

"Uh No. Remember I said pertaining to Operations. A killfile is in fact a file with a list of names of people you are going to kill."

"Oh. Of course."

"Never mind. What is DCE?"

"Delete, Close and Erase"

"Good. DTR?"

"DON'T TRY to RING. The Operator's watchword"

"Well done. DBMS?"

"Dont Bug My Supervisor. Probably the most important acronym around"

"You betcha. Ok. A user comes to you with a complaint about another user sending sexually explicit email messages to them. What do you do?"

"Take a copy of the messages, close the complainant's account (by accident) and extort money from the mailer by threatening to show their parents"

"Good. I think you'll do nicely. Hang onto this wire..."

"I don't think so."

"Excellent. You passed the final test. You start tommorrow. Please leave by that door so as not to disturb the other applicants."

BZZZZZEEEEERETTT!

Electrified Door Handle. Gets them every time. I think it's the "Complaints Dept" sign that draws them to it like moths to a globe...

I push the body out onto the fire escape.

"NEXT!"

1.19 BOFH #14

Don't ask how I got back, I just did. Suffice to say that work frowns upon management material that uses electrodes to gain client information. Especially when you do it to the boss's in-laws. That's HIS entertainment.

So I'm back in the saddle. Unfortunately, that means there's a surplus of operators in the computer room. One slam of the tape safe door later, the problem is solved. The knocking dies down in a couple of hours, so I guess the safes really *are* airtight.

To welcome myself back, I send a message out saying there's a shutdown in 10 minutes. 5 minutes later I shut the system down. I love doing that. I see the hard-disk activity lights flicker as the "disk recovery" phase of startup run through, globally deleting journal files. Funny how we always start up with lots of free disk..

I just get Wolfenstein started and the phone rings. What the hell, I almost missed it while I was away, so I answer it.

"Computer Room" I say

"THAT WASN'T TEN MINUTES!!!!" the voice at the other end screams

"What wasn't 10 minutes?" I ask in a pleasant manner. I can see that things have deteriorated in my absence. Spare the rod and spoil the rm -r, that's what I always say.

"THAT! You said it was going to be te... >pause<... Um, who is this?"

"This is the Operator; who did you expect it to be?"

"Darren? Is that Darren?"

"Uh, No. Darren.. Darren is... unavailable... at the moment."

"Oh. Do you know when he'll be back in the control room?"

"Probably around the time of our next backup - the year 2007 or sometime thereabouts I should imagine"

He's toying with asking me if he can recover their files or not. I let him dangle for a few moments.

"Was that all?", I say, nice as pie

"Well... NO, it doesn't matter"

"Of course it doesn't. Would you like me to check if your files are ok?" I prompt

"Would you? I'm a bit new to this system and I'm not too sure what to do"

"Sure. What was your username?"

Everything inside him is screaming at him not to say it - People beside him are screaming at him not to say it.

He says it.

You just can't tell some people.

"Ok. Well, it looks ok to me, all your files are in perfect condition!" I say

"THEY ARE!! GREAT!!"

The relief in his voice is overwhelming

>clickety< >clickety<

"Yep. Both your x-defaults and AND your newsrc file are ok"

"But.. But what about my site monitoring data?"

"Sorry?"

"There were about 10 files in my research subdirectory, data I'd collected over the past year."

"Oh. Well, I can't see anything. Perhaps you backed them up somewhere?"

"I put a copy in my girlfriend's account.."

"What was her username?"

"Uh.... >pause< ... "

Is he going to do it? Is he?

He does.

Like running down a snail with a steamroller..

>clickety clickety<

"Nope, nothing there either. OH! Hang on, there looks like some form of journal file in your account, it's quite large... I think maybe you should login there and try to recover with it.."

I cat about 100 man files together and slop them in his girlfriends account under then name "rsrch.j"

"How do I do that?"

"Ok; can you login yet?"

"Yeah, I think so..... Ok, I'm logged in"

"Ok, You need to run the file thru the mailer to clear the eighth bit, other- wise the journal recovery will probably choke with an instruction error"

>DUMMY MODE ON<

"Oh... How do I do that?"

"Well, you have to type in 'mail root < rsrch.j'"

"Ok!"

"HANG ON! You have to type it with your nose."

"WH..? WHY?"

I flip the excuse card till something appropriate pops up. "HARDWARE STRESS FRACTURES"

"Well, it's got to do with hardware stress fractures. You probably type too hard with your fingers which upsets the internals of the keyboard. It's got to do with dry joints and electromagnetic inductance"

>DUMMY MODE IRREVOCABLY ON<

"Oh. Ok"

"Now, you've got to type it in 20 times"

"Sure, ok"

He hangs up.

I ring campus security

"Hey, we've got another crazy in the lab. Apparently he's typing with his nose. He might be armed..."

3 minutes later I hear the shots. I close his account, he won't be needing it any more..

The phone rings. It's my Mum.

"Hi Ma, what can I do for you"

"Simon, I've got a problem at work, the floppy disk with all my personal stuff on it is failing I think"

"Oh. Ok. Well, have you got any nail polish remover and some cotton wool buds?"

"Yes"

"Ok, take your disk out, and clean that brown stuff off the inside of the disk. That's what gets the heads dirty. You should just have a nice clean plastic disk when you've cleaned it completely"

"Oh, Ok Simon, Thanks"

"You're welcome. Oh; remember that time you wouldn't let me go over to Graeme's place to watch videos when I was 11?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Oh, No reason.."

1.20 BOFH #15

It's a warm afternoon in the computer room. I dunno, maybe I should turn the chillers back on, but what the hell, I've got a cold and I need to keep warm.

I flip today's excuse card. Magnetic Interference from Money/Credit Cards. Hmmm, vague enough to be plausible. The phone rings

"Hello, Computer Room" I say "Hi!" the caller says "I want to fit some RAM to my machine to upgrade the memory. I just bought some 8 meg chips off a guy in town and wanted to know if you guys would fit it."

"Well," I say "normally we would, but today the technicians are busy trying to gas axe open our tape safe to see why it smells - You could probably fit it yourself though.."

"Really? I thought that was dangerous?" she says

"Nah nah, it's safe as houses, just remember to get the chips out of those stupid plastic bags before they stuff them up altogether"

"Really?! How do they do that?"

"Well, you've heard of static RAM right?"

"Yes..."

"Well, Why pack static RAM in an antistatic bag? Sounds really suspect if you ask me!!! Yours might even be stuffed already, so you'd better remove them.."

>D.M. ON<

"Oh >crinkle crinkle< Ok. Now what do I do?"

"Ok, you'll need to get rid of the charge those bags have probably given your RAM, after all, you don't want to blow up your computer, do you? Get rid of any woolens that you're wearing and switch to nylon. Run round some cheap carpet, then comb your hair a couple of dozen times and then plug the chips into the comb to keep them steady. Turn your machine on, then plug the memory in and out about 10 times to get the slots warmed up. Then slop them back in, flick the power switch half a dozen times and that should do it!"

"Hey thanks!"

"Don't mention a thing, all part of the service"

I leave for lunch - after all I have been here for 10 minutes solid - and walk past the student labs. I hear a mass of beeping and look round to see a user's screen full of garbage. They've either typed an image file or fingered my account and got the core file I renamed as .plan. By the time he gets his terminal sorted out, his allocation of connect time will be all used up. A tragic shame.

I get back from lunch early a couple of hours later and slip into the Usenet news directory tree, slide on down to alt.binaries.pictures.erotica, then start deleting parts 3 or 4 of the really long gifs. (After taking a copies myself and overwriting them to the last user backup tape, of course).

Then I get ready to watch the videos I got out from the video shop by taking the printers offline and disconnecting the phone, and I notice that the frame -grabber video player is gone from the office. Someone has obviously moved it while I was away...

I make some discrete enquiries under the threat of rm -r, and find out that the secretary now has possession of it. So I mosey on down and ask to take it away. Only I can't because I've got to sign *THE BOOK*, saying when it will be back, how many minutes of tape I'm going to put thru it, if I'm going to be watching PAL or NTSC etc. Then it's all fed into her *personal* computer (which I'm not allowed to touch because it doesn't belong to us) so she can produce full colour plots about who's not working in the department.

I mention that it's not coming back - as I was the person that put the hammer through the frame grabber in the first place, I should be the one to hold the video. She then tells me that that's not acceptable, and I will have to find some

other video to use, she needs access to get to the video 24 hours a day, in case someone needs it. And because she takes her PC home at night, I needn't think that I can fake any borrowing records. All this I see for what it really is - a thinly disguised attempt to gain access to the seat of power (The Operators Room) by the Bastard Secretary from Hell.

I decide to let it slide for once, after all she does get the snail mail into the correct distribution slots about 20% of the time, so that can't be so bad.

Next morning, I get in about 2pm and find that I have three departmental memos about the status of other stuff that is in the Computer Room that has been "incorrectly inventorised" as "Awaiting Repair" (The shithead technician has been leaking privileged information in an effort to score the secretary again - A tragic shame, I used to quite like him..) with a note from the Big Boss authorizing the secretary to investigate. Attached to all that is a note from the secretary herself stating that to action this she requires a 24 hour access key to the Computer Room.

ONCE AGAIN I realise that letting things slide never pays off. I look up the secretary's RS232, Ethernet, Appletalk and Phone port numbers and yank them from the comms rack. What the hell, I kick the circuit breakers to her power points and lighting too while I'm at it. Then I strip off some mains cable & plug it in..

The phone rings a couple of minutes later.

"WHAT'S HAPPENED TO MY ROOM?!" the secretary screeches at me.

"Your room?" I say, in a pleasant and innocent manner, using caller ID to track down the room she's in. Ah! Just down the corridor

"Yes, MY ROOM! The power's gone off and everything is dead"

"Oh dear. What were you doing when the power went off? Perhaps you did something stupid?"

"I did NOT! I was working on *my* PC!"

The way she says "*my*" is really getting to annoy me.

"You were working on *your* PC?" I say, reflectively.

"Yes!" She snarls

"Not your *own* *very personal* computer?"

"Yes.." She doesn't know what I'm getting at yet.

And now I exercise the basic law of Bastard Operating which roughly says, Bastard Operators don't just win. Anyone can win. Bastard Operators win and totally DEMORALISE. That's *real* winning.

"I hope you switched your machine off before you called"

"Why?" she barks, a little uncertain.

"Well, it's just that personal property isn't covered by the site insurance policy. Why, if there was a power surge, heaven knows WHAT could happen to an expensive peice of delicate *personal* machinery like..."

I hear her place the receiver down *very* quietly and sprint on tippy toe to the door. As I repeatedly toggle her circuit breaker I start thinking about what I'll be watching on video this afternoon... Still on the phone, I hear a bang way in the background which probably means her pc has shit itself...

10 minutes later the phone in the control room. It's the secretary, and she sounds a little stressed. I manage to translater her sporadic outbursts into a request that her lines be connected to her terminal. I tell her they are, and has she got the technician to look at it. She hangs up.

No sense of humour.

10 minutes later still, the technician rings up and tells me all the secretaries lines are dead. I tell him I'll check them out, then plug her ethernet, phone and Appletalk back in. Which leaves RS232...

Another 10 minutes later I'm startled out of my snooze by the phone. It's the technician still greasing the secretary by

being super-efficient. He tells me the RS232 still isn't working. I make some excuse about dry joints on the plug etc, and ask him to put a new plug on the cable. I hear the >snip!< as he clips the old plug off, and the receiver rattle as he starts to strip the wire in a manly way with his teeth. Then I connect the mains cable to my end of the RS232.

As soon I hear the ">ERRRRRREEEEERRKKK!<" coming down the receiver at me, I know that the "incorrect inventory" problem won't be repeated.

Another problem solved by the Bastard Operator from Hell

It's a dirty, filthy, stinking dog-kill-dog job, but someone's got to enjoy it

1.21 The Bastard Operator From Britain #1

.....

"...I'd like to escalate this call please.."

"I'm sorry?" I can't help but be a little surprised at this guy's tone.

"I'd like to escalate the severity of this call. Surely a person in your situation is aware of the new International Standard regarding fault logging and tracking..."

He's obviously insane. There's no other reason why he'd call me this early on a monday afternoon, as soon as I've got to work...

"What was your username?"

He tells me, and some all-too-familiar key clicking noises follow. I notice his account has the pervert flag set, and yet he has no gif files in his directory - which can only mean one thing....

"Now, this escalation business, you want me to increase the priority with which I'll handle this call?"

"Yes!"

"Tell you what, I'll double it" I say, in gentle, soothing tones

"Good" he mutters

"...Now, twice nothing is nothing, and because it's an ESCALATED priority call, it goes into the RED rubbish bin instead of the brown one."

"WHAT!" he screams "DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU'RE TALKING TO?!?!"

"Well, I could look up your username and find out, but we deal with so many people here. Your name wouldn't mean anything. Not unless we'd seen you doing something *really* depraved on one of our hidden security cameras - you know the sort that were destined to be put in the computing labs to stop piracy, but actually got put in toilet cubicles after the installation order got corrupted somewhere between the purchasing office and the maintenance department. A freak electrical storm maybe... Anyway, unless you'd done something really disgusting that got caught on film...

...like..

(I look him up in the blackmail book)

.. like dressing up in women's underthings and dancing what looked (to the untrained observer) like the lead from "Mary Poppins", I'm afraid that your name wouldn't mean anything to us...."

I've heard the sharp intake of breath - he knows I've heard it, for him it's all over.

"Of course, if you were one of THOSE people, well, I'd remember you immediately, especially when reminiscing to the promotions board, all of whom are squarer than a Rubik's Cube. But I'm in a forgetful mood at the moment. I hope you don't mind if I forget that you called..."

"Yes, of course" he says, the last vestiges of self-respect vanishing.

"Goodbye now!" I cry cheerfully "But before you go, if you could be so kind as to send some money to the Operators Benevolent fund, I'd be so grateful - in fact my gratitude might make me careless with the bulk eraser, if you see what I mean. . . . Mary.."

He makes some wild promise of a large amount, and I keep my side of the deal by being careless with the bulk eraser. His account backups are a mere memory... Then I look thru the exabyte rack for the video tape in question, (Labelled Archive-26/5/90) and throw it in the "Post awaiting cheque clearance" bag, addressed to his boss..

It's for the best really, he was under a *lot* of pressure.

The next call of the day is from the User-Union, a pressure group that sprung up because some users thought they were getting a rough deal.

There's no pleasing some people!

Anyway, to get them off my back, I invite them in to see just how hectic an operator's life really is, and have prepared lots of flashing lights and alert sounds to keep the mindless cretins fooled...

They all file into the control room, about 10 of them in all, the dweebish types who hang out in groups like this as a social event. Things are going well, I'm answering calls and resetting "alarms" when some sour-faced old lard jockey ruins everything.

"These bells and lights don't fool me you know. I was an engineer on these babies when they first came out. This alarm sequence is invalid. There's no such alarm as 00-10-03-15-E. That just can't happen. You've probably just programmed the status display to say that! This is all a sham!!"

Trust there to be some re-education loser in the audience to totally stuff up my day. That just leaves plan B, although it's risky...

"Yes, it's true" I admit, cowering like Joan Crawford on a bender "It's all fake. I just didn't want you seeing what's in the computer room..."

They can't resist the bait. As soon as it looks like I'm hiding something they're in for the kill like Piranha.

"WHAT'S IN THE COMPUTER ROOM?!?!?" they demand, chomping at the bit

"Well," I say in my best 'this-is-it' voice, "you'd best see for yourself.."

..... ..

Later that day, I help the police try and piece the shocking scenario together...

"It's shocking!" I say, voice oozing with the horror of it all, "just terrible!"

"Yes yes" the officer mumbles, irritated "Let's just go over this one more time. You left them in the computer room to go and change some paper and they inadvertantly triggered the Halon fire extinguishers..."

"Yes, yes, it's awful isn't it officer?!"

"..and even though there's a 30 second warning, they didn't manage to make it out the door..."

"Yes, it's such a tragedy"

"..even though two of the people who are supposed to have been smoking and set off the extinguishers in the room are dedicated non-smokers.."

"Yes, what an unfortunate time to take up the habit!"

"..and even though it looks, judging by the scratch marks that the door was in some way locked or jammed..."

"..probably jammed officer, It's a matter of public record that I voiced some concern over this very topic although no-one could find any problem with the lock in question..."

"And even though someone outside at the viewing window could have sworn that they saw you pressing the manual release button on the Halon panel.."

"YES, to try and reset the system and save those poor, innocent people.."

"After ALL that, you still expect me to believe it was an accident?"

"...Well officer, I don't really know what I expect you to do, but your face looks vaguely familiar. You haven't used the toilets around here in the past have you?"

"Well, I may have once or twice - we get a lot of calls over here since you've been here - suicides mainly..."

"Yes yes officer, well how about we go into the control room and look at a copy of a video I have, with someone who looks awfully like you, and what they do to a loaf of bread..."

...

...

Things are looking up!

1.22 The Bastard Operator From Britain #2

"Ah Simon, thank you for coming, please sit down"

The promotions committee is strangely quiet today. Normally they're far more boisterous and sure of themselves. This has to be good news.

"Now Simon, as you know there's a vacancy for a Senior Operator in the Computer Centre following the tragic accident in the staff showers."

"Yes" I utter, "tragic"

"How the hell a toaster got in there in the first place is beyond the scope of this committee, as our main interest is to find a replacement as soon as possible. Ordinarily, we would appoint such a senior position externally, but following that awful business with the lift controller failure and the shortlisted candidates.."

"Awful" I sigh, my heart pity at the tragedy of three Senior Operator applicants plunging down a lift shaft to their deaths... Completely accidental you understand...

"..It still seems very strange; apparently the accident inspector stated that the lift appeared to be accelerating *faster* than the speed of gravity when it fell. But I guess we'll never know now that the lift control room had that big electrical fire..."

I could be oversensitive on this issue, but I'm feeling a little bit of dissent in the room around me. Some members of the promotions committee appear to be having problems making the decision of whether they should support the University's interests by appointing me senior operator or becoming involved in the next fatal campus accident. I decide to cut through the red tape and get to the point.

"So essentially, all supposition aside, you wish me to take over the role of Senior Operator.."

"Ah..." the chairman utters, looking around the room for backup, "..Yes"

"Ok, fine. I'll need a couple of K extra for the increased responsibility, say another K for relocation.."

"BUT YOU'RE ONLY TWO OFFICES AWAY!!"

"Good point - another *TWO* K for relocation, and new office furniture. Leather Armchairs would be good. Oh, and an expresso machine."

I get up.

"Well, that should be all I think, so I'll just get off back to work"

While they mutter amongst themselves, I make my exit back to the control room. As it's getting towards the end of my working day (3pm) I write protect the userdisk and start a shutdown for 1 minute. The phone rings.

"I can't save my work" a voice sobs from the phone

"You really should try.."

"But the system won't let me" he wimpers, "can you halt the shutdown?"

"Well, I'd like to, but it's irrevocably committed to shutdown - there's no telling what might happen - we could lose all your work, there's no telling...."

"Um..." - You can almost hear the wheels turning - "...Uh.."

I hang up - they're obviously not committed.

The shutdown completes and I reboot, then decide to introduce a little fun to the network by pulling out random staff terminal lines and repatching them to the student areas and vice versa. Just like the big breakin of '91.

Next I choose a letter at random from the complaints box to use as this week's "External Penetration" victim, then delete all their files.

I decide to get into something new. I break out the telephone serviceman's handset and wander into the comms room and start eavesdropping on people's conversations.

Most of it is crap, but it gives me an idea. Pipe it all through voice recognition and look for words including my name (for security purposes), a sexual encounter, or live chickens. Definite possibilities...

A user rings.

"Oh, Hi - can you tell me what my password is please?" they ask

"I'm sorry" I say for the 1 billionth time "passwords are encrypted on the system, and it's far easier for me to change your password than to find out what it is." (Which is crap; I know what it is, the password changing routine does have a slight in-house modification which the implementers probably weren't counting on.)

"Oh, ok - could you change it to 'desert' please - that was my old password"

"I'm sorry, but we can't change user's passwords to ones that they supply - that would compromise site security"

"Oh, then could you just give me a new password?"

"Sure. What about desert?"

"Huh? Oh, Ok, that would be fine"

I hang up, they hang up. 10 minutes later they call back.

"Have you changed that password yet?" they ask

"CHANGED the password?" I say "You just asked me to give you a new password, you said nothing about changing it"

"But... Oh. Well, could you change it to desert for me please?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that, because of the security compromise, as I told you before. If I knew your password, I could possibly log into your account without you knowing, couldn't I?"

"Well yes..."

"And if that happened, your data would be compromised, wouldn't it?"

"Uhh, yes, I suppose it would"

"So in other words, if two people have the password to an account, the security of it is at least halved, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right"

"Of course I am, I'm the *OPERATOR*. I'm not only right, I'm wrong if I want to be as well.."

"Uh.."

He doesn't know whether to agree or not. Wimp.

"Now," I say, breaking the tension "I'll change your password for you"

"Ok, thanks"

"No worries. Bye now"

"B. >click<"

They ring back

"You didn't tell me my password!"

"Of course I didn't. We already agreed that two people knowing the password is less secure than one, didn't we?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"No buts, security is security, off you go..."

That's the problem with this job, it doesn't come naturally - you have to *WORK* on it.

1.23 The Last Bastard Operator From Hell

I get back from Britian and return to my old stomping grounds to take up a post as an Analyst/Programmer... As an A/P I'm expected to work weird hours so I start putting in some 9 to 5 shifts to see what it's like.

It's weird all right. I don't like it.

I go to the computer room to check out my machine, only I'm not the Operator any more, so I've got no access. I call the Operator. He answers.

Bad sign.

"Can I get access to the Computer Room?" I ask, respectfully

"Well..." he pauses "... what do you want to do?"

Indecisive. It gets worse! He should've come straight out and said that the day a user gets access to HIS computer room is the day he'll be crated up and freighted to the big Computer Room in the sky to meet the Chief Operator!

"Just look at my machines" I say..

"Um, well, we're not supposed to let programmers in here unless it's an emergency" he blubs.

Dear oh dear. It's almost as if he's apologising! I can't take any more of it so I just wander off. He calls after me in apology and it turns my stomach. Watching something you've carefully built up with neglect and mindless acts of violence just crumble away in front of your eyes!

I can't let it end this way! There must be something I can do...

I go back to my room and open the sealed envelope that I was saving for my retirement nest-egg.

I shuffle through the signed bits of paper, photographs and dictaphone tapes till I find what I want. The photo's a bit faded and blurred, but the people in the picture can still be made out. I get on the phone.

"HELLO?". The Big Boss himself answers

"Hi there, Simon from the Computer Centre. I think I found something of yours"

"WHAT?"

"A photo. One in a series of 24"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT! I'M A BUSY MAN - DON'T WASTE MY TIME!"

"Well, it's a photo of you, a couple of female friends, and something that looks like it has some agricultural purpose"

"oh..." ... — ... "...yes, I was wondering where that got to. If you could just drop it in an envelope and send it to me

personally...”

”*I* *think* *not*...”

”Well, it’s obviously a fake. Where would you get such a thing?”

”Your office. You left the door open one night”

”That’s ridiculous, my door’s electronically locked every night”

”By computer?..”

”Oh! What do you want?”

”The New Operators”

”Ok, I’ll have them fired..”

”NO! Then you’ll get some more and they’ll be just as bad!”

”Then what do you want?”

”TO TRAIN THEM!”

.....

.....

..

A couple of days later the training session begins. Unfortunately, I only get one operator to train as the other one resigned when he heard I wanted to talk to him. Still one’s better than none.

We start from the very beginning..

”Ok, let’s just go into this. How do you feel about users?”

”They’re ok, I suppose” he answers

”OK?”

”Well, they can be a pain at times”

”at times?”

”Well, a lot of the time?”

”A lot?”

”OK, ALL THE TIME! I HATE THEM, I HATE THEM! ALWAYS RINGING ME UP WANTING TO GET MORE DISK OR CONNECT TIME, WHINING AT ME IN THEIR PATHETIC VOICES, COMPLAINING ABOUT RESPONSE TIME. I HATE THEM!”

”Right. There. You see, you did know the answer after all. Second question, What do we do for users?”

”What they want?”

”No”

”What we think they want?”

”No”

”What WE want?”

”No”

”I DON’T KNOW!”

”I see. Well, the answer is, we do nothing *FOR* users. We do things *TO* users. It’s a fine distinction, but an important one all the same. Now, what do we do TO users?”

"What we want?"

"Exactly. And WHY do we do it?"

"Because they deserve it?"

"No..."

"To convince users not to call?"

"No again. We do what we do because we ENJOY it. And because we can get away with it."

"Oh! I suppose you're right"

"I KNOW I'm right. And if I'm not, I'm STILL right, because I'm the *OPERATOR*. It's that simple! If you remember that phrase, there's nothing you can't do. Now the last question. What exactly do we do to users?"

"Delete their files, scrap their backups, invade their privacy..."

"No no Agent Starling. That is a mere bagatelle. That is simply the method. We want to know the result. What we do is BREAK them. What's the point of deleting their files if they never use them? What's the point in reading someone's private correspondence if you're not going to let the user know you did it, then tell their friends or parents? Why scrap someone's backups unless they need them? You have to break the user's will so that they realise that they're the simple-minded sheep we know they are!"

"I see"

"Of course. I'll be off now, don't ever let me catch me in the Computer Room again!"

"Thank you sir"

"Sir?"

"Oh. Get out of my Computer Room!"

"That's more like it!"

The mantle is passed.

"Oh" my new operator calls as I leave, "I can't remember what your backup tape looked like. Is this it here on the Bulk Eraser?"

>HMMMMMMMMMM<

AAAAAGH!

Chapter 2

Epilouge to the Original

2.1 The Bastard returns briefly

Programming is dull at the moment since the only "bug" in my software is now repaired. (The swipe-card door-access machine had some logic "glitch" that unfortunately no-one knew about until a particularly annoying Sales Consultant got accidentally locked in the secure area over the holiday weekend. The poor guy was a drooling wreck when they found him - apparently the sirens and sprinklers were playing up in there too, every 10 minutes. It all goes to show that you can't be too careful when stealing an ex-operators car park.

2.2 The Bastard is back

It's a stinking hot day in my non-air conditioned office and I'm annoyed. The sort of annoyed that's described, mistakenly, as red hot. The correct colour choice, is, of course white.

I login to my account and there's three helpdesk mail requests, all ticking away to expiration, then escalation, then further escalation, then followup mail message, then even further escalation, then 2nd followup mail message and casual phone call, then still further escalation, then non-casual phone call, then threats, then, ultimately, and sadly, violence. But not so sadly that I won't resort to it. And they know I will too...

Because I used to be...

T H E B A S T A R D O P E R A T O R F R O M H E L L ! ! !

...and sometimes, late at night I get these twitches. Like dead people get. (Or, as I prefer to call them, perfect computer users)

In the mornings I get them too. Like when the phone rings. And when I get email. And when people talk to me. AND when people are hogging the espresso machine to make fluffy milk. But apart from that I'm cured. A new man.

I smile at the thought and look, in reminiscence, at some reminders of my past. A couple of backup 8mm tapes with cartoons on them. The thank-you cards for my attendance at 23 seperate funerals of computer center staff. The mains plug with the thinwire ethernet plug at the end. I didn't ever get round to trying that one either, so I don't even know what it would've done.

I'm bored.

That's it alright. I am **absolutely**, **stinking**, **UNCONTROLLABLY** bored. I get up and slip a fingerprint free magnet on top of the reed switch that the Boss had installed in my display cabinet while I was on holiday, then pry the glass door open with a screwdriver. As far as I can figure, the switch is supposed to ring an alarm if the door is opened.

If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times - "Inexpensive means Inefficient".

I open the door to the clamour of... silence. Well, silence and John Lee Hooker's "Mr Lucky" from my CD. I grab my aforementioned etherkiller and wander down the hallway to the switchboard, applying another magnet and opening that to silence as well.

That's what's missing in society today - trust.

I pull the 15 amp breaker for the meeting room, then wander on round and plug the etherkiller into a cheap 24hour timer set to 5 minutes from now. On the way back to the the switchboard I hear the first few murmurs about excessive collisions. I plug in my unpatented nail "fuse" (estimated fault current 200-300 amps) with a set of heavily insulated pliers and wander off to the tea-room to start my espresso brew. Halfway through the make, the machine stops. Now *THAT'S* what I call a collision.

I look around in a bewildered manner as panic erupts on all sides, half-made espresso in my hand. I step out into the hallway and behold pandemonium. Two programmers are fighting over a CO2 fire extinguisher in an effort to put their terminals out. I wander down to my room just as my X terminal, the unreliable peice of excretia it is, flames it's last and lapses into a dull smoulder.

"My cabinet!" I cry in 'horror' and hear the extinguisher struggle end abruptly. In a flash the two programmers concerned are behind me staring into my room. Shortly thereafter the boss runs up as well.

"What's this magnet for?" I ask, picking it up and hearing a bell start chiming in the distance.

"You bastard!" one of the programmers utters

"I'm sorry?" I ask, turning.

"YOU did it didn't you?"

"What? Break into my own cabinet? But I've got a key.."

That's the terrible burden of proof really - in this day and age, you need some to make an accusation.

The late-breaking news comes in that one of the consultants had a set of head- phones plugged into a CDROM drive hanging off their networked PC. But not anymore. Now there's an unexpected vacany in the department. I blame the Ethernet Isolation specs. 3KV my backside!

Quicker than you can say "Help us with our enquiries" I'm "helping the police with their enquiries".

"What is this, can you tell me?" a burly officer asks, right up in my face. He holds up a magnet.

"It's a magnet. There was one on my cabinet!" I cry

"Yes. And where did you get them?" he asks, seizing control..

..and losing it. "On my cabinet! I just said!"

"No not this one. The others. Where did you get them?"

"Others? What others? You mean there were more on my cabinet! Why?!?" (I can play the "stupid game" forever, having had years of education at the hands of computer lusers.) He tries a different tack.

"What would you say this was off?" he asks

"My cabinet! It was on my cabinet, I told you! I pulled it off... and I think I heard a bell ringing"...

.... .

A couple of hours later I'm back at my desk with Mr Lucky, no charges pressed. I close my cabinet, satisfaction mine for the first time in a long while.

Then the phone rings...

-

2.3 The Bastard goes to the Trade Show

I decide to kill some time by dropping into a Computer Trade show to "sense the new direction of the market and Investigate emerging trends", i.e. I'll spend a shitload of the company's cash on food and drink and give a couple of salespeople a hard time they won't forget.

Well, that's how the normal bastard would do it, but not me. I really get remembered. All I need now is an acronym.... Hmmm...

I get there and two stalls promptly close when they see me coming, (poor losers), but theres 4 or 5 newbies that look like easy meat. I centre on a vendor that's trying to push their unix compliance with every ISO standard except hygiene and start talking 7-figure site upgrades. Ignoring his panting, I continue to talk, harping on about our requirement for compliance with currently emerging standards till he takes the ball and runs with it.

"Ah well, you see, we're THE foremost company in compliant systems" (turd) "In fact, our projected market share is.... blah blah blah.."

I let him dig his hole nice and deep. He's sure that 2 years at University has prepared him for the hardball arena of BIG \$ales.

"Yes" I cut in "But all this is irrelevant without a Dynamically Allocated Heap and some Transient Intuitive Hardware System. Are you D.A.E.H.T.I.H.S compliant?"

"Sorry?"

"Dynamic Allocation of Extra Heap and the Transient Intuitive Hardware Standard, D.A.E.H.T.I.H.S. It's THE most important thing to come out of ISO this DECADE! I guess you don't have an implementation path yet then?"

"Tell you what" he says, smelling a deal "The Regional Manager is on the Showroom floor somewhere. I'll track him down and get an answer for you?"

"Well, that would be great!" I say, trying to enthuse him and keep him from staring at the acronym for too long. "But I'm a bit pressed for time, I've got a flight in..."

He runs off. The Regional Manager is no dummy. They're trained to recognise "SHITHEAD" spelt backwards. And upside down. And reverse. And lipread.

One stall down, 4 to go. I troll up to the next..

"Hi there, what form of hardware solution are you looking for?" Mr Smiles says (In other words, how can I tuck you for an extra grand)

"Well I don't really know. I need a fast and expandable machine that's top of the line but also capable of talking to my old luggable laptop."

Mr Smiles likes the words "Fast", "Top of the Line" and "Expandable". He runs over to a machine surrounded in glitter and advertising and gestures at it. "This is probably what you want then. The latest thing. There's only two in the country and luckily we have one here today"

"Yes yes, but will it talk to my laptop?"

"THIS baby will talk to ANYTHING. What's the interface, ethernet?"

"No, a SCSI-1 Interface. My machine pretends to be a disk, ID 3. But lots of machines kill my machine's powersupply with inductive transience backflow due to a non-standard SCSI interface..."

>DUMMY MODE ONE<

He practically BEGS me to try the new machine out. Which I've been waiting for. I drag out my luggable, which is, admittedly, a bit of a beast.

"Wow! That IS old!! And >ungh!<.. quite heavy too. I guess you're quite attached to it?"

I mumble about legacy data, only use it at home, sentimental value and irreplaceable software while he plugs it in and

starts the host machine.

"Okay, let's see what we can see" he says, and presses the power-on switch on my "portable" The 31 hefty nicad batteries that make up almost the entire inside of my "laptop" pour grunt into a tripling inverter which in turn supplies RICH, CHUNKY VOLTS to alternate pins on the "SCSI" bus, whilst emitting a dull "uuurk" sound.

"My Laptop!" I cry, reaching for it, just as smoke starts pouring out the back of the display machine. Mr Smiles dives for the demo machine weeping, while I exit, in "anguish"....

...resetting the circuit breaker in my machine as I go...

..to the next stall..

"Hi there, you look like someone who needs an upgrade!" the salesman chirps

"Well I don't really know. Is any of your stuff capable of talking to my luggable laptop?"

"HELL YES!"

One born every minute.

2.4 The Bastard's still about

It's a warm afternoon as I roll into work after a heavy night at an my favourite bar.

I'm in such a run-down mood I almost don't notice the smell of deodorant in the air. Deodorant can only mean one thing - an outsider. No-one here cares if their smell offends anyone. The smell is pretty thick which means the bearer must have been here a while.

As these thoughts steam sluggishly through my brain, I trundle through to the espresso machine and fill my tankard with the syrupy dark roast Italian.

Barely have I time to turn off logins than I meet today's visitor.

"Simon?" the boss chirps from the doorway "Ah.. I'd like to meet John Stern, he's the speaker from "MOTIVATION 2000" that we mentioned in the departmental newsgroup last week..."

"HI!" John gushes, powerdressed to the max.

"Oh, Do we have a departmental newsgroup?" I ask the boss, toying with him.

"..and sent you email about.."

"Well, you know I don't read my email, it's just a load of mealy mouthed whining from malcontents" I counter

"But I send you mail all the time.."

"Like I said, it's just a load.."

"AH SIMON, John's here to talk to us about improving our department's morale"

"Morale? What's wrong with our Morale? Hell, I laughed THREE times yesterday"

"Yes, I heard the ambulance... Simon, this is a compulsory meeting. All the department will be there..." the boss urges, fingers crossed

"Ah yes, how is the flock?" I ask, disinterestedly

"I'm sorry? Simon, the whole department is going. It would be good.."

"Yes. Well, I don't think it would be *good* 'morally' for me to attend"

"Simon >PREGNANT PAUSE< I'm not *asking* you to attend.."

Now THIS is a turn-up for the books! The boss, against all popular rumours, appears to have a spine. True, he's sweating profusely and has picked up a tremor, but he does appear to be holding his ground. I re-evaluate the potential

threat of John, and decide to attend.

"Oh. Oh, Ok then" I mutter in a defeated manner

The relief on the boss's face is phenomenal. He immediately ceases radiating nervous heat and his bowels get a new lease on life. He smiles nervously and starts his exit to a new world of respect and authority...

We all have our dreams...

"GLAD TO HAVE YOU ON THE TEAM SIMON! YOU WERE MAYBE A LITTLE HESITANT TO START OUT WITH, BUT I'M SURE WE'LL GET TO BE GREAT FRIENDS!!!" John blurts

"Yes" I say, concentrating on remembering where I put my coffee

"YES. NOW COME ON, BUCK UP!!!"

"I'm sorry?" I whisper, instantly in attack mode - the boss freezes in terror

"BUCK UP!, YOU KNOW, MOTIVATION!!!"

"Oh, 'BUCK' up.." I relax

The boss giggles nervously and resumes his exit waddle.

"YOU KNOW SIMON WHENEVER I HAVE MOTIVATION PROBLEMS I SAY TO MYSELF 'IT'S A DAY TO CELEBRATE, 'CAUSE TO DAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF MY LIFE!'"

"I see. So it'll be a double celebration for you today then?"

"I'M SORRY, I DON'T GET..."

The boss 'GET's alright, and hurriedly drags him from the room. I decide its time to get some real work done, and call an ex-operator trainee of mine who works at the National Security Information Centre. A good trainee too, passed with flying colours. You can tell, he's still alive.

"HELLO!" he shouts "WADDAYA WANT!"

Old habits do die hard

"SIMON HERE" I shout back

"SO?"

I compliment myself on a job well done.

"I want some information on a John Stern"

"Stern. Isn't he that Motivation guy?"

"The very same."

"Yeah, I don't have to look him up, but I will anyway. He came here three weeks ago for a motivation retreat. I got a non-specific disease those days"

"Tragic. But what did I tell you about problems? CONFRONT THEM HEAD ON! DON'T AVOID THEM!! It's bad for your rep."

"Yeah, you're right. He's coming back in a couple of weeks for a refresher and I can't back out those days because we're updating vetting info on some national politicians and I'll want a copy for... backup purposes"

"I'm sure you do. Well, what can you tell me?"

"Well, I'm afraid I can't tell you anything Simon. As you know all our information is carefully monitored for compliance with the Data Security and Privacy Laws, and there's no way to extract information without it being monitored"

We laugh, and he emails everything to me. I look through the data and find that Stern is cleaner than the Watergate filing cabinet. A great shame.

Motivation O'Clock arrives and I wander to the seminar room. John's setting up some display on his laptop, no doubt

with lots of cartoon characters depicting co-operation and unity. Nothing turns my stomach more...

"SIMON! GOOD TO SEE YOU!!" John spurts. He slips his hand into mine with a non-threatening orientation. I grab it in such a manner that his ends up on top of mine in the classic repressive Body-Language manner. He immediately notes this, loosens his grip and starts to remove his hand, all according to plan. A squeeze and twist later and John's morale is a little less than 100% with two dislocated fingers.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" I gush, helping John back to the nearest available seat.. ..which unfortunately has his laptop with it's fragile liquid crystal display.

Tragic.

>Whumph!< The room is plunged into darkness, the cause of which I can only guess at. Today's guess is the campus climate control computer started every heater and fan at the same time instead of one by one, resulting in a massive load on the campus power supply, popping all breakers. Just a guess of course.

"Nobody Move!" I call "It's dark and we don't want any accidents!!"

Everyone in the department freezes, knowing what this means. The god of computing wants a sacrifice, and volunteers are being called for.

"HOLD ON EVERYONE, I HAVE A TORCH IN MY BRIEFCASE!" John calls

If John were telekinetic, he would be reeling back from the mental shouts of "DON'T DO IT!". However, he obviously, and sadly, is not.

>WHOP< >WHOP< >WHOP<

Or should I say, WAS not.

Two minutes later the lights come on and the tragedy is revealed. The police are called.

"...apparently, fell forwards, head first into his briefcase, the spring-loaded lid of which slammed down upon his neck three times, snapping it like a twig"

I nod. The boss nods. The flock nods. One big happy family once more.

2.5 ...The Bastard Celebrates Christmas 95...

It's a slow day on the systems front following a network outage that's chopped the site in half. No-one seems to know exactly what's happened to the backbone except that it's completely dead.

In fact the whole day has been rather slow. So slow I passed some time earlier in the morning helping one of our buildings people hang the annual executives portrait photo in a place designed to inspire confidence and team spirit in the workers. Sure, using a nailgun just to hang a photo was a little excessive, but there was some obstruction in the wall which was difficult to nail through. An obstruction which was coincidentally thickwire ethernet shaped. Anyway I hope they find that outage soon..

Meantime I kill a little time by trolling the offices of the Network Team for Xmas pressies. You know the sort of thing, "Thank You" bottles of Wine, Xmas Food Parcels, etc, from grateful suppliers. It's not like they'll report them missing, for to do so would be tantamount to admitting that you hadn't handed them over to the boss for him to "reapportion" as he sees fit.

So I'm in the department Brown-Nose's office when the phone rings. What the hell, Xmas Spirit and all that, time to bury the hatchet.

"Hello"

"Hi, how long will the network be down"

"Should only be a couple of days"

"But I have to get these invoices rectified by the end of tomorrow!!"

"No Chance. I'm sorry, you should have thought about that before now. Honestly, we can't be expected to make allowances for your personal shortcomings"

"B.."

"No Buts, Maybes or What-ifs. It's your own fault."

"Do you know who you're talking to?"

"Well, my Caller-Id tells me that you're Charleston, Head of Accounts - and I would have to admit that you do have that whiney, beancounter telephone voice that denotes a white collar worker desperately in need of a good ten minutes alone with me and a staple-gun"

"WHAT?!"

"Oh, you're a DEAF whiney beancounter?!?"

"I. I." he splutters

Hatchet FIRMLY buried, I hang up. I'm about to leave when I notice that he's left a privileged session open to the router. A quick >clickety click< later and the router reboot he'd forgotten he'd scheduled takes place. A quick >scrawly scrawly< later and a note appears in his handwriting in his desk diary mentioning this was going to happen.

Five minutes later I'm back in the computer room, stashing my spoils inside the covers of some old-style 12" removable disk packs. Leaving the disks laying around would only draw undue attention and suspicion, so I dump them in the bin where they should've been put years ago, except that they have valuable corporate data on them.

I hear the Operator's phone ringing and feel obligated by the past to answer it. Besides, the operators had heard a rumour that there was a 48 disk software install happening in the basement and had rushed off with the portable bulk eraser. If I taught them well (and I think I did) they'll only buzz floppy number 47 under the pretence of analysing it for magnetic anomalies...

"Is this the operator?" I hear

"Yes" (A little white lie that won't do much harm.)

"I'm in a little bit of a bind. My supervisor has gone away he's still running some licensed software on his machine, so I'm locked out of it."

"Yes?"

"Well, is there anything you can do?"

"What sort of machine is it?"

"A Macintosh"

"Well, a lot of that licencing is network based.."

"So if I disconnect it from the net mine will work?"

"That would cause Defunct License Child Reflection on the net. You don't want that do you?"

>Dummy Mode On<

"Duh. No, I guess not"

"Right. What you need to do is to go into your supervisor's office, drag the documents they're working on into the trash can, which will relinquish the license they're working on. Then quit the application. Then EMPTY TRASH from the menu to force the license to be removed, then start the application up again"

"But won't that.."

"Delete the files? Of course not. Do files get deleted when you drag a floppy into the trash? No!"

"Oh. Ok, thanks"

"Hang on. Remember to leave a note on your supervisors desk to tell them what you did in case they have licensing problems too"

"Oh. Ok"

Mission Accomplished, I go to the smoko room and check out the Xmas tree. Sure enough, the lights are the cheap, in series AC kind. I drop a bit of coffee and some water in the bottom of the boss's mug then fill the sink up with hot soapy water.

Bare minutes later the boss rolls in to get a coffee. Noticing the dirty mug, he proceeds to the sink of hot soapy water. Seconds later the Xmas tree, precariously balanced on it's fibreboard base, lurches sideways into the bench area, dropping a few of the colourful bulbs into the water.

A promotion to a vacant position looks imminent...

2.6 The PreHistory of BOFH / The BOFH FAQ

This page was included from The BOFH Executive Relief Penultimate WWW Edition as it explains some background info on The BOFH. The BOFH FAQ is a signature file used by Simon Travaglia when replying to emails that are BOFH related.

The Prehistory of B.O.F.H.

Where it came from, How and Why

I get people asking from time to time, so I may as well tell...

Where it came from:

So I was writing the Striped Irregular Bucket and I was in much the same situation as the poor operator I was writing about. I was bored shitless. So I thought I'd bash out a couple of lines about something, and where better to start than a place I knew. So I chunked out Striped Irregular Bucket, which was far less offensive than some of my previous posts. Unlike most of my other posts, I knew the area I was talking about. (Being bored in a Computer Room that is). Then I started getting mail from people, which was unusual in itself, and it didn't say that my library books were overdue and it wasn't from story-tellers who wanted to tell you why they needed more disk, connect time etc. I ignored most of this and went on with other writing, resurrecting BOFH (who was as yet pretty much unnamed) in Striped Irregular Bucket #5. Then I got more mail, so I thought I'd bash out a couple of BOFH articles. So I did, then ran out of material briefly, so I stopped. Then got some material, and started then stopped again. That was about BOFH #15, after a brief splurge into BSMFH. Etc etc. Then I went to Britian for a year and worked for Enterprise Oil PLC (good place, say Hi!) in London, bricking out 2 articles in that time. Along the way, Waikato kept my old account open, so I'd get maybe one mail message a week from someone who'd just read it for the first time. I still do, strangely enough. Anyway, so I got back home, took up a job as Analyst Programmer, kissed the Computer Room goodbye, and thought that would make a fitting end to the BOFH.

To all the people who mailed me over 1993 or so and got no reply, sorry, but had to login from a Sun Sparc SLC via a modem to a machine which connected to a machine which let me login via a weird version of telnet to home in New Zealand.

Anyway, that's the very end of it. I know I've said that a couple of times, but there you go, you can't trust an Operator. But you can trust an A/P - Trust me.

21-Mar-1994. Okay, so I lied.

18-Nov-94 Lied again..

May->Jun-1995 Still lying... December 1995 No more lies - I guess I'll be writing them for a while. If you want up-to-date articles, you should be reading Datamation Magazines Web Site and/or Subscribing to "Network Week" magazine in London. Some of the episodes make it to both places, some now. Network Week sometimes also pens

their own episodes.

The BOFH FAQ

————— Congratulations on sending me mail, it getting here, and you getting a reply! ————— This is the Bastard Operator From Hell (and other) FAQ file v1.6 (Revised Beta) created in response to the sporadic queries I get regarding things I write and post to Usenet News. You have received it because either:

A. You asked for it B. It looks like you want some information from it C. I know you're paying for every byte you receive (which means you'll get the 2000 line version) D. You're a postmaster and the person I sent it to passed a bad return address to me. E. Extra Terrestrial Activity.

————— Q0. Is there a book? Tell me there's a book? A0. There's a book. Maybe. Q0b. Where? A0b. Send email to cburke@mis.net to hear more.

Q1. Can you mail me BOFH/Quantum Optics/Part 4 of xxx/Party Dude/etc? A1. No

Q2. Can you tell me where to get BOFH/etc? A2. Possibly. It should be available on Anonymous FTP at the following site. It may not be up to date at all tho: cathouse.org in /misc/fun/humor/simon/ Also, my WWW archive is fairly complete. (See Below)

Q3. How many BOFHs were there? A3. Well, it's a little grey for me, but to my knowledge there was: 2 pre-BOFH texts (Striped Irregular Bucket Series) 15 BOFH real 2 Bastard System Manager from Hell 2 or 3 Bastard Operator from Britain 1 Last Bastard Operator from Hell 1 more Bastard returns briefly 1 more Bastard goes to the Trade Show. (There's probably a discrepancy as I didn't keep a hot copy the whole time so I may have missed one somewhere. There were two "full" reposts to my knowledge: "The Executive Relief Repost" and (prior to BOFB) "The Penultimate REREPOST" The Penultimate REREPOST (or REPOST) is the last compilation available, so if you have that, you have a major part of it. 10-Jun-1995. 1 more "The Bastard's still about" 22-Dec-1995. 1 more "The Bastard does Xmas"

Q4. Will there be any more BOFHs? A4. I've given up denying it, I have no idea. I do some for "Network Week" (U.K) and Datamation (U.S) Magazines from time to time.

Q5. Is any of it true? A5. None of it. P.s. You have a lot of free disk now. Don't thank me, it was my job.

Q6. Why did you do it? A6. At first because I was bored.

Q7. Did you ever *really* do any of that stuff? A7. Ah.... .. no.

Q8. Can I use the BOFH in my magazine/newspaper/book? A8. What the hell. The only things I ask are: 0. You acknowledge copyright 1. You acknowledge the author (me!) 2. You don't edit it in any way (If it sucks, don't use it) 3. If your magazine/newspaper/book is earning a truckload of cash I'd like to see some of it!!! ;-} 4. If you're not getting a truckload of dosh, I'd still just like to get a copy of your magazine, book, paper whatever, just to know how it's travelling. NOTE: The Electronic Rights of BOFH are owned by Datamation Magazine or their publishers. I would prefer that people who have electronic versions record this cos they've been pretty good to me over the years.

Q8a. What's the copyright situation? A8a. I retain all copyright on my stuff unless otherwise stated

Q9. You convinced me. Where can I send the truckload of cash? A9. To me!: Simon Travaglia P.O. Box 13018 Hamilton, New Zealand

Q10. What if I haven't got a truckload of cash? A10. Join the club. I collect cameras... (Pentax K1000s by preference) & United frequent flyer miles perhaps? (grovel)

Q11. When did the last BOFH come out? A11. December 1995

Q12. When did the first one come out? A12. Dunno, I didn't pay attention at the time, I didn't think it'd catch on. (I got some angry mail from people who didn't like it and thought I denigrated the good name of Computer Support)

Q13. Have you written anything else? A13. All sorts of stuff. It probably requires a well 'tuned' sense of humour. cathouse.org (as mentioned above) has a directory called 'simon' that has some of my stuff in it. More of my stuff is

on my web page (see below). Some other stuff I neither have, nor in some cases remember writing. So it goes.

Q14. I'm a psych grad - what was BOFH's motivation? A14. The undeniable realisation that Computer Operators rule the world!

Q15. Is that the lot then? A15. Ah. Well, there's a WWW distribution at Waikato University under:

<http://mrjollylivesnextdoor.cc.waikato.ac.nz/simon.html>

which contains the most complete collection I know of.

Q15a. So where's this network week site with all the new bofhs? A15a. <http://www.emap.co.uk> follow the Network Week links. Say hello to Maxwell Cooter while you're at it.

Q15b. Ist das alles? A15b. Ok, there's a webbed german language version on:

<http://www.physik.uni-osnabrueck.de/~gjaekel/Operator/operator.html> A15b(ii) Ok, there's also a Russian version (apparently, I can't read it) at: <http://www.samson.spb.su/tea/tmp/humor/>

Q16. Anything Else? A16. I thought about getting "The Bound Bastard" or "The Bound Bastard and Other Stories" printed or maybe a tee-shirt with "Talk to me and I'll kill -9 you!" but I didn't know how well it would go. But if anyone can track down a publisher who had the wherewithall to do it... Versions of Tee-Shirts were made by JFurr (lost his email addr) way back, and Network week in 1996. *Late Note* Both Network Week and Chuck Burke (cburke@mis.net) are looking at compiling books as at 28-1-97

Q17. What, no "Sorry about all your files" or "What was your username again?" A17. Oh, of course. What was your username and password again?

Q18. How many K1000's have you got? A18. Two. Broken. And I paid for them too. I haven't *EVER* received one. It would be nice. (Hint Hint)

Chapter 3

The New Bastard From Hell

3.1 The B.O.F.H. is back ...

So I'm in my office again, reconfiguring the router when the phone rings. Somehow I knew this was going to happen. I'm obviously going to have to change my number (and Operator) YET AGAIN.

I pick it up.

"Start talking."

"Is this the network engineer?"

Sigh.

"Yes it is," I say, resigned to my fate.

I check the phone - there's no corresponding name on caller ID, which can only mean one thing.

"You're new here aren't you?" I ask.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Lucky guess. Tell me, how did you get my number?"

"Oh, I just called the helpdesk."

How helpful of them..

"Anyway, I was just ringing to tell you that you've got a problem with the network."

"No," I answer, "no problems here."

"You do have a problem - I can't get my PC to work."

"Let's just look at this logically," I say. "You can't get your PC to work, so I have a problem."

"With the network, yes. It's probably a loose connector somewhere."

Of all the things that REALLY piss me off, the 'loose connector' and 'loose wire' theories TOP the queue. He obviously thinks that my day consists of sitting in a comms room somewhere 'wiggling loose wires' to improve network services. Or that I designed the network by calling up a cable supplier and ordering several drums of CAT-5 and asking for it to be "scattered about the building in a spider web shape".

Next thing I know he'll be telling me that maybe one of the 'bulbs' burnt out on my FDDI ring.

"Hey, maybe one of the bulbs.."

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

"No, it's not that! You've kicked out your patch cable," I say.

"I can't have!" he backpeddles.

"You've kicked out your patch cable."

"No, all the wires are securely plugged into the back of my PC..."

"You've kicked out your patch cable."

"Hey! I kicked out the patch cable!"

"Of course you did. It happens all the time. It's because the twisted pairs in your cable get tangled, shortening the effective length of the cable. It's just like the telephone cord when it gets tangled."

"Oh right! I think I read something about that.." he burbles. What a plonker.

"Is there anything I can do to stop it?"

"Well, all you need to do is unplug it from the floor socket and give the cable a really really hard yank. Then all the twisted pairs come into line."

"But won't that damage my machine?"

"Heck no! The connector at the other end is made to pop out when the strain might damage the cable!"

"OK, here goes..."

CRASH!!

"HEY! I PULLED MY MACHINE ONTO THE FLOOR AND A BOARD'S RIPPED OUT OF THE BACK OF IT!"

"Oh well, you obviously pulled too hard," I say calmly.

"WHAT AM I GOING TO DO? IT'S MY FIRST DAY!"

"I don't know," I reply. "It sounds to me like a hardware problem. I'm just a network engineer.."

"But..."

I hang up. It's time to have stern words with the helpdesk. First step, into the comms room to 'wiggle their wires around' and drop out their network. Step two, set their call-forwarding so all their calls go through to the boss.

I pick a floor at random and remote boot both the main and redundant routers.

REQUEST LINES ARE NOW OPEN!

Scant seconds later I hear the boss's phone ringing. I'll give the boss about 10 minutes of irate users, then wander round and suggest the helpdesk staff need a lesson on what's funny and what's not. Forwarding your phone to the boss at network failure ISN'T funny. Helpdesk personnel investigating the job market IS.

My thoughts are interrupted by a call on the Red 'Bat' Phone. It's obviously the boss.

"Is this the network engineer?"

"It certainly is, how can I be of help?" I crawl.

"Ah, you've got a problem with your network."

"Have we?" (grease grease).

"Yeah, I guess it's probably a loose wire somewhere.."

Sigh.

He'll have to go..

3.2 The B.O.F.H. trips up ...

"So what you're saying is that the network is wide open to hackers?" the boss asks.

The department Brown-Nose nods. I, however, shake my head.

Guess who he believes?

"Well, what have you been doing about these security holes?" asks the boss, now more than a little concerned.

"Ah..."

I consider the topic carefully for almost a nano-second prior to providing my answer.

"Not a thing."

"But our network is wide open. The security implications are horrendous!"

"That is correct," I say. "My much maligned co-'worker' has hit the nail right on the side with his diagnosis of our situation, which I will now attempt to summarise.

"In the unlikely even that someone manages to pick both the seven-pin tumbler locks on one of the comms room doors, bypass the alarm systems and security cameras, then open the locked FDDI cage, or alternatively, smash their way through six inches of reinforced concrete piping buried four feet under a busy suburban road, then tap into our fibre-optic cable without us knowing...then yes, we are wide open.

"However, if as I surmise this is a thinly disguised ploy by the departmental Brown-Nose to edge his way one rung up the perk ladder into a trip to look at new security software, then I believe that our exposure to danger is somewhat overstated."

"Did you say trip?" the boss asks, eyes gleaming.

EVERY TIME A COCONUT!

"Yes," Brown-Nose chips in innocently. "Just to a manufacturer in the US who has some software to quadrupally encrypt data streams while retaining data integrity and not impacting bandwidth."

Of course, as soon as the word 'US' pops up the boss has visions of himself overseeing the 'evaluation' procedure at a convenient beach, staying at the nearest resort because of its central placing.

Right.

Brown-Nose smirks as his dreams of a holiday on the company come to full fruition.

It seems almost a crime to take his dreams and strike them with the iron bar of reality, but network engineering is a dirty job...

"Well, that really does sound like a good idea. However, I believe that there is some quintupally encrypting software with a manufacturer who is presently on a six-week tour of the States that I'd already lined-up a meeting with."

To add to the impact of my statement, I flash a sheet of paper with impressive writing and letterhead as proof. They are not to know that it is in fact from my lawyer who is attempting to defend me from some libellous allegations of an illegal wiretap at my previous workplace (a sordid blackmail allegation completely fabricated by some other employees who were jealous of my six figure salary and my five minute working day).

Flashing the paper at this stage is of course unnecessary, as the boss wants to believe this...

I tip him the 'junkt-nod' with:

"Hopefully we'll be able to catch up with them as they had booking problems and had to review their venues and dates."

Now the boss has carte blanche at junket level. His two options are either he goes with Brown-Nose to the States for a brief holiday with a small amount of technical content, or he goes to the States with me, expenses-paid for five weeks, never quite catching the manufacturer, returning home empty handed and still needing to find some encryption software (in other words, up for another junket), no technical content, with the minor danger of alcoholic poisoning.

Choose the first option and Brown-Nose will wilt under their respective inspections.

The Boss smiles. I smile. We both smile.

Brown-Nose sobs - he knows what's on the cards.

"Of course," I say "we don't really want to muddy the waters of purchasing and spread ourselves too thinly in researching this. A small team to concentrate on the hardware should do."

Engage cover-up plan.

"Yes," the boss concurs knowingly, "... too many cooks and all that. Some technical reshuffle seems called for... I hear there's an opening for a technical consultant in our site maintenance division in Hartlepool."

Tears well up in Brown-Nose's eyes as he contemplates his next five years of gardening and rubbish bin emptying...

"That will do nicely sir. Book the tickets now?"

I try not to think of it as spite, just seeing the job through to completion.

3.3 The B.O.F.H. gives advice ...

I'm preparing for a six-week US junket on the company with the boss to look at new comms gear. This means I'm going to have to take on someone to do my job while I'm away.

The ex-office brown-nose applied for the position, but unfortunately he was late for his interview when the lift in which he was a passenger mysteriously blew a control breaker. A pity they didn't discover him till after the weekend, by which time he was a drooling vegetable. It all adds fuel to my argument that I require a larger 'miscellaneous' budget to employ part-time staff to check things like lift emergency telephones and alarm switches.

As far as the job went, within a couple of days I have a 'green and keen' contractor occupying the spare desk. Now to teach him the ropes...

"OK quick outline, we look after every communications entity in the building. And they all belong to me. Not the user. Me. Remember that, it's important!"

"They belong to you." he repeats

"No, never say that. Always say, they belong to 'ME'. You don't want to give the users the idea that comms is something they should get involved in."

"They belong to me. So we look after phones as well?"

"Phones, fire and intruder alarms, intercoms, networks, microwave link, miscellaneous control systems; hell, if they bought semaphore flags we'd probably be looking after them," I say, pointing out the respective chapters in my site management bible.

"How do you get away with it?" he asks.

"Simple. I apply the basic rule of standardisation. Everything gets done in a standard way, and no-one but me knows anything about it."

"It's all in your head?..."

"No, no. It's all copiously documented in that safe over there," I reply, indicating a large armageddon-proof box in the corner.

"Who has access to it?"

"Me."

"And your boss..?"

"He has a key that he likes to think will open it. In actual fact, it's a duplicate of the key to the CEO's wine safe in the basement."

"Does the boss know?"

"How could he. He's not allowed in either area."

"He's not allowed in here?"

"Of course not. He's management and this is a sensitive area. Standardisation, remember. Just mention to the CEO that we have phone-tap equipment and you get a fat security budget to play with."

"Aren't you worried the boss will find out about the key?" my employee asks.

"Not as worried as he'd be when I mention informing the CEO about it. There's been a surprising amount of pilfering going on. It wouldn't look good on his permanent record when he went looking for his next job..."

"What a tragedy. Okay, I've got all that, what do I do?"

"Nothing, I've done it all. Familiarise yourself with the site management bible. It'll tell you all the major problems that could befall us, what to do and who to contact. See that phone on your desk - don't ever answer it, it'll just be some user who's moved his machine and expects the data-sockets to be live."

"That's it?"

"Like I said, it's mostly in the site bible. Oh, remember to put the voice recorder tapes into the fireproof back-up safe!"

"That's in case we have a verbal contract disagreement?"

"No, that's so I can listen to the boss's personal phone calls. Honestly, it's better than 'Days of Our Lives'. Also, never mention the name 'Pooky' or he'll know I'm onto him."

"OK, what if the helpdesk corners me?"

"Hmmm. Well, as I haven't introduced you to them, you've got a week's grace. After that, use the excuse that you can't accept helpdesk calls until you have a username to receive the email so that the process can be tracked by me when I return. That'll buy you another couple of days. Add two more days for documentation on paper and then you might squeeze yet another week or two out if you use the old routine 'log a fault call' - preferably on some ancient noticeboard using the tried and trusted postcard method. Remember to make some number up and write it on the incident board as 'proof'. When you can't delay any more, use the network monitor to drop the CEO's data ports. He has priority and you can kill at least a day 'isolating the failure'."

"What happens if the CEO corners me?"

"Play it safe and brown-nose. Get him a coffee and take him on a tour of the central comms room. When he's mesmerised by the flashing lights, nudge his arm when you open a cabinet door so that the coffee spills through the floor tiles. The master breaker will pop so fast he won't even have time to say 'woopsy'. After that, no-one's going to complain about anything. Got all that?"

"Sorted!"

"Right, get to work."

3.4 The B.O.F.H. gets a non-PC ...

So I'm in the States with Sharon, the ex-boss's secretary, to check out some new networking hardware and software. The boss couldn't make it after unfortunately having a disagreement with the CEO when the CEO somehow got 'listen-only conferenced' into a telephone call between the boss and the CEO's wife. (The bit about the boardroom table got to him apparently). Being the only other person familiar with the whole deal, Sharon, a young, part-time aerobics instructor and non-subscriber to the motto "Don't screw the crew", was obliged to accompany me.

What a tragedy.

Strangely, it couldn't have worked out better if it were planned. (You know, someone telling Sharon to familiarise herself with only 10 of the 1000 or so documents that pass over her desk every month; someone accidentally tampering

with the exchange configuration to allow listen-only conference calls; someone tampering with the exchange to make it auto conference calls to the CEO's home number back to the CEO's private phone that no-one but his secretary has the number to...) But of course, that's ridiculous.

Of course I blame myself. If I hadn't taken the boss for a 'working lunch', bought him 10 pints and mentioned the CEO's wife had a fixation on him, perhaps none of this would have happened.

Sigh. Oh well, at least I did my duty by the firm and made the most of it; difficult though it was. I must remember that at contract renegotiation time.

We book in at a modestly priced hotel - (modest by the standards of the Royal Family that is) and suffer an upgrade in rooms when it is discovered that due to some computing glitch a Mr Babbage and a Mr Pascal have been double-booked in our economy rooms. It's funny the number of times that has happened to me...

I ring my temp to see how he's doing in my absence. The phone rings about 50 times before finally being diverted to talking clock. At least I know he's read my Site Management Bible...

I then ring the boss's temporary replacement from the bar.

"How's it going?" he asks keenly, disguising the fact that he's annoyed at not being here.

"Well, we're having some trouble tracking down the supplier's tour dates, but we figure we'll track them down through computing magazines. Speaking of which, can you wire me another thousand quid for...miscellaneous expenses - the computing magazines, phone calls etc."

"I sure can," he replies amiably. "Of course, you'll be bringing these magazines back with you when you return so our accountant can rectify all this with the bean counters upstairs?"

Sneaky bastard - he's just upset that he didn't get to go and is obviously going to cause problems. Best to nip this in the bud right now.

"No problem - could you make that three thousand quid, the air freight costs are likely to be quite high for the 250 odd magazines..."

"Perhaps that IS unnecessary," he says, thinking about his plummeting operations budget.

"OK. Well I'll get back to you in a couple of days," I reply.

He hangs up and immediately I whip back to my room and dial through to my private modem pool at work.

I wait 10 minutes for the temp-boss to type and print the expense memo, then ethersniff his text and digitised signature on its way to the printer. I quickly bash up another expense report for a couple of hundred quid requesting some 'photographic' magazines from a dealer in Amsterdam appending his home address as the delivery point. I 'accidentally' queue it to print at Bean-Counting-Brown-Nose-Central then logout.

Knowing the religious background of the CEO I expect to find yet another empty desk on my return. Just applying the first law of networking - loose ends are bad, termination is good.

To enhance my job security, I make another phone call to a number that's permanently etched into my memory. In a darkened comms cupboard on the 5th floor, the call is answered by a 'Home Security Dialup Unit' and I type in my pin number. Then type a three-digit code and hang up. The clock starts now.

Six minutes and twelve seconds later the phone rings. The helpdesk has found me which can only mean that the temp-boss has given out my contact number, which in turn must mean the CEO is displeased.

"Something's wrong with the network!" the operator cries.

"I see. Put me on hands-free and tell me what's going on," I reply in a business-like manner.

The earpiece tells me I'm on hands-free, speaking to, if my calculations are correct, the helpdesk operator, the temp boss and the CEO (who likes to be around when major panics are in session to get firsthand knowledge of what the problem really is).

"What's the problem?" I repeat.

"The network appears to be bridged out somewhere in the computer room."

"OK, have you looked at the network topology in the documentation cabinet?" I ask, playing the knowledgeable and helpful network-person to the hilt.

"Your temp's trying to get into his office but there appears to be a lockout on the comms room swipe-card lock."

"Really? It sounds suspiciously like we've dropped a breaker in the distributed UPS Unit."

No-one has a clue what I'm talking about at this stage, but they also don't want to appear ignorant.

"Uh huh," the help desk operator says (probably accompanied by en-masse nodding in the room).

"OK, call the operations room, tell them to open the third UPS cabinet from the left, and they'll find a breaker, number 15 or 16, has tripped. If they reset that, the computer room repeater should come back to life and the door access system should start communicating with the office again..."

Five minutes later I'm back in the bar, with one of the safest contracts since Al Capone was alive. The CEO thinks I know each circuit breaker personally, and that my temp will have to go as soon as I get back. Situation Under Control.

Good networking depends on good planning.

3.5 The B.O.F.H. is on a buying mission ...

Sharon and I have to make the junket look more plausible so I track down several trade-shows for us to go to and pad out our cover story. I use the basic two-step junket cover-up plan:

1. Drop business cards saying I'm interested in everything so I get lots of correspondence when I get back.
2. Sign up for every free subscription and on-site demonstration (to be farmed off to someone once I get home).

I then engage the one-step Make The Most Of It Plan - get to the bar as soon as possible and get freebies and drinks from suppliers.

Later that day at a sales stand...

"..combined with dual, redundant power delivery systems, opto-mode indicators, and rapid install strain relief fixtures"

"So what you're saying is it comes with a spare power cable, a 'power' LED and a bag of cable ties?" I ask.

"Ah well, you're obviously not aware of the full ramifications of system redundancy, hardware stressors and high availability."

"IT'S A BLOODY ROUTER!" I shout. "If the power goes out, it doesn't matter how many spare power cables, lights or cable ties you have, it still stops, you lose your net and get lots of phone calls!"

"Yes, but it does come in a nice black case with eight rubber feet instead of four!"

"WHAT I'M AFTER," I repeat for the fifth time "is an FDDI hub with IMPRESSIVE LOOKING ENCRYPTION built-in. I don't need another router."

"It's a nice router.."

"I don't care, I have routers. I want IMPRESSIVE LOOKING ENCRYPTION!"

"What do you mean by impressive LOOKING?" the guy asks.

"Something that'll fool a technical manager," I reply.

"What about converting everything to lower case?" he suggests, knowing the level of competence of the average technical manager.

"No, no we might get an intelligent one sometime in the future."

"Lowercase and all words spelt backwards?"

"Better.."

"Well, we do have this encryption chip set for terminal servers that we could whack into a hub.."

"What sort of speed would we get?"

"FDDI in."

"And out?"

"96K.. ...on a good day."

"NOT really what I want is it?"

"Well, that would be version one. But we promise that version 1.1 would have perfect performance, no lag, and so secure it'll seem like magic."

"You're lying aren't you?"

"Of course, I'm in sales!"

"What would we really get?"

"Like I said, version 1.1 would have the lot - everything you asked for."

"When would it be delivered?"

"Third quarter."

"Third quarter?"

"2012."

"Thought so. Perhaps we give this one a miss?"

"But it's the only hub on the market with high-speed-opto-interfacing!"

"They all have that - that's what FDDI means."

"Yeah, but no-one else calls it that in their brochures. And you get a couple of bottles of 40-year old scotch with every one as a product endorsement."

"Make it half a dozen with each one and I'll take 10."

Sharon looks a little concerned at this.

"We'll never get away with it," she whispers. "They'll cripple the net!"

"Sharon, Sharon, Sharon," I sigh. "We're never going to use them, that's the key. We'll buy them and mention to the CEO that we'll be able to ensure that absolutely no-one can snoop our networks without being detected. He'll realise that the piece of software he uses to detect the schemers among his junior execs will be compromised, and late one night all the routers will disappear from the storage cupboard to reappear in a landfill somewhere in Bognor."

"You mean the CEO spies on the other execs to protect his job?"

"Of course! I'd be most put out if I'd written that software for nothing!"

"What if he's not snooping any more?"

"Please! Upper management has all the 'filial loyalty' of a piranha infested toilet bowl. And anyway, should that fail I will engage the old-favourite 100 per cent-foolproof kit-destruction ploy."

"What's that?"

"Switch the voltage to 115 and PLUG 'EM IN! Works every time."

"How much do they pay you to think up this stuff?"

"NOT ENOUGH!"

3.6 The B.O.F.H. wreaks his revenge ...

The problem with being away on a jolly, sorry fact-finding tour of the States, is that there's a hell of a lot of paperwork to catch up on. Normally, I shove this to one side and if any of the paper pushers upstairs complain they get shown the door swiftly when the CEO receives insulting e-mail from their PCs. It's amazing the rude words the chair warmers can come up with sometimes.

But this time it's different. It's yearly budget time again, which means once more it's time to print the 'Basic Computing' OHPs so I can explain to the technical management committee why we should look at upgrading our network.

I briefly consider not printing the 'This is a BIT, This is a BYTE' slides, but reconsider when I remember that one of the committee avoids lace-up shoes because it takes him an hour longer to get ready for work...

While I'm planning the phone rings. Caller-ID tells me that it's a nasty specimen from Public Relations who just yesterday, as chance would have it, was lucky enough to slip into a parking space that I myself was about to enter.

Lucky is, of course, a relative term, and subject to revision over time. The time is now. I press the 'record conversation' button.

"Hi, network ops," I say.

"I need a PCMCIA net card for my laptop. By Friday, 9am."

Of course it's Thursday afternoon, 3:45pm.

"Ah, equipment purchases must go through your department," I say.

"Then you'll have to loan me one. The purchase order wouldn't go through in time. Besides, it's my personal machine, I've got a presentation to give to the CEO that I've been working on at home."

"Wouldn't it be preferable to transfer all this via back-up floppies to your work machine?" I ask, praying for the desired response.

"Don't be stupid, it'd take me a year to back this lot up. Just get me a card and I'll do the presentation from my laptop tomorrow."

"Well, I've got a ... doctor's appointment right now so I won't have time to configure your machine for the card," I say, giving him the chance to dig a nice big hole. "Also, I won't be in until about 9:30am tomorrow."

"I'll do the bloody configuration!" he growls. "It's not rocket science, despite what you geeks attempt to imply!"

Hole dug nice and deep. Now to work on the edging details...

"I don't know, if you get something wrong, or the card's incompatible.."

"IT'S A BLOODY PCMCIA CARD. HOW CAN IT BE INCOMPATIBLE!?!?"

The hole is perfection, in fact it looks almost grave-like.

"Well, OK, I'll leave one in the equipment room. But take a network card and not a SECURE-network card. Do you know the difference?"

He's in a lather now and there's no way he'd admit ignorance.

"JUST LEAVE THE BLOODY CARD OUT AND I'LL PICK IT UP IN THE MORNING!"

"Well OK.."

He hangs up.

From the 'documentation' safe I pull out the 'special' PCMCIA card and pop it on the desk in the equipment room.

The next day I roll in at about 9:30 in time to be summoned to the CEO's office.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" he rants.

"About what?" I ask, innocence personified.

"THAT BLOODY EXPLODING NETWORK CARD THAT CARSON IN PR. GOT!"

"Exploding network card? What explo.. Oh dear. He didn't try to install a SECURE-network card in his machine did he? I told him yesterday to be careful about installing and configuring it. They're programmed to self-destruct if someone attempts to override their access parameters..."

"By self-destruct you mean..?"

"Well there's a tiny nitrate charge in them which burns out the circuitry.."

"Or perhaps blows a hole the size of a saucer through the laptop in question?"

"They DID have teething problems with the first batch, which is why I had them recalled to the equipment room in preparation to send them back to the manufacturer. But it shouldn't have been used in the first place. I warned Carson yesterday when he asked, it's all on the voice tapes..."

Much later as I'm watching the name 'Carson, MJ' being removed from the floor directory and 'Carson, MJ' in person being removed from the premises, I can't help but wonder what makes people think they can beat the system.

It's a good system. It's MY system.

I like it.

Now, to complete plans for the budget meeting...

3.7 The B.O.F.H. gets a new boss ...

After a few days away I always attempt to come in slightly early to catch up. So when I roll up at 11 o'clock I find the place ominously quiet. This could mean two things; either my understudy didn't make it through my time off, or he's been brainwashed by the boss and they're both hidden away staring at the monitor of the closed-circuit BOFH-watching system that they somehow installed while I was away. A quick scan of all the suitable camera points shows that nothing quite so technical has happened (perhaps the boss remembered that it didn't work first time they tried either), so I wait for the knock at the door.

I'm not disappointed.

"Morning, operator," booms the boss as he strides in.

Odd, the boss and I are on first name terms, he usually calls me 'the bastard'.

Hang on, this is a different boss.

"You're probably wondering who I am."

He's on the ball, this one.

"You could say that," says I. "What happened to the previous generation?"

"Nasty business. Installing security cameras or something according to the paramedics. Something went 'bam' and there they both were, all kind of charred and surprised-looking. Still, I'm still around, so look on the bright side."

Nasty. Ah, so they did try the cameras. Lucky I remembered to wire up all the video cable to the three-phase supply.

"While you've been away, we've decided to make a few changes," says the boss.

"We?" (What I really hate is someone trying to change my system).

"We've noticed that the systems around here are slow," he continued, "and that we need some new kit to to keep up with everything. It seems that the new stuff they bought last month just can't cope with all the software we run on it."

For a minute I thought I smelled trouble; but it seems that my clock-chipping exercise paid off. Neat bit of lateral thinking that - buy the box the supplier recommends, clock it down from 133MHz to 13MHz, and wait for someone to reason that they need something ten times faster to do the work. Not only that, but the supplier gets sued for selling us unsuitable kit.

"Really?" I inquire cheerily. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, we figured you would be in the best position to tell us what to buy, since you're the one who understands the technology."

He's damned right; not just anyone understands how I get the pictures from the stationery store to the TV in the coffee room at that quality, especially with Nicam Stereo sound and zoom facility. "Leave it with me," I reassure him. "I'll see if I can milk a bit more performance out of this lot first." With a bit of luck I can get a couple of thousand a week for a couple of months for 'upgrades' and wind the clock back up a bit every Friday night (that's what they mean by incremental upgrades isn't it?). By the end of it, I'll have enough for that new 52-inch 'console display', which has a wide-screen TV and a built-in satellite decoder. AND The boss will be happy that he's saved a couple of hundred grand.

I sometimes wonder how I get away with it.

Unfortunately that just leaves the more mundane jobs of the day. The e-mail filter is disappointing; perhaps the CEO and the girl from Accounts are starting to catch on and are using code.

I flick through the excuse book. Oh no, not lunar disturbances; who will believe that?

The phone rings. Damn, that was careless, I forgot to have it diverted.

"Computer room."

"Oh, I'm terribly, terribly sorry. Really, terribly, awfully sorry."

That's nice, but perhaps a little less than descriptive.

"Could you elaborate?"

"I just broke the mainframe."

Interesting. We don't have one of those any more. I downsized it to something with faster graphics when Doom II came out.

"How did you do that?"

"I just added an entry to our mailshot with a spelling mistake in it, and now the mainframe won't respond. It's only my second day here and I broke the computer."

"Where are you calling from?"

"Marketing."

It all becomes clear. She's on the segment that's 'accidentally' shorted for the next half-hour. That reminds me, I must put in a random-fault-duration feature before someone notices that I fix every network fault in precisely twenty-nine minutes.

"OK, don't worry. How long ago did you send the entry?"

"About two minutes."

"No problem. Because it's your boss's database, the mainframe contacts an automatic system on his PC which has to confirm the transaction before the mainframe will accept it. As long as you get to his office in the next ...er ... 23 seconds, and pull out the network plug, the transaction won't have had time to get there for confirmation."

"Oh thank you, thank you. How can I ever thank you enough?"

I can think of a few ways, but she's dropped the phone and run for it, and I find myself shouting "It's the yellow wire" to nobody.

I wait for the phone to ring. Given that it's a 20 second run, and a further 15 seconds for her boss to comprehend why a secretary should suddenly barge in and rip out all the wires from his computer I take the opportunity of a quick 'grep' of the FTP log. Ten GIFs and fourteen JPEGs, they'll take a while to download, so I'd better just allocate myself a bigger slice of the KiloStream...it won't do them any harm to share 8Kbps for a while.

The phone rings, three seconds early.

"Computer room?"

"Yes?"

"Can you explain why my secretary just charged in here and wrecked my PC, saying that you told her to?" he demands.

No, surely I couldn't get away with it. He's got to see through it...

"Lunar disturbances."

The sudden aura of sympathy at the other end of the phone tells me I've got away with it again. Not just a pretty face, more a Bastard Astronomer from Hell ...

3.8 The B.O.F.H. defines his territory ...

I'm sitting at my desk, reconfiguring my network monitor, when the phone rings. Caller-ID tells me it's one of the consultants in the Bean-counter department on the sixth floor. I pick the receiver up, say "Wrong Number", and hang up.

I know it's a wrong number - mine isn't listed internally. The number that is listed rings through (I believe) to a locked storeroom in the basement. Popular rumour has it that it was once answered... Network Engineering, like a major credit card, has its privileges.

The phone rings again and I'm getting concerned. Twice in one day is a little excessive.

"Hello?" I ask, not wanting to give any clues away.

"Is that the network engineer?" a voice asks.

This concerns me even more. There's only one person who knows my extension number - that's the system operator, and he knows better than to divulge it to a user. At least, I thought he knew better.

"Yes?" I reply.

"I've got a little problem with my connection," the voice says.

"Call the helpdesk," I reply, and drop the receiver back into its cradle

Yet again the phone starts ringing.

"I already rang the helpdesk!" the voice wails. "They told me to call you!"

Oh dear. There are three things wrong here: one, a user knows my extension number, which means: two, the helpdesk has been talking to the operator again; but more importantly: three, the operator is giving out my extension number to people.

This is not a good thing. If I'd wanted calls, I would have put an advert in a personal column. I'd best get to the very bottom of this before things get out of hand.

"Why did the helpdesk tell you to call me?"

"Because they don't know what the writing on the patch-panels means."

My network monitor is now beeping at me, which brings the concern level into the upper percentiles.

"On my patch panels?" I say.

"No, the ones up here in our section on the sixth floor."

"Yes. My patch panels. The ones I lock away from everyone," I fume.

"Well, I ... "

"Just a minute. One question. What were you doing in the Comms Cupboard?"

"Well, my connection went dead, so I ..."

"So you broke into the Comms cupboard?"

"No, not broke into - the operator gave me the key."

"The ex-operator gave you the key?"

"Yeah."

I grab the phone, go to the inspection window, and get the operator's attention. He exits to the corridor heading in my direction.

"And you've touched something haven't you?" I ask down the phone, knowing the worst.

"Uh ... I ... er"

"You got drawn in by the pretty lights, and you touched something. Don't bother denying it, I know you did, and you know you did. And pretty soon, if I'm not mistaken, most of your division will know you did too. What did you touch?"

"Well, I thought the router might have crashed, so I ... "

"Wait! Another question. Where did you hear the word 'Router'?"

"I read it in a manual that I got at Dil... "

"WHAT?! You've been reading forbidden literature as well?"

"It's not forbidden to read ... "

"Stop! The book was in the technical section wasn't it?"

"Well, it ... "

By this time the operator has arrived at my office and has realised the significance of the tones coming from the network monitor.

"What were you doing in the technical section? You know you don't belong there! But let me piece this together. You skim-read a technical tome, wait for your chance, impress the gullible ex-operator with a host of buzzword lies, then, under the false impression that the router had gone down, rebooted it. Didn't you?"

"Uh ... Yes. Sort of. I didn't know which of the three routers was at fault, so I ... "

"You booted them all didn't you?"

Sure enough, my screen shows the sixth floor as a sea of red.

"Uh, yes. I was just wondering if there's anything else I should've done."

Looking directly at the 'ex' operator, I reply: "Well, come to think of it, yes there is. Usual procedure after causing a major network outage is to collect your personal effects from your desk and work area, not forgetting your coffee mug, then sit in a large open area until security comes to escort you from the building."

"But I ... "

"Oh, and make sure they don't have to search you for your keys or ID card. I've heard people have nasty accidents that way. Bye now! Oh, and if you've written my extension number down anywhere, I'd advise you to dispose of it carefully."

He hangs up, and I prepare to show our operator why the electric stapler has all those warning signs about keeping the body clear.

3.9 The B.O.F.H. and 'budget constraints' ...

So I'm at my first budget meeting of the month, which has one and ONLY one purpose - to increase the size of our modem pool by 10 modems.

Small potatoes on the budgetary scale, but it does set a precedent for future meetings, a fact which is never overlooked.

Normally I'd get about a quarter of whatever I ask for (due to 'budget constraints' - ie the technical managers want the latest flashy status-symbol toys), however today I'm feeling lucky for some reason.

"Well, I still don't see what the problem is," Technical Manager One says. "It's not as if the modems are used 24 hours a day!"

"No," I say, "But at peak times they are 100 per cent utilised causing us problems."

"Perhaps our staff should be educated in modem use?" Tech One says smarmily.

The other Tech Managers fall into line with this statement with lapdog-like nods.

Time to play the ace up my sleeve.

"Yes, education is an answer, however it achieves little when modems are in use for excessive periods of time..."

"Meaning?" Tech Two asks, smelling a rodent-type creature in the immediate vicinity.

"Mainly people downloading large files from Internet's Usenet News..."

"Ah," Tech Two chips in quickly, "Perhaps there is a measure of expansion needed."

"...Large downloads," I continue, "Probably picture files of some description."

"Yes yes, I'm sure there's no need to go into extraneous detail on this."

Tech Two interrupts sweating slightly...

"No, you're right," I say, "None whatsoever. But newsgroups are only one problem. There are a lot of heavy image downloads from Web-Sites as well."

Tech One is suddenly fully awake. He knows (as do I) just which sites I'm talking about here and what images. AND what they depict. AND more importantly, who's downloading them...

I continue...

"Of course, should 'budget constraints' require usage statistics from our News host and Web-cache server, I'm sure I can dig up what articles and images were downloaded, when and by whom. In fact one site is getting fairly heavy access by only one user at our site and..."

"Yes, yes. Shall we move along?" Tech One pleads, "I believe you have a valid point and I am fully behind the move to get more modems."

"I would agree," Tech Two adds.

The Technical Lapdogs once more fall into line...

"Certainly," I say, "I think those 15 modems will be most helpful."

"FIFTEEN!" Tech One says "Your proposal was for TEN!"

"True, but on second thoughts, I feel it prudent to leave room for expansion in this area. Don't you agree?"

The moment of truth. Will he fold or not? Better safe than sorry...

"ESPECIALLY if modems are going to be used to access sites that have dubious relevance to the purpose of the company, such as..."

"ALL RIGHT!" Tech One cries, "Fifteen seems quite... reasonable."

I'm out of the meeting a record two hours eight minutes and back in my office in time to hear my phone ringing. What

the hell, I answer it.

"Network Engineer."

"Hello is this the Network Engineer?"

"No, I'm sorry this is the Mail Room. Please hold, I'll put you through."

I forward the user to the talking clock and look over the error reports that have accumulated in my absence.

I grab one at random to give the impression of service. I ring the user.

"Hello, Payments"

"Hi, I'm Simon the Network Engineer. I gather you had a problem with telephone call-pickup."

"Yes, I can't pickup the phones in the office like everyone else."

"And you logged this as a Priority One call?"

"Well it's quite important!"

"OK, your problem is obviously an... EEPROM CONFIG CHARGE LOSS."

"Uh?"

"The battery that saves your phone's information is flat."

"But it's just new!"

"Of course. But it's been sitting for months in a storeroom."

"Oh. Should I get a new battery then?"

"No, no," I chuckle, "It's rechargeable! Just whip down to the basement car park and borrow the vehicle jump starter. Put one of the big clips on either side of the battery and press the red button. In seconds your battery will be back to new."

"OK, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Five minutes later I'm sitting in the comms room by the exchange. One of the line level LEDs glows very brightly for a fraction of a second then goes out.

Some users have it coming. I'm just a delivery mechanism.

3.10 The B.O.F.H. and the 'C' word ...

I'm not impressed. The Boss has just said the "C" word, and with no provocation either.

"What did you say?", I ask, still not believing what my ears tell me I'm hearing.

"Oh, don't put on the shocked look. I thought you'd enjoy having a consultant to play with; it'll take your mind off annoying the users."

Me?? Annoy users?

"So when is our new friend coming then?"

"First thing after lunch"

Yes, that should give me enough time.

"And might I ask who ... errr ... 'invited' him?"

"Well, the Finance Director did actually. He's worried that we're open to hacking, and that people might get at confidential and potentially damaging financial information, so it was decided that an outside opinion was the best

thing. In fact, the FD recommended this chap himself”.

Ah, I knew the bean-counters had to have a hand in it somewhere. I’ve known for some time just how much they spend on hotels for ”one-to-one briefings”, but one wouldn’t want just _anyone_ to know, would one?

”And how much is he charging?”

The number quoted by the boss closely resembles a telephone number. I wonder ...

No time to lose. First thing is to shift a bit of kit around the building; that doesn’t take more than half an hour, so I’m soon on-line with that password I found recently. Ah, just as I suspected ... now, just a quick Email (anonymous, of course) to the Personnel people ...

Just then, the new arrival knocks and waits to be asked before entering. He’s obviously come across electrified doorhandles in his career. The Boss strides confidently in after him.

”Good afternoon,” spouts the Boss cheerily. I get the feeling it’s going to be. ”Welcome to our machine room. Let me introduce Simon, our BOFH”

Nice firm handshake, but a little sweaty; he didn’t ask what BOFH stands for, so he’s obviously used to accepting acronyms he’s never heard of without flinching.

”Simon will show you around”, adds the Boss. ”Can you present your preliminary report to the CEO and myself last thing this afternoon?”

”Certainly. And don’t worry about showing me around; I’ve been in setups like this before”.

Oh, no, you haven’t ...

He heads off in the direction of the comms room, and I wait for the scream. Silence. Must be wearing rubber-soled shoes ... this guy knows what he’s doing.

I busy myself with the tasks of the day, and wonder what he’s up to. He certainly seems to be spending a long time in there looking at the firewall, which is reassuring - while he’s playing with that, he can’t be bugging something else up. I put the coffee pot on, sit back, and watch the CCTV monitor ... now ... all we have to do is wait ...

I remotely drop the main hub from the management console, and the alarm pierces not only the dull hum of the air conditioning but also probably one of his eardrums.

”WHAT’S THAT ALARM MEAN?” he shouts over the alarm.

I silence the alarm with an accurately thrown manual

”WHAT DID YOU TOUCH?”

”NOTHING ... HONEST” - a standard admission of guilt.

Obviously deaf as a post. Nice bonus. I stride into the comms room and grab a bunch of unconnected wires. Okay, they have never been connected to anything, ever, but this is a minor detail.

”So what the hell are these?”

”Pardon?”

”I SAID, WHAT THE HELL ARE THESE?”

”I ... THINK I’LL JUST GO LOOK AT THE REMOTE BRIDGES”

Five o’clock comes, and we’re all sat in the CEO’s office. Me, the FD, the CEO, the Boss, and our aurally-challenged friend who is shouting his report so he can hear himself.

”... SO WITH SUCH DISORGANISED CABLING AND A SIXTY-GRAND FIREWALL WHICH IS KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD TO LEAK LIKE A SIEVE, YOUR NETWORK IS FULL OF HOLES. WHOEVER PUT THIS KIT IN IS AN IMBECILE”.

The CEO looks at me.

”Well?”

”Well, sir,” (creeping usually helps), ”I wonder if I might just explain a few facts. First, the cabling arrangements weren’t helped by our colleague here and his size-tens; didn’t you hear the alarm when he trod on something important? Second, I didn’t actually order that firewall”.

”So who did?”

All eyes turn to the Boss, who remembers an important appointment and dashes out with panic in his eyes. One down, two to go.

”One thing”. I look at the CEO. ”How long was our consultative associate in your office for this afternoon?”.

”Well, I hadn’t seen him before this meeting. Why?”

”Because our active firewall is in that data closet over there,” I answer, waving toward a door in the corner of the office, ”so unless our friend here had been sitting in your room for a couple of hours or so there’s no way he could have evaluated our security. Perhaps he just invented a damning report so we could pay him to ’fix’ our security on top of the fat consultation fee. That’s fraud, isn’t it?”.

”But what about the firewall in the comms room?”, asks a worried-looking consultant.

”Oh, well, when the Boss ordered it I thought I’d better put it somewhere, even though as you rightly say it’s no good at all; after all, he could lose his job for blowing sixty grand on something that just sat in the cardboard box, so I thought I’d help him out. Didn’t you notice it wasn’t connected to the LAN?”

A few choice words from the CEO, detailing where he thought he might insert the cheque for the consultation fee, and our numbers are again decremented.

BONG!

The silence is broken by the CEO’s PC telling him he has new mail. I know this has to be from Personnel (I filtered everything else to /dev/null earlier lest this message get lost among a flood of trivia). I excuse myself, reasoning that I probably couldn’t keep a straight face as the CEO inquired of the FD whether he thought that a director who employs a crooked consultant who happens to be married to his sister could possibly stay in office.

As I sit by my console and gaze out of the window, I see our ex-FD drop the contents of his ex-desk all over the car park as Security body-search him for the keys of his company Jag. On-line registers of births, deaths and marriages are a wonderful thing ...

3.11 The B.O.F.H. and the engineer ...

It’s a slow day network-wise, and for some reason I’m feeling a little like Clint Eastwood ...

”I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, is he monitoring the fourth floor or the fifth? Well, to tell you the truth, in all the excitement, I haven’t looked at the screen myself. But, taking into account I have a defined key to invoke a kernel debugger on the server which can erase even the MEMORY of your database process - and the work you’ve done this morning - I’d like you to ask yourself one question: do I feel lucky? ... Well, do ya? ... Punk! ?” I demand.

I hear the clatter of the receiver on the wall, and in my mind’s eye I can almost see the frightened accounts clerk scurrying back to the office to close the connection to the database in an orderly fashion before failover time.

My mind’s eye being not what it once was, I flip through my CCTV monitors of the fourth floor until I see a geeky guy, laden with lunch, beating a hasty path to his office.

I click on the security window and deactivate the ’Door Open’ knobs on the stairwell.

I almost wish I’d turned the CCTV sound on so I could hear the thud when the door didn’t open, but you can’t have everything.

Rule 75 of Network Ops: never log a fault on a device from the lunchroom. Especially if your office is up a flight of stairs and on the other side of the building.

I get on with my work, which today is 'fixing' the swipecard door-access machine. Apparently there's some logic glitch that no-one knew about until a particularly annoying sales consultant got accidentally locked in the secure area over the holiday weekend. The poor guy was a drooling wreck when they found him - apparently the sirens and sprinklers were playing up in there too, every 10 minutes.

It all goes to show that you can't be too careful when you don't hold the lift open for someone laden with networking magazines ...

I upload the original swipecard microcode over my specialised patched version, and give the system a clean bill of health. It was obviously a freak hardware problem, and nothing to do with the network whatsoever ...

While I'm in the computer room, a hard drive arrives in preparation for a disk replacement, which means the engineer can't be far away.

Quick as a flash I have the box open, wind a couple of paper clips round the power terminals at the back of the drive and return it to its packaging.

Scant seconds later a pin-striped service engineer arrives.

"Hi, I've come to replace the faulty drive," he buzzes.

I lead him over to the machine with the Fault Status on it and he goes to work.

"Will you be wanting me to have the system shut down?" I ask.

"Oh no, didn't you know, this machine is mirrored and hot-swappable. I just pull the cover off like this."

Clip!

"Loosen these two retaining screws, grab the new disk and ... Hey, did you open this bag?"

"No, it must have been sent like that."

"Oh. It was probably the office when they pre-formatted it."

He has now added 'lying to the client' to his list of sins. Tragic.

He continues: "I get the new drive in one hand, slide out the old drive like so ... place it on the ground like so ..."

Clunk!

"And slide in the new one like so ... and ..."

BANG!

The smell of ozone tells me that both the paper clips and the power supply are no more. Time to play dirty.

"What the hell happened?!" I demand.

"Er, it appears that the replacement drive was slightly faulty, and the extra load may have overworked your power supply."

"You blew up our machine!"

"No, no, it's only a power supply problem. All I need to do is slide the disk out like so, switch the power off and flick this switch to change over the power supplies. Now I switch her on, and ..."

Nothing happens.

"Nothing's happened!"

He hits me with the old engineer special: "That's interesting!"

"Yeah, that's what yesterday's engineer said when he blew the other power supply."

A network loading alarm shakes me awake in front of my terminal and I realise that it had all been a pleasant dream.

Ah well, I guess a network engineer's got to know his limitations.

The phone rings, I pick it up.

"I know what you're thinking ..."

3.12 The B.O.F.H. seeks sweet revenge ...

It's New Boss time yet again and, because it was caused by politics that I was uninvolved in, I'm worried. Doubly worrying - the official office grapevine (Sharon the ex-ex-boss's secretary) has it that the new boss is a Bean Counter!!!

A new boss is bad enough, as they all want to distinguish themselves by re-arranging the department hierarchy to transform it from a stunted money-soak into a glittering and applauded service division.

But a Bean Counter is bound to be much worse!

Bean Counters have a reputation for reshuffles that are worse than a half-blind, epileptic poker player in a disco.

To get to this position he must have:

got the CEO completely suckered with his glittering dream, or
found out that while the interior decorating of the CEO's office cost
the company tens of thousands of pounds, the redecorating of the CEO's
entire home only cost 47p.

Amazing what you find out when you throw a passive fax-receiver across the CEO's personal fax line ...

It's 9.15am on Monday morning, and the entire department waits with bated breath for the arrival of Gerry, the new commander in chief.

He emerges from the rear stairwell catching half the department lift-gazing - quite a change from the normal clock watching.

Straight away he calls a meeting to discuss his 'departmental economising'.

None of the staff really care, they've been moved around so much in the last couple of years that the walls are on wheels and the room directory is a blackboard. Not even X.500 can keep up.

The meeting trundles along with the usual nightmarish staff regroupings (PC support with the telephone operators; Unix operators with the tea lady, and so on).

Groups are renamed 'Knowledge Units', so everyone gets a warm feeling from the reshuffle shafting they just got.

The meeting takes a turn for the worse as the bifocals of death come to rest on me.

"Simon, as network engineer, you will be invaluable in your position on the help desk. Your co-operation will ensure network fault resolution times drop dramatically ..."

I don't think I need to mention that the chances of me accepting a position on the help desk are so slim that it would make an anorexic Ethiopian on a hunger strike look like Porky Pig.

On the way back to my office I realise that I can make the most of this by rising from the hell I've just been placed in, or by wasting my time in pointless revenge.

I let a coin decide by flipping it ...

Heads.

Revenge it is then.

A freak earthquake shocks the coin to 'Tails'.

Revenge it is then.

'Edge' was so close too.

The way is clear. Gerry has obviously spent a weekend formulating this and will shortly fire a salvo of memos both around the department and up to the Execs.

I dust off my Router Text-Change software (a simple piece of code that simply watches packets go by and occasionally introduces a spelling mistake or adds a zero to the end of a figure), make a few modifications and upload it to the network hardware. To be on the safe side, I upload the duplicator code as well.

Scant minutes later my workstation beeps as e-mail from the boss comes in. A memo confirming the decisions made at the meeting if I'm not mistaken. (Never am. Never was. Never will be.)

I don't need to open the message to know that the 'To:' line has been written with an inventive expletive sequence.

Two minutes later the phone rings. Caller ID returns: 'Big Guy'.

"What the hell's going on with the system?" The CEO growls.

"What do you mean?" I ask, caring and concerned.

"My printer's spewing the same memo over and over and I've been receiving repeated e-mail messages"

"That's not from Gerry is it?"

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, he's probably been playing around with his printer and mail client settings again. I'll sort it out post haste."

The CEO hangs up, and I drop the router out, so solving the problem. Round One to me, I think.

I would ring the Boss, but he appears to be talking to the CEO about something quite pressing at the moment. Perhaps later ...

3.13 The B.O.F.H. retaliates ...

It's a hot morning and I've forced the security windows open for air conditioning. This has the unfortunate side effect of illuminating a warning lamp on the security desk, but due to a CAD wiring design flaw that was never quite explained, there's only one lamp for the 204 windows on six floors, so it will take about an hour for security to find me.

In the meantime, the Boss has charged into my soon-to-be-ex-office because he noticed me chatting to the CEO this morning and wants to know what it was about ... After last-week's e-mail/print debacle, he's keeping a low profile until his master reshuffle produces the sweet fruit of victory. The Boss's command of small-talk doesn't even extend as far as weather, so it only takes him 10 seconds to get to the point.

"So what did the CEO want this morning?"

"The CEO?" I ask, playing dumb to the limit.

"OUR CEO!" he repeats a little harshly. "You were talking to him outside the building."

"Oh, that CEO," I say. "Well, he was worried that we didn't have sufficient higher-level redundancy."

"Really?" the boss exclaims, eyebrows in flight. "I didn't think he knew anything at all about networks".

"He doesn't," I reply smugly. "You're fired!"

"What are you talking about?" he demands

"Fired. You know, dismissed. Let Go. Terminated. Made redundant!"

"I don't believe you!" He sneers.

"Of course you don't. The CEO DID want to tell you himself, but he owed me a favour ..."

"He owed YOU a FAVOUR?"

"Yes, for bringing that Invoice to his attention".

"Invoice?"

"Yes, from you for those two big-screen TVs you had delivered to your home this morning, filed under 'enhanced communications equipment'."

"I didn't order any TVs!"

I carefully shuffle out some papers.

"So this isn't your signature?" I ask, pointing.

"N ... Well, I admit, it does bear a resemblance, bu ..."

"It should do, it took me a week and two of your souvenir airline pens to perfect!

The paper's even got your fingerprints on it!"

"It can't have! I've never seen it before in my life."

"So you didn't fill your laser printer with paper when it ran out yesterday?"

"I ..."

"That was silly wasn't it?"

"I can't bel ..."

"Believe it. But it's not that bad. If you'd trusted the digitised signature service, we would've had this conversation a week and two pens ago, so at least you bought yourself some time. That's one more week before your mortgage foreclosure notice arrives ..."

"You bastard!"

"In the flesh, the very same, on the job and tampering with your outstanding holiday leave! Oooh look! Isn't that security, looking for you?"

He backs away, straight through the open security windows and down two floors below.

Nothing like a couple of fractures to slow you down at work. Security is, of course, on the scene in less time than it takes to fully reconfigure a 10-slot WAN router over a 150 baud modem. (Not quick, in case you're wondering). The CEO is also present.

"What happened?" the CEO asks.

"Well," I say, "it's hard to say. He was babbling about some order and televisions and things. I don't like to say it, but I think the stress was getting to him. The suicide attempt was just a cry for help ..."

"Not a cry that's going to be answered by this company!" the CEO growls. "He's out of here!"

Good old CEO, loyal to the bitter end! And to think, only this morning he was as cheery as pie when we had that nice chat about his excellent choice of tailors.

They say I play a mean game of poker too.

3.14 The B.O.F.H. and the wheelchair ...

It's a strange Tuesday morning. Despite his unfortunate fall from the window, my Beancounter ex-boss apparently wangled (with menaces no doubt) a job back at Beancounter Central on the sixth floor.

Yesterday, electric-wheelchair-dependent, he initiated an asset audit of the entire department, down to the last router cable. An asset audit of the big stuff alone takes four people about a week to complete, so this is just bloody-

mindedness after his tragic misadventure with the roadside two weeks back. Some people just never learn ...

The asset audit is a potential problem. I'm not sure I want anyone finding out about my unique and quite lucrative asset-disposal policy ...

His previous position in our department has been temporarily assumed by one of the technical managers who's done this before. In fact, so many times before that he has two sets of business cards.

Temp-Boss rolls in at about 10am.

"Simon?"

I look up from my Ethernet monitor. "Yup?"

"Have you seen Gerry this morning?"

"Gerry?"

"Your last boss? You know, the one with half his body in plaster, strapped into a wheelchair?"

"Oh Gerry! No, not this morning."

"Strange. We called him about this audit thing and Accounts hasn't seen him."

"Really?"

"No. And apparently they called his home and he'd left at 7am."

"Mmm. Well, I've got no idea. Speaking of missing things, have you seen that SNMP-managed antenna servo set and the Cell-Phone-based SNMP link box?"

He frowns for a bit. "... No."

He thinks for a bit "...What was it for?"

"Well, together we were going to use them to control the direction and altitude of our satlink antenna."

He thinks for another minute. "You haven't!"

"Haven't what?" I ask innocently, secretly surprised at this guy's technical competence and sheer vision.

"Lost them!?"

Once more my faith in the system is restored. Had he said, "SNMP-managed Gerry's wheelchair," I would've had a serious ethical crisis on my hands.

"No no," I say. "I'm sure they're around here. I was just configuring them yesterday."

"Oh."

Topic ended, he looks around for something to fill in the day.

"New game?" he asks, pointing at my laptop complete with spanking new modem ...

"New game? OH! Yes, new game. Very new. A day old. Only started playing this morning."

"What do you do?"

"Well, the object is to manoeuvre the, er, robot through the streets of what looks like Cornwall."

"That's it?"

"Uh huh."

"Not much of a game, is it?"

"I don't know about that. I get a measure of satisfaction out of it. I've been playing since 7am this morning. Especially satisfying when I put it through one of those automatic car washes three times ..."

"Oh yeah! OK, mind if I have a go?"

"Be my guest!"

Five seconds later ...

"Woopsy."

"What happened?"

"Ah, I wasn't used to the controls, I drove it down that manhole thingy and it's disappeared. How do you get a new man?"

"Appoint another accountant as boss?" I suggest, removing the cotton wool from his clouded brain.

His eyes widen slightly as my copious stack of clues adds up in his grey matter.

"You didn't!"

"No. You did. I just watched. 'Witness for the prosecution', you could say."

"But I thought ... You bastard!"

"Don't worry" I say. "They're fairly good about grievous bodily harm these days. You'll be eligible for parole in two or three years as a first offence, assuming it's your first offence. Oh - and only if he lives, of course."

He wastes several lungfulls of perfectly good air burbling on about department loyalty, and so on. I mentally switch off for a bit till the droning stops. He finally notices.

"OK, what do you want?"

"Two new routers, a back-up FDDI hub, and full ISDN to my home, for testing purposes."

"I see ... OK."

"Excellent. Sign here."

"But it's a blank order form!"

"That manhole did look rather deep didn't it ..."

He signs, I smile benignly, he leaves.

Networking is a funny old world ...

3.15 The B.O.F.H. spreads peace and good will ...

The season of goodwill is upon us once again, and the endless round of Christmas festivities is just about to start. Gerry, the ex-boss from beancounter control was pulled out of the manhole with only minor injuries to the SNMP servo set attached to the wheelchair. Unfortunately, the casing was slightly damaged by the soapy water from the carwash, but nothing too serious.

I sit back in my armchair, and think about informing all users that they must log-out for vital maintenance work, so Systems can settle down to a serious game of network DOOM II.

I think again, and just finish rebooting the server and changing the log-in script when the phone rings. No caller id shows up. Bad news. I have all the office, mobile and home numbers logged on call-line identification. I pick up the phone.

"Start talking."

"Simon, Gerry here."

"Hi Gerry," I say, matter of fact.

"You won't get away with this you know. I know you remote-controlled my wheelchair. You really are a complete and utter bastard."

Now what's the point of calling THE Bastard Operator From Hell a bastard. I mean, what does he expect? This conversation is going nowhere. "Stop talking," I say, and place the telephone back gently on the desk. Short but sweet. I like that.

I record the number Gerry rang from on the database. It's the pay phone at the company's BUPA hospital. Some people just never, ever learn ... I get to work. Christmas is such a good time for dabbling in office politics.

I dig out the automatic phone log on the boss's mobile, and do a quick search for 'I'm sorry darling, but that's the day of the office party'. It's amazing what CTI technology can do nowadays.

I dive into the e-mail and write a simple little rules-based filter. I divert the 'to everyone' memo from office services about the Christmas party straight to me.

Back to Doom II and happiness. Later in the afternoon, I get the e-mail. Office services are sending out a request for Christmas party suggestions. How good of them. The venues are a boat trip or a barn dance on the 14th. What are these people on?

I check Sharon's (the boss's secretary) personal organiser. So far so good. I send the e-mail on, and all the punters have their vote for their venue of choice. How democratic.

The e-mails come back to me. It appears the majority want the boat trip on the 14th. I add up my version of the totals for office services automatically - I'm helpful like that.

Before forwarding to office services, I also add a little note to say that I'd had a call from Gerry, and thought it would be a seasonal gesture to club together and buy him some flowers, champagne, chocolates, and maybe even arrange for him to get a chauffeur driven limo to take him back to the party - presuming the doctors had finished operating.

I add that I'd prefer it if office services could do the running on this one for me. It's so vulgar to display your charity. Charity suffereth long and is kind, and all that ... Office services duly receives my helpful e-mail and announces the decision on the Christmas party. They've raised a great deal of money for Gerry, and the venue is to be the barn dance - but as many people unexpectedly can't make the 14th, the date is now the 13th. Unlucky for some.

I wait 10 minutes. Right on call, the boss comes in very pale and tongue-tied. I help him out.

"Problem, guv?"

"Sort of ..."

He pretends to hide the serious nature of the situation. I'd seen how much he'd had to put on his Amex card so that poor Sharon could stay in a luxury hotel in the Mambo King suite on the 14th instead of braving a taxi home. I also knew just how difficult it was to arrange the office party for the same night as his wife's night out with the girls. I almost feel sorry for him, but recover immediately.

"I heard the news. I couldn't believe it either. A barn dance. Still, at least Gerry will be happy."

"Gerry ...?" growls the boss.

"Yes. It was his idea. He didn't want to miss out on the party, so he's ordered a chauffeur-driven limo to take him there on the 13th. And of course, he can join in on the barn dancing from his wheelchair, unlike a traditional disco."

"Chauffeur-driven limo?" exclaims the boss, now back on fine form with the blood running to his cheeks. "I'll kill him."

"No need to do that. The doctors are already on the case."

I hand him the BUPA bill, along with other assorted receipts for champagne, chocolates, flowers and one very, very large telephone bill, which helpfully lists all the 0898 numbers Gerry has called from his hospital bed, as well as the police report citing him for careless use of a wheelchair.

The boss goes through the receipts and says the fateful words. "He's fired."

"But you can't fire a hospitalised man," pushing him that little bit further.

"Just bloody well watch me," says the boss resuming command. "And another thing, can you say there has been a

systems error and that we are going back to the boat trip on the 14th. You'll know how to fix it won't you."

No problems. I think I can sort it.

3.16 The B.O.F.H. sees in the New Year ...

It's a very sad time of the year. Having spent the Christmas period in the office, neatly combining the filling in of a timesheet liberally scattered with numbers in the 'overtime' column with the avoidance of certain members of the family, it's terribly irritating to see all these hung-over employees dragging themselves miserably back into the office with the sole intention of breaking my network.

You see, during the shutdown period I received not one single support call, confirming my theory that my network is indeed perfect, and that all faults are user-inflicted.

It would seem from the system logs that I wasn't the only one in over Christmas: looks like the head of engineering has been around, faxing out dozens of orders for bits and bobs to put in the new shake-test line they're hurrying to build down in Quality Assurance.

The gossip around the office, though, is that the CEO is really mad - the line was meant to be running in time for the New Year, and from all accounts, it's nowhere near completed.

The most interesting snippet from the network fax log is that the software patch I installed on the server seems to have kicked in for at least one outgoing call ...

It's an entertaining little patch, and fixes the most common problem with all networked fax systems around the world - the fact that they're terribly dull.

The update in question is simple, yet brilliant: the network manager specifies search and replace filters for outgoing messages, which can brighten up messages immensely if used properly. You can even program it to divert faxes to a different country according to your own parameters ...

The phone rings.

"Good morning, you're the first caller of the year, how can I help you?" (Sometimes, my charm surprises even myself)

"Chief engineer here. Is the fax system working?"

"Certainly is, in fact, I've just been checking it a moment or two ago. Why? Are you having problems?"

"Yes. I ordered some kit for the new QA line before the break, but the supplier reckons the fax never arrived. Can you check it out for me? I sent it on December the 22nd, and it claimed to get there OK. The purchase order number is PE4456."

A quick 'grep' on the fax log turns up the fax in question.

"Well, it's here in the system log, and it certainly went OK. Quantity 48, product description 'Vibrator (three-phase, heavy-duty)'. Perhaps your supplier is trying it on."

"Yes, that's probably right. Many thanks."

"You're welcome".

I wonder ...

The phone rings. CLI says it's Goods Inwards.

"Machine room."

"Goods Inwards here. We have a delivery with no contact name. The supplier says it was ordered by fax - can you find out who sent the order with that fancy gadget of yours?"

"Sure, no problem. What's the order number?"

"PE4456."

"Let's see ... Yes, that was ordered on the 22nd of last month, by the head of engineering."

"Thanks mate."

I'm sure I hear sniggering as the phone is put down.

Time, and several levels of Doom III (beta, naturally) pass uneventfully before there's a knock at the door. Deftly switching Doom to 'Boss Mode', I motion the chief engineer to enter.

"Something's wrong with your fax system," he blurts.

"Really? How come?"

"You know that fax I mentioned? I just tried to re-send it, but it hasn't got there."

"Well, let's test the system."

I compose a quick fax on my PC, plug one of the old fax machines I've got lying in the corner into a spare line, and click 'send'. The machine springs into life, faithfully reproducing the test message.

Well, it would, wouldn't it - I didn't put the word 'vibrator' in my message ... so it didn't get redirected to Siggis Sex Emporium in Rotterdam ...

"There you go," I proudly exclaim to my spanner-wielding colleague. "Nothing wrong with that. You'll have to tell your suppliers that their machine is on the blink."

"Oh well, thanks for checking."

Serves him right for doubting my systems.

The phone rings again.

"Machine room, BOFH speaking."

"CEO here. Tell me, have you seen Bradshaw from engineering? They tell me he was on his way to see you about a system problem."

"Yes, he just walked out of the door. Why?"

"Oh, I'm just wondering why Goods Inwards have brought me a box containing four dozen three-speed sex aids, as ordered by our engineering friend from Siggis Sex Emporium in Rotterdam. Don't suppose you can shed any light?"

"Well, I can certainly go through the fax log for you - it's all here in black and white ..."

3.17 The B.O.F.H. has an appraisal ...

It's a nippy afternoon when I get to work to find an e-mail memo indicating that the computer has randomly selected me for a supervisor appraisal scheme. My supervisor is especially surprised because he distinctly remembers having my name removed from the list. "Random" can be such a misleading word.

Late in the afternoon I get to the interview with one of the senior execs and a Mr Grey (by name and nature) from a staffing resource company. The interview kicks off with:

"Simon, I believe you're aware of the purpose of this interview?" Grey smarms.

"Yes, where you discover that my supervisor ALMOST has the technical competence to remember his phone number if prompted eleven times."

"I don't think it's quite that bad" Grey chuckles..

The exec looks slightly uncomfortable.

"His HOME number. His office number is 4 prompts. That's only an extension."

"Yes. Well, he must be technically competent to be in this position!"

"Or be related to the CEO or the CEO's wife. Or plays golf at the same club. Or knows someone who plays golf at the same club. Or knows what a golf club looks like ..."

"I take it your opinion of your supervisor isn't particularly high?"

"No."

Exec looks distinctly uncomfortable now.

"For what reasons?"

"Well, let's be honest. Prior to this position, my supervisor paper-shuffled in a large factory known for its baked beans"

"I see. His network experience?"

"..resulted from him being the CEO's wife's second cousin" I reply.

"Ah"

"In all honesty, the guy couldn't examine a litter and find a runt, let alone a network. When I told him we should consider getting ATM in the Computer Room he ordered a new Barclaycard. I told him we had an internet firewall and he asked about extinguishers to go with it."

"I see. Perhaps his knowledge is more the planning field, as expected from a supervisor?"

"Possibly. Still I wonder why, when I suggested a heavier move to fibre he thanked me but said he was quite regular as it was."

"Ah. Well, what do YOU expect from someone in that position?" Grey asks

"The ability to add, subtract, read and write without having to stick his tongue out. The sense to sign his name to everything I put in front of him no matter how controversial it might appear"

"So you envisage that he is nothing more than a 'yes man'."

"Yes."

"Well, We'll perhaps agree to disagree on that one. Surely you can't expect him to sign anything without a thorough examination; after all, a delay of a few days is not likely to inconvenience anyone. As to your relationship, whilst it seems apparent that your supervisor is not optimum for the position, your opinion seems stunted and mostly reprehensible"

"Hmmm." I say, feigning concerned thought, "I see that we've probably reached an impasse" then I get up and leave.

On the way out I hear Exec warning Grey not to use the lifts or get into any computer controlled access areas. For that he shall be punished ...

....

I'm watching the closed-circuit-tv at 6:17pm when a shadow detaches itself from the others and breaks for the doors ...

A quick >clickety< >click< on the keyboard and the revolving door halts mid-spin as the security alarms activate.

I wander downstairs 20 minutes later as if to exit via the doors. A crowd has gathered to watch security attempt to free Grey from inside the door. I smile benignly as Grey catches my gaze.

"DON'T WORRY" I shout "WE CAN ALWAYS BREAK THE GLASS TO GET YOU OUT!"

"Armour Glass" a guard chips in. "Have to put a car into it to break it - wouldn't do him much good"

"There's always the emergency override" I add helpfully

"Something went wrong. The whole panel's dead"

"Really?" I say, looking at Grey. "Well, the maintenance contract was part of the budget request MY SUPERVISOR REFUSED TO SIGN THIS AFTERNOON. STILL A DELAY OF A FEW DAYS IS NOT LIKELY TO INCONVE-

NIENCE ANYONE. ”

The guard mumbles. ”We thought if we cut the wires to the locking plate it would release”

”If it were that simple any burglar could get in.” I say, ”NOW IT’S ON AN INTERNAL INDEPENDENT BATTERY. TAKES 48 HOURS TO DISCHARGE!”

”What can we do?” the guard asks.

”Well, Taco Shells and cheese slices sound like a good idea”

”?”

”To slide under the door to him. He’s got to eat! I just hope he’s BEEN TO THE TOILET RECENTLY. WOULD HATE TO SPEND 48 HOURS LOCKED IN A GLASS CABINET WITH FULL EXPOSURE TO THE STREET AND ONLY MY BRIEFCASE AT MY ’CONVENIENCE!”

Life can be so cruel especially when you’re trying not to think about things ...

3.18 The B.O.F.H. educates a PFY ...

It’s a quiet Monday morning as I wander into my office and make for my desk, only to discover its pristine surface has been taken over by what can only be described as a Pimple-Faced-Youth.

”Hi!”, the PFY gasps ”, I’m the new network trainee you organised last week”

Instead of stopping, I drop my case and about-face to the Boss’s office. He informs me in no uncertain terms that the salary review he suffered after my report to the supervisor review last week has in no way contributed to what might appear to the casual observer as a vendetta. Pure coincidence.

He also informs me that the PFY is not only here to stay (at his appointment), but might even stay longer than myself. I’m to train him to the point of absolute confidence ...

Sadly, there’s only room in my office for one, but that can wait.

...

”I’ve been answering the phones while you were away!”, PFY cries as I return, brandishing a huge wadge of ”While you were out” messages.

I decide to give every impression of complying with the boss’s wishes.

”OK, file them then look at this”, I say, switching on the network monitor.

”Where should I file them?”

”The filing cabinet”, I say.

”But I can’t see a ...”

”The round one ...”

”... on the floor ...”

”... IN THE CORNER !!”

”One was important!”, he gasps.

”This is networking, they’re all important. Now, it’s imperative to be able to recognise important users when they phone”.

”Oh. How do I do that?”

”You don’t, it was a joke. This is networking, remember? They take what they get and are happy with it or they get an ’upgrade’ to a 150 baud modem on an unfiltered power supply”.

"How've you managed to stay here?"

"Hmm. A clever mix of superior intelligence, indispensibility and ruthless blackmail where required. Hasn't failed me yet. Now, I'll wager my next pay cheque that 90 per cent of those complaints you took this morning were from the payments department - am I right?"

"Yes! Is their network faulty?"

"No, it's more of a protocol problem".

"What, protocol as in TCP/IP and stuff?"

"No, more like protocol as in 'When Simon asks to be reimbursed for some technical manuals, reimburse him straight away'. True, it's mostly undocumented, but around here it's pretty much a defacto standard".

"So what do we do about the errors?"

"Nothing. We mention that it's a network error we haven't seen before that's probably described in a technical manual somewhere, then we implement the 'never-fail network error resolution technique'".

"What's that?"

"We solve all problems with a 'Router Reset'"

"I don't understand ..."

"Simplicity itself!! Someone calls up with a 'networking' problem; you go and power-cycle their router. Then you wander round their department and say that you simply had to do it because the person concerned had an urgent problem that couldn't wait. You'd be amazed at the departmental hostility you can generate in just one week. If you really want to stir things up, do it 10 minutes prior to lunchtime - no-one saves their work before then so applications hang and people lose everything".

"What happens then?"

"We're 'just doing our job', of course! But up in the departments it becomes a demilitarised zone! Things start disappearing, lunches start getting doses of cayenne pepper, then, slowly but surely, the calls stop. If someone has an outage, they won't dare call us, they call the helpdesk."

"And what do they do about the errors?"

"They write out a 'while you were out' message".

"And then?"

"Then they pass them on to us".

"And we ..."

"FILE THEM!"

"What do we do for the rest of the time?"

"Monitor how the network is REALLY working, where bottlenecks are occurring, and also plan for upgrades in the next budget round"

"Really?"

"Don't be stupid. You any good at Immortal Kombat?"

"I'm OK.."

"Right, doubles. Winner does the next reset, loser buys the doughnuts".

It's a tough life at the top, but life is what you make it ...

3.19 The B.O.F.H. almost meets his match ...

Things seem to be working out OK with my pimply-faced-youth trainee, surprisingly enough. He's keen to please, but I'll cure that in a couple of weeks after exposure to some of the more demanding clients ...

Speaking of exposure and clients, one of our more annoying ones resigned recently after some rather personal images were left in the memory of the "loaner" digital camera. It's all very strange too, as the erase function was working perfectly when I 'serviced' the camera a week ago. The incident would've been less severe had the finder of the images not downloaded one into the Windows Start-up Screen of everyone on his floor. The victim claimed in his defence, of course, that the image had been touched up, but consensus of opinion was that it wasn't the image that was getting that treatment. Dirty sod.

PFY is concerned, and obviously needs counselling about it.

"What's the problem?", I ask.

"Well, it's just that I don't understand how the image could have got onto all those PCs".

"I see. I guess someone managed to break into the application server and forced it to upload it to certain desktops".

"But the server is protected by a password and so is the version control program, so how did they get in?"

"Someone must have found out the passwords", I reply, waiting for the inevitable.

"But only you and I know the passwords, and I only found out yesterday".

"Did you write the passwords down?"

"Well yes, but they're locked in my drawer".

I shake my head sadly. "And who has keys to your drawer?", I ask.

"Just you and me".

"And did you do it?"

"No".

"Then, by a process of elimination, it must have been me that opened your drawer, read your passwords and logged into the server as you".

"You did it?!"

"Of course. You don't think anyone else in the department could, do you? Hell, the only other person with overriding access is the system manager, and he's so slow he needs a tow-rope!"

"Why did you do it?"

"Because you needed to learn the value of security. I'm sure that piece of knowledge will serve you well in your next job which will probably start sometime after tomorrow".

"B..b..b"

"No use butting".

"But, I was going to say that surely you're not going to make me tell Uncle Brian this was my fault, are you?"

Warning Bells On!

"Uncle Brian?"

"Uncle Brian, you know, on the 6th floor. The big office with the leather furniture. I'd hate to disagree with your report to the CEO".

UNCLE Brian ... Uncle Brian, the CEO. I should have known that this wasn't a run-of-the-mill shafting. This was big-time.

"Well, perhaps it's best to put it down to some outside hacker", I say, in what I believe to be a kindly manner.

"Or some inside hacker ...".

PFY smiles, looking menacing.

The sneaky bastard! Perhaps he has potential after all!

"... like our Boss", he adds, letting me off the hook entirely.

There but for the grace of god ...

"OK", I say, seizing the opportunity before he can realise the enormous potential of blackmail. "You tell Uncle Brian and I'll slip your keys into the top desk of his drawer".

"Done!"

Ten minutes later we watch on with interest and sugary donuts as yet another boss is escorted from the hallowed halls of hell.

"You realise he was the one that got you this job", I say.

"Yeah, but no point in being sentimental", he replies.

Definite Potential.

"Right, what shall we do now?" he asks, keen to learn.

"Well, I think it's about time we pull the plug on a remote site, then phone them to tell them it's because the labels on their EPROMs have expired and they need to remove them in a well-lit area, like some bright sunshine .".

"Won't that ...?"

"Yup."

"Let's do it".

You can't PAY for a job like this ...

3.20 The B.O.F.H., the user and the printer ...

It's a pleasantly cool morning as I lie back in my armchair and plot the next surprise in the users' lives. Well, it's pleasantly cool for me, anyway - due to a tragic error in the air conditioning system, every other room in the building is alternating between temperatures more normally associated with the arctic and the tropics.

Some of the brighter staff tried jamming the stairwell doors open until a fire alarm was strangely triggered there a couple of times in succession, and security arrived to ensure that their smoke-stop capability wasn't being impaired. It's for their own good.

Because of all this activity my room, which is normally very busy at this point in the publicity year, is fairly quiet right now. Amazingly, my pimply-faced trainee has turned out to be a fiend with a scarcely human face. He's managed to 'persuade' the personnel manager to send him on a 'First principles of management' course... in Paris. Not bad for a non-manager and a newcomer - could it have been something to do with the e-mail filter he placed in the human resources department? Tut, tut - all those young secretaries.

I'm thinking that my whole day will pass by peacefully, without being disturbed by pointless queries. Touch wood.

Too late, the phone rings. It's a user.

"Hi, I'm writing this program to poll our printer to see if ...". I hang up.

It rings again: "Hi, I'm writing ...". I hang up.

Once more it rings: "Hi, I ...". I hang up.

The learning curve of these people is so near to horizontal you could play bowls on it, so I leave the phone off the hook. Ten minutes later the geek's knocking on my door. I just have time to replace the phone on the hook before he comes in.

"Hi, I was trying to ring you but your phone must be broken ...".

I point at the "Console of Hell" and shake my head. "It's the console," I say quietly. "It never breaks."

"Oh, well, then it ..."

"Your phone", I continue, "has a life expectancy of three to five years, but this will be here on judgement day. It'll still be taking calls from dumb users, too".

Geek is momentarily stumped. He manages to recollect his thoughts. The phone rings. "See what I mean?", I say, lifting the receiver.

"My PC's crashed again. It does it every time I try to access my network disk", a user sobs dejectedly.

"Ah," I say, flicking up today's excuse on the calendar. "That'll be TRANSIENT NODE DUPLICATION."

"Huh?"

"Well, your machine's crashing because it's seeing duplicate files on the network file server and on your machine".

"Oh. What do I do?"

"Well, your best bet is to just login to the file server and do a remove-rename."

"Oh. How?"

"Do an rm -rf. Which means remove minus rename files. Any non-duplicates won't be renamed."

"Oh. OK, thanks".

"That's OK," I hang up. Geek is still here. "I'm writing a program ...", he retries.

"... to poll the printers", I finish.

"Yes".

"MY printers", I state.

"Ah ... yes".

"Why?"

"Well, I thought that I could poll them every second to see what jobs they were printing and how fast their throughput was".

"Why?"

"To see if there are any network bottlenecks ..."

"Like, for example, a bottleneck caused by a printer having to respond to an 'intelligent' poll once every second?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that being a problem".

"No, I didn't think you had", I say, changing the stairwell temperature to zero and cranking up the humidity. "But you've been running your program on the system already, haven't you?"

"Well, maybe once or twice".

"No, more like ..." (I count the red dots showing on the print queue monitor) "17 times by my count. You talk to a printer with a poorly parameterised SNMP message, it doesn't answer you, so you go and run it again on a different printer".

"I ... well, I might have done ..."

"Now MY problem is this: who should I choose to pass YOUR problem on to? Maybe my borderline psychotic

trainee, who has been taught to hate unnecessary traffic more than he hates re-runs of Emmerdale Farm? Or perhaps to the programmers who hate cowboys more than they hate working when the pub's open? I tell you what, I'll ask them both".

He's made it out of the room and is planning that six-month holiday in Spain before I've even managed to lift the phone off the hook.

I watch the monitor as he rockets to the stairs to make clean his getaway. Sadly, an amount of condensation has built up on the lino floors of the now chilly stairwell and he slips, bumps and rolls down a couple of floors on his way out of the building, knocking down a group of salivating bean-counters hungry to get back to their sums.

As he limps his way out of the building a thought occurs to me: you just can't plan job satisfaction like this. Well, I guess you can really ...

3.21 The B.O.F.H. and the salesman ...

So I'm sitting in the office when I get a call from a salesman trying to flog me some ATM kit. He got my name from one of those magazine 'free subscription' forms a couple of months ago, which contains information inaccurate by a factor of 10, (except the 'Spending Authority' which I inflated by a factor of 100). A little white lie never hurt anyone and periodically dispels the rumour that there's no such thing as a free lunch.

I mentally switch to junket-mode, and tell him it's the technical manager he wants to speak to and can he hold. Two seconds later he's talking to my party-stopping imitation of one of our better-known technical managers.

"I'd like to come and meet with you to discuss a future-proofed network solution, if that's at all possible", he gushes.

The last thing I want him to do is come to the office and ask around for "the technical manager", so I go for the quick junket.

"Well," I say, "I'm a little tied up with some equipment reviews this week".

He's pausing a little too long for my liking. This probably means he isn't fully committed to crowbarring open the expense account.

I turn up the heat a little.

"Then I've a budgeting meeting next week to earmark spending in the next quarter, so I'll be busy preparing for that as well".

He smells dosh and goes for it.

"Tell you what - how about meeting for lunch - you've got to eat, right? No obligation, I'll just outline our products and I'm sure you'll see the advantages for yourself".

"Well ...", I stall.

"Luigi's, 12 on Thursday?"

"I, ah ...", I burble, playing hard-to-bribe.

"OK, I'll make the reservations", he closes, like a true sales champ.

I get into our electronic meeting planner with the manager's password (his wife's name - I mean, if they're not going to try to be secure ...) and make the entry for Luigi's. I make sure to select 'Hide Appts' option, as three can be a crowd.

Thursday rolls around and I show up at the bar at 11.30am and work my way through 'imported spirits' while the tab's open. By the time the sales guy gets there, I am, as we in the Ethernet trade say, in a promiscuous mode. I will buy anything. Or at least I would if I had any money. Which I don't. However, I do have several of the manager's business cards and a fairly acceptable version of his signature down pat.

The next three hours whirl by as I look through several catalogues of shiny, beta-tested, 'top-of-the-line' hardware,

drooling as only a technical manager can, and dropping comments like: "nice lights". By about 3pm I feel it's time for the stress period, so I tell him that there is no networking budget for the year as I spent it all in advance last year.

He starts crying in an attempt to make me feel guilty. I pretend to fold and tell him to order me a truckload of goods which I'll fake as last year's order.

"Will it work?", he sniffs.

"Of course ...", I say. "Now, you go and clean up, you're a little bit of a mess".

He exits for the bathroom, and I quickly check his wallet. There's about 70, so I remove about 40 of it - I don't want to leave him totally broke. While I'm at it, I remove his last payment method by jiggling my trusty permanent magnet around the magstripe on his credit cards, then make my way to the bar to order another drink.

I talk to the barman till the sales guy returns to the table.

"Well", I say. "I have to get back to the office".

He eyes me suspiciously.

"Tell you what", I say. "How about I sign an order form and you can fill it in back at your office?"

A salesman's dream.

Just time to whizz through the manager's signature, pocket the dosh and I'm halfway back to work as the police roar by on their way to Luigi's.

Obviously their treatment of defaulting clients hasn't changed recently. With any luck, it'll just be the one kneecap - unless, of course, the chef's throwing arm is back in ...

3.22 The B.O.F.H., the boss and the bribe ...

It's a quiet morning recording calls to the medical officer when I get a call from reception asking where I want some new equipment delivered.

It takes me a couple of seconds to remember the meeting with the salesman in Luigi's and a few more seconds to contemplate the talking necessary to get the ATM guy out of Luigi's when he didn't have any money. Mind you, his two front teeth were gold-capped, so perhaps they worked something out. Or possibly pried something out ...

This probably means that my boss now owns some extremely dodgy hardware that's likely to destroy anything it's placed into.

As I have no idea what's been ordered, I ask them to send it all up to the boss.

"There's quite a lot of it ...", security informs me.

So it was both teeth then ...

"... would take up the whole of the lift, I'd guess".

And perhaps some jewellery ... retrieved post-amputation ...

I tell them to send, then prepare to meet my boss's doom.

Five minutes later the goods lift wheezes up with hundreds of shiny boxes of various sizes.

The boss looks confused. With a budget that would run to a couple of packets of networked crisps, he's a little concerned by the arrival of lots of shiny new kit. Especially as he's the only one with spending authority.

I wait till he gets the invoice with attached order. From his expression he has, as we in the trade say, rapidly downloaded some brownware.

"There must be some mistake!", he burbles, just as a particularly troublesome auditor enters, inventory register in hand.

"This the new stuff?", he asks.

"Apparently so," I say. "But haven't we run out of money?"

"We have!" the boss bleats.

"Then why", I ask, pointing to 'his' signature, "did you order it?"

"I didn't!" he backpedals, at 28.8bps [backpedals per second].

A crowd has gathered, so I appeal for calm. "And after you turned down the request for better air conditioning too!"

Mumbles of dissent indicate the level of support the boss can expect at this stage. (A large number multiplied by nil.) This hostile audience isn't going to be receptive to denials, especially after the past years' weather extremes.

His razor-sharp vision spots a saving straw: "hey! this order is six months old. I wasn't even here then!", he cries. "Pre-dating orders to escape the Inventory System!", I cry.

Brown-nosing auditor's eyes light up like a Christmas tree as he contemplates the kudos from discovering this fraud.

"But ... I ...", the boss pleads.

I spot a box and wind the heat up a little.

"Hmmm. ATM cards for XT compatibles. How useful".

The dissent grows in volume. The boss gives up all pretence of innocence and tries for a plea bargain.

"We have a lot of legacy equipment!", he gasps.

"The card could run DOS faster!"

He's completely cornered with no escape. I know it, he knows it. The staff know it.

"What on earth is that?", I ask, pointing at the back of the goods lift.

The boss rushes in, hoping to disguise further implication.

"What?", he asks as I catch up.

"Oh nothing, just all this. The auditor, the staff, the useless kit. Everything. It's not good for a career man you know".

"But I ..."

"I mean when your boss finds out about this ..."

With his vocabulary bucket empty, the boss just stands there.

"Unless, of course, it were to all just simply go away ..."

A gleam of hope registers.

"Away?"

"Like a bad dream".

"How?"

"Well, you give me the invoice then sign this Course Approval Form".

He examines the form:

"But it's a two week course in the States on basic networking. You know all that stuff!"

"Then I'll have lots of time to revise, won't I?"

"But ..."

"Oh. Isn't that a Commodore 64 ATM card?"

"All right, all right!"

He autographs my form and we exit. I put all the kit back into the lift, walk back to my room and give reception a ring.

"Something's wrong with the lift", I say, as I use its service console to wind the acceleration way past the red line.

Popping back to the lift, I see that the auditor is not letting go on this one.

"You think that's bad", I say. "You should see everything at reception!"

The emergency stop goes off with a click as he goes to investigate.

Exactly 23 seconds later the building resounds with the impact of a fully laden goods lift striking the bottom of Basement Two at high speed.

As the ambulance siren approaches, I start looking through travel brochures for good places in the States to do my "revision" and ring corporate insurance about all that top-of-the-line equipment that just got destroyed ...

3.23 The B.O.F.H. and the ioniser ...

I'm sitting in my office listening to my personal stereo when a co-'worker' from a few offices along pops into my doorway.

"Mmm?" I say, looking up.

"Ah. Could you wind your stereo down a couple of decibels - I'm trying to get some work done and it's difficult to concentrate."

Without thinking, I reach for my soldering iron and flick it to 'paint-strip'. I pause mid-'scorched earth policy' and reconsider. He's new, he deserves a chance.

"Sorry", I say, seeing what it feels like, while turning the volume from 11 to 2.

He wanders off happily to the astonishment of the others in the department who have already rung personnel to advise them of the vacancy.

The Boss pops in to make sure that I'm really in the office and has a look around. As he exits I notice a hint of a smile on his face.

Five minutes later he's back asking me to help him install the back-up program on his laptop. For some reason, instead of copying the DELETE.EXE file to BACKUP.EXE I actually load the backup software ...

Something's wrong, I'm sure of it now. I call my fiend-like pimply-faced young assistant over and ask him how he is. He tells me that today he's solved a couple of users' problems and helped repatch an accountant's machine after a move.

Now I'm worried. Something's definitely wrong! He used the 'a' word (rather than bean-counter).

The next day dawns and I start out with a couple of random telephone repatches, but my heart's not in it. By mid-afternoon I've patched them back and apologised for the inconvenience. The boss is still smiling.

I've been careful and not eaten anything, so it's something else. Something insidious. After a long battle with my conscience, I look into the recent purchases authorised by the boss, telling myself I'm doing it to check that all the orders total-up properly.

I find what I think I'm looking for in the form of 10 'ultra-positive' ionisers recently installed into the air conditioning system. I can't yet bring myself to do anything about it, so I stand in the printer room, air-conditioning off and laser printers full-on. Half an hour later I'm almost normal. I break for home to make my plans.

Next morning I rise early and slip into work unnoticed in half-scuba paraphernalia.

First stop, the air conditioning tower on the roof. I locate the offending units and reprogram them repeatedly with a claw hammer.

Next stop, the CEO's office with a similar ioniser of my own design. I hide it away then wander down to the telephone operator's room, divert her line directly to the CEO, then lock-out her console.

Down in the comms room I fashion a trip-wire out of the power cables to the main database applications and network servers. Back in my office, windows open, I await the start of work. Nothing happens till 9:45 when the CEO, after 15 minutes of phone calls and exposure to my positive ion generator, calls the boss. I watch and call him immediately the boss hangs up.

"THIS IS NOT THE OPERATOR!" he shouts.

"Yes sir, I know that", I say, all kindness and understanding. "I just noticed that your phone seems to be receiving all the calls for the telephone operator and her console appears to be locked. She's been acting a bit strangely the last couple of days - well, as a matter of fact we all have I suppose. Now I'll pop into the comms ..."

The boss, in panic mode, sweeps through my room and rams the comms door open, ripping the power cables from the servers.

I flip a quick cheesy grin at the boss as he looks in horror at what he's just done.

"Home Team ONE, Your Future Job Prospects, NIL", I call out with my finger on the mute button. "Oh dear", I utter into the unmuted phone. "The boss has just had a little accident ..."

3.24 The B.O.F.H. and the cruise control ...

I'm in the workshop when the boss comes in with a perplexed look on his face. Discarding the thought that he might have found a higher meaning to life than taking the world record for impersonating a paper-weight, I decide to see what's on his mind.

"Is there a problem?" I ask, appearing concerned with his welfare.

"Well ... no. No problem. Just having some trouble with my car as it happens".

"The royal blue monster in the basement? Not starting then?" I prompt.

"No, no, starts well, runs well. Too well in fact. That's the problem".

Knowing what's coming, I prompt yet again. "Too Well?"

"I got another speeding ticket this morning".

"Really? How many's that in total then?"

"Three. But the strange thing is, the car was on Cruise Control and well under the speed limit. Yet when I looked at the speedo later on, I was way over the limit".

"Really?"

"Yes. But the really strange thing is that the radar detector noticed nothing".

"Well, the police do switch bands from time to time to defeat the detectors", I say, trying to ease his curiosity.

"But I've only had it a week! If I didn't know better, I'd swear the car picks the worst time to accelerate. As if cruise control and the radar detector are working in cahoots!"

"Out of the mouths of babes ..." I mutter.

"Pardon?"

"I said, the police must be hiding out of the way".

"Oh".

He wanders off contemplating life without a licence while I pop down to the basement and swap my recently created radar peripheral into the pimply-faced-youth's car. He's been getting complacent recently, so it'll do him good to get

a small reminder of what life on the edge means.

With that little trick nicely transferred to the next recipient, I head back to the lift. I am suddenly assailed by twin-tone air horns at close proximity. Behind me, a sporty red convertible and owner are impatiently awaiting my progress. The name on the car park plaque is transferred to long-term memory in an instant.

Back in the office, I realise I've been neglecting the education of the PFY and decide to rectify this forthwith. I recount to the PFY the events in the basement concerning the rather too impatient sales manager in the sporty convertible.

"Shall we disconnect his line?" The PFY asks, keenly interested.

"No, no", I reply. "This is a special case calling for a special measure. Grab that book over there".

"The one with the metal covers?"

"That's the one".

He grabs the book, lifts it and falls to the floor. Seconds later he regains consciousness.

"What happened?" he asks in a daze.

"The oldest trick in the book. 'Which book?' you ask ... the Bastard Operator Guide. The Tome of Hell".

"But what happened?"

"When you picked the book up, the microswitch in the basement activated the chunky inverter which supplies a healthy dose of voltage to the covers. You can't be too careful with the Book".

"Oh".

He's not happy, but good education has never been cheap.

"OK", I say. "Grab some rubber gloves and turn to page 43, bottom paragraph".

"This it? About Internet news?" he asks.

"The very one. Now, perhaps you can help me compose the message that our friend will be sending to a large number of sex-based newsgroups. What sort of perversion will he be interested about in hearing from people?"

Five minutes later we have a virtual masterpiece, guaranteed to appeal to a large number of the strangest people on the net.

"Shall I post it now?" the PFY asks.

"Not quite yet. You realise that this is going to generate an enormous amount of e-mail that will flood the server, causing the system administrator, a man with all the discretion of a loud hailer, to investigate?"

"You mean he'll tell?"

"We can't rely on that. Make the return address the head telephonist. It'll be round the building before someone has the guts to tell him!"

"You really are a complete bastard!"

"In the flesh, on the keyboard, and wading through people's personal lives!" I reply, with a measure of pride.

Later that day, I pop down to the basement to watch a figure emerge from the lift and slink to the little red convertible. From the look on his face, the propositions haven't only come from external sources ...

As he rockets off for a long memory-obscuring holiday, I head back to my office to finish the day's labour, pausing but momentarily to drop his sump plug into the rubbish bin ...

3.25 The B.O.F.H.'s Black Wednesday ...

It's a fateful Wednesday when I'm called into the boss's office for some important news. Present are a technical manager and the department's personnel manager.

A collection of three like-minded peers one might say - or five, if we were to count the paperweight and rubbish bin, which do more work and provide far more value for money to the company.

"We've, err ... decided not to renew your contract", the boss blurts out after a couple of seconds of tense silence.

The technical manager and personnel manager have suddenly found interesting things to look at on the roof and floor. Meantime the boss, by the looks of it, is making an attempt at the world mass-sweating award. He's expecting the worst, so I let him have it.

"Okay", I say quietly. "I leave four weeks from tomorrow, I believe".

"Ah, well, we've decided to pay you off for the last four weeks of your contract", the boss fawns.

"In fact, you can leave right now if you like. Actually", he blurts, "we'd prefer it".

"Sure", I say. "I'll just get my things and be off then".

"Ah, we've had security do that just now", the boss says, waiting for the eruption. "There's a box outside".

"Okay then, I'll see you around", I say, step outside and grab my belongings.

In the lift on the way down the pimply-faced-youth is astounded.

"What are you going to do?", he asks, shocked.

"Me? Take a holiday, read some books, no plans really".

"No, I mean about being let go".

"Oh that! Nothing really. I'm sure you'll cope without me".

A grin slips across his face as he contemplates the future.

"I'll see what I can do ..."

Three days later the phone rings. It's the boss.

"Ah, just ringing to see if you could take your contract back", he grovels.

"Why, surely my trainee's doing well?"

"Ah no, not really".

"Strange, I taught him everything I know", I reply, keeping the ball rolling.

"Yes, that's what we were afraid of".

"Pardon?"

"I don't know. He just keeps making mistakes. At least he says they're mistakes".

"What sort of mistakes?"

"All sorts! The other day he 'repaired' an 'unusual' temperature control setting on a probe in the boardroom and boiled the CEO's tropical fish in their tank; his 'Lift Maintenance' had myself and one of the managers riding between floors three and four over the lunch hour; the share-price monitor only picks up Dutch porn channels; the security doors keep locking people out of the toilets - except on one occasion when it locked a particularly nervous secretary in - and one of the board member's hearing aids fed back so badly when he went near the sixth floor comms room he was clinically deaf for four days afterwards!"

"Well networking is a touchy business and he is still learning I guess".

"Yes, yes, but can you come back and fix things? The network server passwords expire every day and the minimum

password length increases with it. By the end of the week it'll be 15 letters, and you know what the big boss will say about typing his initials five times".

"Well, I don't know ...", I say, holding out for the inevitable.

"An extra 5,000 a year?"

"Ten?"

"Okay, ten!"

"And I never did like that personal liability clause".

"IT'S NEVER STOPPED YOU BEFORE!"

"True, but it gets to you after a while ..."

"All right, all right, it's a deal. When can you start?"

A day later the status quo is restored. The PFY gives me a quick run-down on what happened in my absence. Apparently the turning point was after an accident on the mezzanine escalator involving the boss's wife, his surprise birthday cake, the CEO's suit and a sudden change of escalator speed. An extraordinary coincidence ...

The phone rings and, as I'm in such a good mood, I pick it up.

"Is that the networks guy?" a voice asks.

"Yes ..."

"I've got a problem with this new machine and the network".

"A pentium?" I guess randomly.

"Yeah".

"Uh-huh. The manufacturer faxed us about an electrostatic build-up problem".

"Errr?"

"To fix it, just slide the lid open ..."

"Okey dokey".

"Pull the network card out ..."

"Yup".

"... and put tin foil along the edge connector to ground static charges".

"Oh. Okay".

"Now plug the card in and switch her on".

"Okay. I'm switching it".

BANG!

"Agghhh...!"

<Click>

It's funny how you always miss the good times ...

3.26 The B.O.F.H. seeks more revenge ...

"There he goes ..." the Pimple-Faced-Youth mutters as the department's latest programmer sneaks out of his room and goes off home. The poor guy's got a persecution complex which has absolutely nothing to do with his office being constructed from an area stolen from the comms room by the bosses.

Sadly, I didn't get to the plans before they left the drafting machine, but the PFY did manage to 'recalibrate' the builders levels and cable detectors. Funny how the walls seem to lean inwards and every time the air conditioner comes on the door handle heats up.

In the spirit of re-use, the boss had trolled all the offices for unused furniture prior to the programmer's arrival. From us he scored the drawers of death. Previously used to hold the bean-counter back-ups, the drawers of death look like an ordinary set of drawers, and even behave like an ordinary set of drawers. Until they're closed.

That triggers a five second hummm. Moments later, the programmer finds all his work for the day has been mysteriously wiped out; amazing how small you can make a bulk eraser ...

The remote control on his gas-operated chair was the PFY's idea. The chair plummets to the bottom of its movement at irregular intervals, and the poor guy has since developed a bit of a limp. Probably a lumbar problem.

The boss realises something's happening - as he should, considering he masterminded the room seizure. I'm sure he thinks of that every time he changes the bandage on that nasty doorknob shaped burn on the palm of his hand ...

After a heart to heart session the programmer had with the boss, that the PFY and I accidentally overheard because of the microphone pickup inadvertently cabled onto the redundant UTP connection, the programmer asks us to stop by, obviously believing the scandalous mistruths passed to him by a soon-to-be ex-boss ...

"I hear you're responsible for all this", he says.

"For?" I ask innocently.

"These annoyances! And I want them stopped. I'm working on an important project and I will not tolerate interference".

I'm not a hardline fan, and by the looks of it neither is the PFY.

"Do you know how much I get paid?" he continues.

"Not a clue", I lie, so that I don't have to pretend not to be annoyed that he's earning more than the PFY and I put together.

"But I'll tell you what - you share your good fortune with us and we'll see what we can do. A couple of hundred quid a week, each. Call it Comms Room Rental",

"NEVER!"

Meeting at a close, the PFY and I wander off. Two days later, following a minor first caused by some faulty wiring on his desk lamp (I blame cheap imports), we're invited back.

A generous donation to the Operators' Christmas fund later, we return to our office.

Sometime later, the programmer again asks me and the PFY to stop by his office. He has that smug look that can only mean some form of trouble is brewing.

"I'd, ah, like my money back please", he says, striving to appear nonchalant.

"Sorry", I counter, just as calmly. "It's been invested in operational expenses."

"Well, perhaps you can uninvest it. Unless of course you wish this to appear on the CEO's desk".

He clicks on an icon on his screen and a recording, obviously made by his laptop's vidcam attachment, pops up on the screen. A recording of our last encounter, sound and all.

He smiles.

I smile back. And nod to the PFY.

One standard issue, trip-on-the-floor-mat later, the programmer's machine lays in ruins on the floor, with a large heel mark decorating the hard drive.

"Woopsy", the PFY gasps. "Must have low blood sugar or something".

"A good attempt", he sneers. "But not good enough. I have back-up tapes".

"I see. Aren't you a little concerned that I'll get to the tapes somehow?" I inquire, trying to sniff out their location. He chuckles.

"Not in the slightest. Not when they're safely locked away".

>SLAM!<

A five-second hum and chuckle later the PFY and I are heading back to our office to resume normal life.

"Shall I crank up the voltage on the doorknob?" the PFY asks.

"All the way! Oh, and that desk lamp looks a little dim while you're at it ..."

With initiative like that, he's bound to go places ...

3.27 The B.O.F.H. has a counselling session ...

It's a quiet day in my office when the boss trundles in with a bundle of official looking papers, which can only mean one thing - he's trying to get rid of me again. A great personal tragedy is about to occur. To him.

"Simon, glad I caught you!"

Considering it's 2.30pm on pay day and a mass of expensive hardware that would fit rather well into my briefcase has just gone missing, his surprise and gladness are faked.

He's trying to cover up an ulterior motive.

"I've just had a directive from the top about staff appraisals. The Big, Big Boss wants us all to go through personal interviews this year prior to any increases ..."

Dangling the 'increase' carrot has been used before, and usually precedes an attempt at a monumental shafting. However, a raise is a raise, so I just nod.

The boss takes strength from getting this far and continues.

"Yours, if it's OK, is tomorrow at 10am. Could you make that?" he says, all sugar and spice.

"Of course I could", I reply, smiling with Bambi-like innocence.

The boss thanks me and wanders off, barely suppressing a smug grin. Yep, it's a shafting all right ...

Next morning dawns and I'm in at 9am for a change, watching the entranceway.

Time ticks by and it gets to 9.48 when my suspicions are proved. A pale, emaciated figure, sporting a thoughtful beard, glasses and medical issue white-collar shirt with non-threatening tie, wanders in.

A plain-clothes psychologist if I am not very much mistaken.

I get the PFY over for a quick gander. He nods. Not a word is spoken as he logs into the various control systems, shaking his head.

At the interview, it's the usual psych-type thing, Ink Blots, stories about childhood, recent dreams, and so on.

I decide to go for the high score, and find lots of witches and murderesses in the ink blots, 'remember' some disturbing incidents from my childhood, and tell him that all my recent dreams involve axes and guns and things.

An hour later, he's appearing calm and smiling a lot, but his eyes never leave me for a second.

I smile back.

"Coffee?" I ask.

Afraid to refuse, he nods.

Barely a minute later the PFY brings some coffee in and raises an eyebrow to see how it's going. I keep smiling to maintain my power base.

A couple of security guys pop in mid-coffee and I realise it's the full 101 per cent shafting and they're not only trying to lose me, they're trying to have me committed at the same time - probably to secure the PFY's loyalty in my absence...

It looks like speech time, by the expression on psych-guy's face.

"Simon, I find you to be what we clinically refer to as a sociopath. You have some deep-set adjustment problems that I, as a government appointed health counsellor ..."

Government? The Bastards!

"... am duty-bound to relate to the proper authority, as I feel you may pose a danger to yourself and to others".

He's quick isn't he?

He's also starting to look a bit uncomfortable, which is not surprising considering the strength of the laxative that the PFY put in his drink, but there you go.

Losing his great mental struggle to stay and see this out, he breaks for the toilets, only, if I'm not mistaken, to find them locked.

Strange that, the only key that locks them is the building master, and that's kept in the security's hi-tech safe (three turns to 37, two turns to 12, one turn to 45) which no-one has the combination to.

While he's hitting the stairwell at a run, the boss comes in and grabs my psychiatric evaluation with an evil grin. He wanders back with me to the office to gloat, but I'm too busy watching the closed-circuit TV screen over his shoulder to pay much attention. Psych-guy makes for the quickest source of toileting in a building like ours - the floor below.

It too is strangely locked

The door on the floor below that, which doesn't have a lock, is blocked by eight large boxes containing 28-inch boardroom-style video monitors which weigh about a ton each and require a trolley to move ...

He knows he's not going to make it back up the stairs in time, but then he notices a shining beacon presenting itself to him in the form of a rubbish bin at the cafeteria freight entrance.

His relief is immense, but not shared by the cafeteria storeperson who emerges at a bad time, nor by the boss when my moral obligation prompts me to point out the CCTV screen to him.

"Ahem. So good to have a profile of your employees done by a fellow of such discretion and taste", I chirp, as I nudge my profile from his hands into the bin that it can now call home.

3.28 The B.O.F.H.'s boss has an 'accident' ...

The boss has become a liability. Sad, but true. Still, it's all part of the Pimply-Faced-Youth's training, so it has to be done.

He knows something is up, and is trying to ingratiate himself with me by asking for technical advice all the time and thanking me profusely for it. In other words, sucking up.

On the ingratiation scales, it's right up there with hitting an alligator's snout with a stick to make it friendlier. If I'd wanted work, I'd have left the phone on the hook in the first place.

The final snout-rap came when he brought his home stereo in for some installation advice. I don't know why, but he seems to believe that simply because I do some work at the nuts and bolts end of the computing spectrum, I'm bound to know about everything from the rating of the third fuse to how to program a Beta video to get Coronation Street in the least amount of tape.

I give it a quick once-over to see what's wrong with it, noticing almost immediately that the tape IN and OUT leads were the wrong way round.

"So what's the problem?" I ask.

"It's the tape," he whines. "It stopped working after we moved the stereo into the drawing room. If you turn the volume all the way up, you can just hear the sound of the tape".

"Hmm", I murmur thoughtfully. "We'll probably need the speakers to get the complete picture".

"I'll get them at lunchtime", he enthuses.

Three hours later we have the little beauties on the desk. I jam the overload cutouts closed while the PFY puts the bags of isopropyl alcohol and ignition circuits into them. Half an hour later we have a masterpiece and sneak off into hiding, priming the halon system before we go.

Fifteen minutes after that we're playing poker in the storeroom when we hear the first strains of a Neil Diamond number thumping. I look to the PFY.

"The loudness switch should do it", he murmurs, taking his electrical apprenticeship quite seriously.

Scant seconds later there is a >Crump!< from the control room as Neil fires up not only a guitar solo, but also a very expensive pair of speakers.

The PFY and I can hear the beeping of the Halon warning, which means that the boss has to make a decision - save the speakers and be suffocated, or watch them burn and live.

The silencing on the warning tells us that the boss has subscribed to the motto "Choose Life".

We give him a couple of minutes of respectful silence then grab some equipment and wander back, pausing only to knock over a huge box of thinwire terminator.

"Woopsy," the PFY mutters. "We'd better pick those up ... later".

By the time we locate him, the boss is sobbing into an oxygen mask in the sick bay as he recounts the horror of it all.

"It just caught fire", he bleats, "and then those job sheets caught light, then those folders, then the wooden door wedges stacked on top of them like kindling, then ..."

A thought crosses his mind, watches for traffic, and seeing none, crosses back. He stares at us both.

"You bastard!" he utters in a state of shock.

The PFY and I exchange shocked glances.

"We were in the store!" I cry, lamb-like innocence.

Tossing the mask aside, he makes a break to verify this.

And that's not the only break of the day. An arm and a clavicle follow in short order as he rockets across the floor on terminator rollers into the poorly loaded paper shelves, which promptly fall on him.

Nasty. We tell the officer that when he comes to investigate. (The boss's new corporate policy requires all incidents to be reported to the police.) Fitting that he should be a test (and basket) case. The officer sadly takes down the details, then goes to get a statement from the boss. Two hours later he discards the pages of notes in favour of a "Workplace Accident" verdict and leaves with an expensive speakerless stereo that we had no need for. On the way out he pauses.

"You're a computing guy?" the Cop asks me.

"Yep", I reply, nodding.

"You know anything about Beta videos? My wife likes ..."

Hanging's too good for 'em ...

3.29 The B.O.F.H. wants to re-cable ...

It's quarterly budget time again and I'm trying to convince the managers that we should upgrade the thin wire Ethernet in one of our remote offices. An hour into the meeting the conversation goes something like ...

Manager 1: "So basically you're saying that 10 million of these 'bit' things EVERY SECOND isn't fast enough?"

Me: "No, not really."

Manager 2: "He's right you know, I've been to that office, the network speed is abysmal!"

Manager 1: "It just doesn't seem possible! Hell, I can't even manage TEN bits of stuff a second."

Me: "That doesn't surprise me."

Manager: "Pardon?"

Me: "I said the numbers really surprise me. Too, I mean..."

Manager 1: "Oh."

Me: "You see, when my predecessor put that net in, he did it on the cheap. All the devices were connected to the same piece of net. It's like everyone using the same road to get to work."

Manager 1: "But we paid a PREMIUM for that network!"

Me: "Four years ago. Cabling was more expensive then. And..."

Manager 1: "And?"

Me: "And the original spec was for individual segments."

Manager 1: "So?"

Me: "Well basically, everyone was supposed to have their own network 'road'."

Manager 2: "What happened?"

Me: "Well, it was probably a combination of financial and distribution considerations."

Manager 2: "Meaning?"

Me: "He daisy-chained one segment through all of the offices, sold the remaining cable off, and charged you through the nose for labour."

Manager 1: "Really?"

Me: "Yes, it happens with the less reputable network engineers."

Manager 1: "I find this all extremely hard to believe. There must be some mistake. He assured me that it had been done."

Me: "Ah, he probably assured you that YOU had been done."

Manager 1: "No! I'm sure he wouldn't have taken advantage!"

Me: "I see. Tell me, what money was he earning back then?"

Manager 1: "Seven fifty an hour."

Me: "And the car he drove?"

Manager 1: "Mercedes convertible."

Me: "And how did he dress?"

Manager 1: "Nicely - Italian suits."

Me: "Are things becoming a little clearer?"

Manager 1: "You mean to say..."

Me: "I do."

Manager 1: "He..."

Me: "He did."

Manager 2: "How bad IS this?"

Me: "At the time it wasn't bad, but with all client server upgrades, staff are wasting valuable time waiting for networks."

Manager 3: "What should we do then?"

Me: "Well, as you see in front of you, I'm recommending UTP to the desktop, Cat 5 so that we can upgrade to ATM when it becomes a more widespread and viable technology. This will save you the expense of having to recable in a couple of years."

I pause in my delivery to let their minds recover from acronym overload.

Manager 1: "How much will it cost?"

Me: "Well, it won't be cheap. However if you look at the cost over five years, it's fairly small, if, of course, you accept that the cabling will be done out of hours by me and my pimply faced youthful assistant at the standard double-time overtime rate. We could get a contractor in, but as you can see on the paper in front of you, it would be about three times as expensive and only slightly quicker that way. And, given that we will have laid the cable and are likely to know more about it if problems occur in the future..."

Manager 2: "We get your point. Well, it seems that you've covered all aspects of the problem, I for one agree. Everyone else concur?"

Two weeks later, the PFY wanders out to the site and starts the job.

"So we change the existing UTP patch cables to a new colour, drop some Cat 5 off-cuts on the floor and kick a hole in the plasterboard every few offices or so?" he asks.

"Yup! For a week or two."

"Won't someone find out?"

"Well, they WOULD if there was any documentation saying that there was Cat-5 to the desktop here already, but unfortunately that information accidentally fell in the shredder this morning," I reply.

"So we really ARE just changing the patch cables to a new colour?"

"Yup!"

"How's that going to improve performance?"

"It's not. But switching off the traffic generator in the 2nd floor comms cupboard which has been increasing its traffic by one per cent a week since the beginning of the year will."

"So we're just screwing them for lots of labour."

"And those drums of premium Cat-5 which have excellent re-sale value."

"You bastard!"

"Hey! I was this close to charging them for new network cards too, but I relented."

"So that stuff about your predecessor was all lies?"

"No. He did all that, just to some of the other offices. I had the cabling done here two years ago. Managers never remember."

3.30 The B.O.F.H. does some Future Planning ...

Something's a little fishy in the department. I recognise the signs when I reach my floor - the air of restrained anticipation.

First stop, my internal mail slot - bombshells usually get placed there by the boss prior to him scuttling to the relative

safety of his office. Naivety knows no bounds.

Sure enough, there's a bombshell measuring on the red-tape Richter scale.

In an effort to standardise a coherent future direction, the bosses have decided to appoint a 'Director of Future Planning'. Couldn't be fishier if it came with tartare sauce.

Sure enough Jeremy, the appointee, has all the initiative and forward thinking of wheel-clamps, and was recently responsible for purchasing 10 multi-mode analogue recording devices for a bargain price of 6,000. The most expensive box of pencils in the history of the company ...

Unless I'm very much mistaken this is yet another salvo in the 'bean counters versus techies' war. I read further and discover that all purchases have to be approved by the DFP to ensure that they conform to the direction the company has chosen for its future ...

I get two weeks' respite before the you-know-what hits the fan with a knock at my door. Jeremy enters.

"Ah, Simon, just a couple of points," he says. "This wireless LAN stuff. You realise that we're not equipped to deal with this just yet?"

"In what way?" I ask. "Not having several open-plan work areas that are hell to cable - you know, like the WP pool, the PR offices - or not having a single free AUI connector unless we unplug the unused terminal servers?"

"Oh. Ah. Well, no, not that exactly, it's just that according to my calculations ..."

He bashes a couple of figures into his personal organiser, an item that appears to have been distributed far and wide amongst the upper echelons, a move no-doubt designed to cover up for the stupidity of a prior purchase.

"... we would be spending almost 300 per multi-peater more than we need to if we buy from our current supplier."

"Ah. Our current supplier of ... analogue recording devices?" I ask.

He pretends to ignore me. "No, our current supplier of personal organisers. And we have the added bonus of being able to transmit and receive information from the organisers through them which is not available on any other equipment."

He toddles off leaving me feeling that the outcome was: "Future Planning, 1, Simon, nil", so quick as I can, I bash out a memo about the potential security implications of uploads and downloads taking place from these devices. There's a rumour of a takeover flying about and the last thing we want is sensitive data being intercepted.

My warnings fall on deaf ears, the marketing has already been done in secret and accepted as gospel. Not good.

The kit duly arrives and I reluctantly install it. However, the manual is most instructive on the upload and download features, and to remain an interested party, I read it ...

A week later I'm listening to a boardroom conversation, as is my wont. It really was an amazing coincidence that a couple of highly sensitive microphones ended up being placed near the panel when the room was recabled recently.

"Well, quite frankly, I'm tired of it all," a manager whines.

"Why?" Jeremy asks, a little stress registering on my accompanying voice analysis software.

"The bloody thing keeps turning itself on in the middle of the night and ringing an alert for my wife's birthday, which was three weeks ago. I can't put it in the lounge because it switches my TV on now it's learnt the controls like you suggested. And, if that's not bad enough, it keeps switching the bloody thing off just before Inspector Morse finds out who the killer is!"

"Mine does that too," another boss adds.

"Mine added one to the street numbers of all my addresses," yet another voice announces.

"You think that's bad," another snuffles, "mine rang an alarm and displayed 'Dinner with Trudi' with three stars by her name one night when my wife was using it. I don't even know a Trudi!! But I've got plenty of time to find one now!"

"These are obviously teething problems," my ex-nemesis oozes.

"I'm sure it's just some redundant information"

I tap away at my keyboard and a chime is heard from the boardroom.

"Good Lord!" a voice exclaims. "Mines just told me to ring the doctor about the HIV results!!"

"I think we've heard enough," the CEO interrupts.

"Until further notice, we're withdrawing these devices from use. Thank you gentlemen. Jeremy - a word."

I listen on while Jeremy is promoted to another position of responsibility - head window cleaner. Only, we have contractors to do that ...

A pity really. Still, it doesn't pay to dwell.

3.31 The B.O.F.H. averts a takeover ...

I'm barely into work when the boss and CEO crash the door, looking worried.

"We're in trouble," the boss says.

"We're being taken over," the CEO interrupts, slipping past the boss.

"Why tell me?" I enquire, innocence oozing.

"Because you have a way of 'fixing' things ..." the boss hints.

"Routers?" I respond, all innocence.

"No. You know what I mean!"

"Networks!" I cry, happily.

The CEO starts getting agitated so I put him out of our collective misery.

"OK, who is it?"

He spits out the name of our hated rival. Later, behind closed doors, the PFY and I form a plan, then invite the boss et al back again.

"Step One: Fire the PFY!"

"How? Why?" the boss blurts.

"Embezzling something."

"If that were grounds for dismissal, you would've been ..."

A stony gaze at the boss silences him and I continue.

"Step Two: I have lunch with one of their network guys and on the way out I drop (in front of their security cameras), and then quickly hide in a suspicious manner, a data tape with their company logo on the front.

Step Three: The PFY, invaluable in the future plans of our takeover because of his intimate knowledge of the way we work, steps into a recently vacated network guy position."

"Sounds good," the boss chirps.

Three days later we're set. I'm making our company look an unattractive investment by falsifying memos about future criminal liability from defects in the furniture production line, then leaking them to the press.

Of course, no pressman worth his salt substitute would believe the memos without proof (being men of integrity), so I sacrifice a couple of bean-counter limbs for the purpose of, "Stress Testing Production Line Furniture," ("the cause") and make sure the papers are on hand to see the ambulance being loaded.

Meantime the PFY is stepping through the entire first three chapters of the Bastard Manual, wrecking havoc all round. The oxy-acetylene in the halon cannister was a nice touch, and took out half a warehouse before they realised what had happened and switched the automatic extinguishers off. A simple typo on a refill form can make such a difference

...

His technical advice appears to be second to none judging by the continual arrival of replacement equipment and deskside fire extinguishers.

Meantime their Fire Alarms have been used more in last three days than in the previous two years and the route to and from the Fire Station has a 24-hour parking ban.

I tried calling him but due to a wiring maintenance mix-up people are too scared to answer the phones. Must be the stigma attached to electrical burns. Page 73 if memory serves me correct.

I'm continuing as normal, repatching a repeater when the boss comes to see me.

"It's about these accidents," he says.

"What accidents?" I ask

"You know what accidents. They have to stop. Why is the equipment being sent to the accounts department for testing anyway? We've got a perfectly capable testing team."

"Yeah, but they're all good sorts," I reply.

"What?! Well, I don't care, it has to stop! There are only three accountants left!"

"No ..." looking at my watch, "... there's ..."

A thud and a muffled scream from the floor above punctuate my sentence.

"... Two. I'm guessing the wardrobe and drawer unit he was looking at did not pass the 'heavy weight placed in an elevated position' test.

Speaking of heavy weights, you haven't seen the large box of full-height hard drives normally in my office have you?"

He trundles off without a word to rest in his office ...

I get to my office and the phone is ringing. One of our equipment suppliers wants a site visit with a prospective customer. What the hell, it'll kill time till the real action starts...

The phone rings and as I'm in time-kill mode, I answer it.

"My phone's broken!"

"Then how are you calling me?" I ask.

"I'm using another phone, stupid."

Stupid!?!?

"I see," I whisper, "and what was your number?"

He tells me. I look it up.

"Ah, Mr 0898"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you sure? I have several VERY PROGRESSIVE tapes here for you to listen to if you'd like."

"Err ... that won't be necessary."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, forget I called."

"Well I'd like to forget you called, but the only thing that makes me forget is a couple of bottles of single malt scotch. The good stuff, not that cheap crap they serve up at the bar ..."

"I'll drop them off shortly."

Ten minutes later the transaction is completed and I end the day by playing one of the tapes into his home answer-

phone. It was for the best, those calls were just a cry for help ...

3.32 The B.O.F.H. meets an unexpected guest ...

It's a calm morning network-wise when I arrive at the office to prepare for a site visit and to continue defending my company's recent bad name and business from the potential takeover.

I realise once more why I discourage site visits normally. Their only purpose is to pretend to a customer that the stuff really does work like it says in the brochure by finding a site that's worked out where the manual went wrong and fixed it.

If it wasn't for the free lunch and the chance to blackmail a good price for our next order, they'd never make the front door.

The visit should follow typical form: supplier lies to customer; I extort goods to support this flagrant misinformation; a walk-around tour; a free lunch, and promises from me to help out if they have any future difficulties.

In other words, a day that would turn Pinnochio into a kindling machine.

As 10am rolls around, I get a call from the front desk about my visitors.

A quick look at the CCTV shows me everything is as expected; our supplier with his customer. Except for one small thing; the visitor is none other than the head network guy of our rival company. Something smells a little rotten, and it's not the Danish cheese in the staff cafeteria.

I slip downstairs with the boss wondering exactly what the purpose of this visit is. Some show of strength probably, but what form this will take is unknown. Obviously a lapse in reporting on the part of the Pimpily-Faced-Youth which I'll rectify with a cattle-prod at our next meeting.

The technical competence of my rival is identified when I notice his rubber-soled isolator shoes. The electric doorknob was a waste of time ...

... but then again, perhaps not, as the supplier gives himself a belt he won't remember in a hurry, along with his name and who he works for.

The opposition immediately identifies himself as a network professional by perusing the bosses swipe card PIN number, 'accidentally' shutting the bosses hand in a door - twice - then snaffling the access card while the boss is busy blubbing. Smooth - 11 seconds in total.

He flexes some more muscle by popping a couple of earth leakage detectors as he passes by some equipment. The old high-powered-transmitter-inducing-current-in-the-leakage-wire trick.

His attempts at conquering the comms room in the same manner fail dismally, though. I operate under the assumption that anyone who should be playing with electricity knows the dangers and wouldn't need safeguards anyway...

It's the price you pay for being good. And who'd lose a whole network just to save the mind of someone who's playing with something they shouldn't?

Getting to the point, my counterpart speaks in crypted 'NetSpeak'.

"What's that unit like?" he asks, gesturing at the supplier.

"A little 2400. No actually, this one's probably 300 synchronous. On a good day."

"Yeah, it was transmitting nulls earlier".

"Nothing a repeated Control-Alt-Delete wouldn't solve."

The boss returns in bandages for the free lunch. And over lunch, my counterpart and I talk turkey.

"I favour the previous configuration," my rival states.

"Yeah, a bit too much SNMP at the moment, but that's always been the case."

"Yeah, me too. So ... a reinstall of the original specs..."

Two weeks later the takeover threat is but a memory. I have a brand new Bean Counter department in the sights and am raring to go. Some of the upper middle management who favoured a protracted takeover as grounds for a pay rise took early retirement - the 40s are such a difficult time of life, especially when you find a photo of yourself in women's underwear (in the confines of a very progressive Soho club) in the top drawer of your desk.

I get a call from my counterpart on the secure line.

"All clear?" he asks.

"Yep. You?"

"Not a worry. Had to let your PFY go, you know how it is. A real pity."

"Not to worry, he's back at his desk, playing with the temperature of the fridge which is storing tomorrow's chicken lunches. I'll probably eat out..."

The world is full of networking victories - this has been one of them.

3.33 The B.O.F.H. and the CEO's pet project ...

The PFY and I are having a quick chuckle when the Boss is passing, so he stops in - probably to see who he should send the condolence card to.

"Is there something funny?"

"No, no, not really. It's this memo. For a minute there I thought it was a real one where you were asking for the root passwords of our machines."

"I did" he says straight-faced.

"Stop, you're killing me", I chuckle. "Why would YOU want the root password?"

"Why is irrelevant. Just do it", he snaps.

"You realise it's insecure?"

"I'll lock it in my personal document safe".

"You mean three turns clockwise to 37 ...", I say.

"... two turns back to 18 ...", the PFY chips in.

"... then back to 43", the cleaner finishes.

"Then scream in frustration and get your secretary to open it for you".

The boss does his impersonation of a stunned mullet then continues.

"Alright, I'll put a new safe in - and I WILL have those passwords", he says as he storms off.

That night we do some sneaky miniature CCTV installation in his office ...

The next day the floors groan as a huge grey monster is delivered to his offices. The boss himself supervises its placement.

"We can't see a thing", the PFY moans as the hidden camera gives us a view of the top of the boss's head.

"Not from that camera", I reply, "but from this one ..." >click< "... a full frontal!"

Sure enough, the boss's lamp-cam reveals all.

"So why did we put the camera in?", the PFY asks, perplexed.

"A decoy. The boss was bound to check the room after last time, so I wanted him to find that particular camera".

”Why?”

”Well, if you look carefully at his room, there’s only one plausible place he could put the safe out of the camera’s eye whilst maintaining the illusion that he knows nothing”.

”Sneaky ...”

”Doubly sneaky”, I add with a hint of mystery.

Pretending to fold, we give the boss the passwords, then the next day when he’s checked they’re legit, change them to something else. Raising the stakes, we deal ourselves into the CEO’s pet video-conferencing project downstairs so the boss can’t ”call us urgently away” when he finds out ...

”How are things going?”, the CEO asks benevolently.

”Great sir”, the PFY gushes.

”We should be ready to go tomorrow”, I add as I cable up the cameras to the video multiplexing unit - the device that cost a quarter of MY budget for the year - that the boss recommended after the salesman took him on a two day bender ending up in his arrest at a pub in Brighton for showing some women his rendition of Trafalgar Square’s tallest monument ...

Bad thoughts aside, I run some diagnostic images through the machine and show the CEO how the pictures will look to our overseas offices.

”The images will be displayed across the screen like this,” I say, ”one for each person present. Sitting on a chair activates the camera”.

”And this will all work straight off?” the CEO asks, barely suppressing his excitement at being on corporate TV.

”There might be a few teething problems, but I’m sure that my trainee and I will be able to go to there and sort them out. Most should go smoothly except perhaps for the Rome and Florida offices, which may have solar interference during the summer”.

The CEO might smell a junket, but he’s not going to risk delaying his baby. ”Of course, I’ll see to it that your Divisional Head is aware”.

An hour later we’re in the boss’s office as he seethes with impotent fury.

”Oh! Did we forget to tell you about the password change? And the Video Conferencing? Take a note of that for the future”, I mention to the PFY.

The boss seethes some more.

Three hours later we’re knocking back a few lagers as we draw straws for vacations. I mean assignments.

Two hours after that, we’re in the off-license purchasing two cases of gin which we slip into the grey monster later under the cover of darkness.

”What did we do that for?”, the PFY asks.

I say nothing but jump in the air, landing heavily on the floor. A creak from the floorboards enlightens the PFY, and he joins me. Seconds later a sound not unlike a heavy safe falling through a floor greets our ears.

The next morning as we watch the boss pack up his things the PFY muses about the fickleness of life. ”You know, he might’ve got away with it if the safe hadn’t landed on the video multiplexer ...”

”Yeah,” I reply, ”what a terrible coincidence. It was probably the password book that broke the camel’s back ...”

3.34 The B.O.F.H. and the PFY’s raise ...

I’m doing some important network response testing with the PFY when the phone rings. It’s the PFY’s line and it’s never rung before, so he celebrates by unplugging it from the wall. While his attention is otherwise engaged, I shoot

him a couple of times in the back.

Networked DOOM II is an excellent breeding ground for the Machiavelli in us all.

"That was the boss," I mention, easing the tension in the room somewhat.

"Contract Renegotiation Time," he says and trundles off to the boss's office. Five minutes later he's back with a not-too-happy expression on his face.

"Problems?"

"He doesn't believe that I've the experience to warrant an increase in my hourly rate." This, I don't like - if it can happen to him it can happen to me, and I have an irrational fear of anything that looks like the thin end of a wedge.

I'm on the phone to personnel in a flash. "What do we have to do to prove that my assistant deserves a raise?"

"Typically there's a meeting with the head of personnel, an independent expert and the candidate himself. The idea is that the candidate's networking knowledge is put to some form of test."

I arrange the test for the next day and instruct the PFY to do his homework...

The next day dawns and at 10am everyone shows up for the main event. Except for the independent expert, that is. However, he's unlikely to be heard of for another couple of hours... providing the lift maintenance contractor is as slow as usual.

I offer my services as an independent expert.

"OK, a couple of questions," I say. "Shoot," the PFY responds.

"What criteria do you use when determining whether to remove a user's files?"

"How much sleep I had the night before?"

"Fair enough. When pushing a user's machine off a desk, what should you ensure?"

"That their keyboard is below."

"Half marks. Keyboard and a valued personal possession."

"Of course."

"When should overtime be scheduled?"

"When circumstances make an operation hazardous during normal hours."

"More information?"

"When I'm in a bad mood because I've run out of money that month."

"Correct. A colleague asks for your advice purchasing a machine for their private business. What do you recommend, Macintosh or PC?"

"Neither. I'd recommend the Commodore 64 with twin tape drives that I use as a doorstop - priced at 600 quid."

"And when it failed?"

"It wouldn't."

"More information?"

"It's rigged up to catch fire when it's plugged in. I'd claim he plugged it in wrong."

"Excellent. Phones are running hot with complaints that sessions on the 4th floor NT server are being lost randomly. What is the problem most likely to be?"

"The problem, as I see it, is that the phone is on the hook."

"Correct."

Half an hour later ...

"Well I'm convinced - he has learnt a great deal."

"And I am unconvinced!" the head of personnel cries. "This trainee was brought in to address the problems of poor service and lack of accountability that were prevalent in your reign of terror. Instead of doing that you've twisted him into a nastier version of yourself!"

"Yes, good isn't he?" I comment.

"NO! And if you think, even for a moment, that I'm going to OK this .. this TRAVESTY of skills evaluation, you are sorely mistaken. He STAYS on our trainee contracting pay-scale."

It's true, there is a tool for every job. Yet it still amazes me how many 'jobs' benefit from a little tweak with the 'blackmail' tool.

"Fair enough," I say. "You're probably right. After all, he is a beginner at this sort of thing and as a trainee I suppose you could pay him less as a result of the mistakes he's bound to make. You know the sort of mistakes I mean - like e-mailing personnel's international phone logs to the CEO instead of the head of personnel. How is your daughter Sir - still working in the Cayman Islands?"

"Ah. Well, on second thoughts I can see how his skillset might be more.."

"Mistakes like accidentally misconfiguring the network back-up server to restore pictures from the directory named SMUT on a personnel machine to.. say... the directory containing the slides the CEO will be using for his next talk to the board of directors."

In the international unit of operator success, Backpedals Per Second, the head of personnel is dangerously near redlining. Half an hour and a sizeable trainee-raise later, the PFY and I are sitting back in the office.

"What should I do with these phone logs?"

"Send 'em on."

"Head of personnel?"

"HELL NO! The CEO's office - you're a trainee - mistakes happen."

Needless to say, I believe my renegotiation will slip through without a hitch.

3.35 The B.O.F.H. puts in for an award ...

It's a quiet day in the office. Perhaps it's got something to do with me relocating the helpdesk to the recently-vacated Boss's office and accidentally putting an axe fifty-three times through the phone cables down that corridor. Forget using pink noise tapes for relaxation, there's nothing quite like the distant sound of phones being slammed frustratedly into cradles to help a BOFH chill out. Our telecomms system is in a shocking state; must be down to all the users taking out their anger on the handsets.

I make sure the door's closed and electrified appropriately (in case any of the braver users get the rash urge to come round in person), and settle down with my reading material.

Normally, this is the time to catch up on those Dutch magazines that were inadvertently delivered to the back door a couple of months ago - and which seem to have been delivered equally inadvertently ever since. You wouldn't believe that the same mistake could be made again and again, would you? Someone, though, seems to have found my private stash, since it appears to have grown legs. I suspect it's my PFY, as he's been walking around recently with a knowing smile on his face. He'll soon learn the perils of being nosey when I've figured out just what to do with the electric stapler, though. Anyway, in the meantime, I'm stuck with reading networking magazines.

Pausing only to fill in a 'please send a barmy UPS salesman to see me' form in the name of the guy from accounts who cut me up in the car park this morning, I start to wade through the surprisingly tall stack of unopened networking mags. One item catches my eye, though: the Networking Professional of the Year award. I laugh inwardly - it'll probably be won by some sad anorak who spends his weekends up to his ears in UTP, spends his evenings retrieving

lost files from users' PCs, and who earns crap wages and no gratitude. I read on, however : "... presented at a special ceremony at l'Hotel Ambassadeur in the south of France"

Ah, now, let's not be too hasty. There is, naturally, a lot to be said for the unsung heroes of the networking world. At least that's the line I'll use when I try to persuade the CEO to let me enter the competition.

Up in the CEO's office, the man himself stares at me glassy-eyed for about a minute. The words finally emerge in a croak. "YOU want to put in for the Network Professional of the Year?"

"That's right. Just think of the credit I'd bring to the company"

"I'm thinking of the bad publicity you'd bring to the company"

"That's not very nice!" I adopt my most aggrieved expression, combined with my most innocent tone of voice. "And after all I've done for this company, too"

"Don't you mean '_TO_' this company'?" The CEO looks at me and starts reading from the entry form. "Helpful to his/her superiors? You've gone through five bosses in the last year!"

"So I've had to cope with five different working methods - it's a much more demanding part to play. I think it demonstrates great flexibility."

"But you're responsible for all of them leaving!!"

"Coincidence... they all seem to remember another job offer somewhere else. Perhaps you ought to look at your working conditions and salaries", I suggest slyly.

"Perhaps I ought to consider whether I need as many support staff as I do"

Ouch. That was a little below the belt. Oh well ...

"Perhaps the Inland Revenue might find out about the secret account that was mysteriously set up on a computer outside the main system."

The CEO reddens and suddenly seems to find his blotter fascinating. He recovers slightly and reads on from my form.

"And what about this," the CEO is almost shouting now. "A good team player"?

"Yes. Naturally I'd expect my pimply faced assistant to be included in the entry. As a good team player, I'd expect members of the team to be included."

"But he's a psychopath!"

"So? Are you going to hold that against him? It's not very supportive of you. I personally think the climate in the south of France will do wonders for his temperament and the experience of going to such an event will do wonders for his social skills."

"There'll be a diplomatic incident!"

The CEO carries on reading. "Nominations for the awards must be accompanied by three signed endorsements by the nominee's colleagues." He paused; "There's no-one here who would agree to sign such a statement. They all hate you."

"So I can enter the award if I can get the form signed?"

"If you can find three of our employees who will sign it, you can enter. But I'm only saying that because I know nobody here will sign it". He exits, laughing silently to himself.

A miracle, eh? Nothing's impossible in the world of networking, as I never tire of telling users whose hard disks have been miraculously wiped clean. After all, who said getting someone's signature on a form actually needed them to write it ...

3.36 The B.O.F.H. wins the day in France ...

It's a glorious day in the south of France, especially since my room at L'Hotel Ambassadeur managed to somehow get double-booked and they upgraded to me to a suite with more rooms than I've had bosses. Getting the signatures on my entry form for Network Professional of the Year was no problem - I knew that digi-sig facility on the network fax server would be handy for something - and so here I am to pick up my award. Okay, there are half-a-dozen other finalists, but I have this suspicion that there are numerous skeletons due for synchronised cupboard exodus very shortly.

Down at the awards dinner, with the sound of an alleged 'entertainer' rambling on in the background, I get talking to a rather nice PR bimette, who is fascinated by the modern networking methods we use.

"So you've tuned the ATM backbone to 827Mbps?"

"Only on the test network of course, we couldn't use something that fast ... err ... early in development for the real users"

"Naturally. So how do you measure the throughput?"

"Doom II between half-a-dozen SGI Challenge boxes, of course. Comes out around 45,000pps"

"45,000 packets per second doesn't sound very quick". Hang about, a PR woman who knows how fast a network should go ... scary thought.

"No, it's points per second. You don't get packets for killing things in Doom, you know.

"Oh, I see. You must have a major budget each year, too, if you've got six Challenges on your test network alone".

"Ah, well, you see, they're eventually going to the CEO's pet videoconferencing project; we bought them with the insurance money after the Pentium 75's from the first project met an accident"

"That's some difference in cost"

"Well, yes, but we have a friendly insurance company". And a rather nice home video of their board at a conference in Amsterdam ...

"Nice one. So let me guess, you've had to clock-chip the Challenges and tweak their ATM cards, thus making them 'experimental' and giving them to you for a month or two for 'testing'".

This girl is on the ball ... I'm almost impressed.

"Well, yes, but it's a complex job so testing will take a bit more than a couple of months ... 2004 would be a good year, I reckon".

"You're a bastard, aren't you?"

Catches on quick, this one. As we're chatting, some TV personality (a contradiction in terms if ever there was one) is introduced and given a shiny gold envelope to open. This he manages without needing to read the instructions, though only just.

"And the Network Professional of the Year is ..."

Later in the "winners' enclosure" I again find myself chatting to my PR friend; it's terrible, this animal attraction I seem to have. She appears surprised at my victory.

"So how did you manage to pull that off? I must admit, I wasn't exactly expecting you to get it, given your apparently unconventional outlook on network management. Did you hack the entries computer or something?"

Hack? She must be an oldie - nobody with any self-respect would ever call themselves a hacker these days, unless they owned a seriously bad anorak. I call for more drinks (the expensive stuff, naturally - I already have the root password to the hotel's systems, not to mention the room number of the old goat from the telly who bored us so much over dinner), take a deep breath, and explain.

"No, I didn't hack ..." (it takes all my effort to say the word) "... anything". Anyways, the shortlists and stuff were

all done in hardware and weren't possible to access over the hotel LAN.

"In hardware?"

"With a biro and a piece of paper. These judge types have trouble with technology"

"Ah, that hardware"

"Yup. Anyway, I didn't have to hack anything; all but one of my competitors pulled out at the last moment. Well, actually some of them didn't, if the polaroids they received in yesterday's mail are anything to go by".

"What, they were ALL having a bit on the side?"

"Two of the six were - it's a side-effect of having to spend so much time in hot countries at networking shows and conferences"

"What about the ones that weren't?"

"Simple. One of them works for the company that's sponsoring the awards, so the small print got to him before I could. Of the others, one now has a photocopy of a vehicle registration form and the other was fired inexplicably after an anonymous, untraceable phone call yesterday afternoon and had his nomination withdrawn by his now-ex-employer". I must put the PFY in for a raise - he did that phone call business without me even asking.

"I see. What's this about a registration form?"

"Oh, just something about a vanishing company Rolls and a known black-market car trader"

"I see. You really are a bastard, aren't you?"

"Naturally. Though it's taken me a while to perfect, of course."

"So what about the one competitor who didn't withdraw?"

"Oh, I beat him fair and square; the directors' words of recommendation on my entry were far more flattering than those on his". At least they were after the form got switched in the chief judge's briefcase on a train to Doncaster last week.

"So what's next?"

"Back to work, a nice pay rise as thanks for raising the company profile, thank the temp for keeping the users on their toes while I've been away, then the occasional after-dinner speech with a five-figure fee".

"What if someone blows the whistle?"

"Oh, I don't have to worry about that"

"Don't you?". I don't like the look in her eye, or the tone of her voice for that matter. "What would you say if I told you I taped this conversation?"

"I'd point out that the dictating gadget in your top left pocket has no record head, so you've got a blank tape. As we're on the subject, what would you say if I told you that the phone in your your room was bugged? Now what were all their names ...". I pat my pocket, and hear the reassuring rattle of microcassette-in-plastic-case.

Sense of humour failure is instant, and she turns and wanders off to sulk.

My mother was right ... you should never trust someone in PR.

3.37 The B.O.F.H. joins an agency ...

The boss is being a little reticent about my rate so I decide to twist the knife a bit by calling up some contracting agencies. My only worry being that if I called up a good agency, I'd probably get a job - which rather defeats the purpose of the exercise. My purpose is to make the boss wince every time there's a contracting rate review. And to rake in more dosh of course.

Bearing in mind my job prospects, I put some feelers out with a couple of the large but mostly dodgy agencies. The sort of agency that will 'smooth out the wrinkles' in your CV before faxing them on to a prospective employer.

Wrinkles like, 'I done DOS once,' and 'I know how to turn my screen on,' become 'Wrote DOS from scratch,' and 'Extensive Hardware Support Background'.

I expect the worst and get it. I meet my placement consultant at a local pub, where he buys me a beer to prove that he's really my friend, and not someone who wants a criminal percentage of my wages.

"So," my personally assigned, widely experienced, computing professional placement consultant says: "You're looking for a position in networking?"

"Yes."

"What sort of experience do you have?"

I run through a quick synopsis of the past 10 years.

"Excellent. Now, have you had much experience of DOS?"

"Why?"

"Well we have an excellent position in DOS consultancy at the moment."

"And you feel that's a networking position?" I ask, already annoyed.

"Well, not exactly. Initially it would be more of a help desk role."

"Not interested. I'm networks, not systems, and definitely not support."

"Ah. Oh well, it was a thought. What about VAX/VMS?"

"DECNet? TCP/IP? Dare I say it, CI?"

"No, more in the lines of Cobol Programming. Great position there. In Milton Ke.."

"No."

"Very good pay..."

"If I'd wanted to do Cobol Programming I would have said so. But I didn't, I said 'networking'."

"Of course, so you did. hardware engineering doesn't interest you?"

"What sort of hardware?"

"Dead terminals mainly. But when they're working they're connected to a terminal server, which is on a network..." he calls out as I leave the pub, drink only half finished.

The boss meanwhile has been playing my game and has faxed out to a couple of contracting agencies himself, obviously in an effort to show me how cheaply he can get a replacement. It's sad how people delude themselves sometimes.

My next few days are punctuated by offers of data entry, fill-in secretarial work, tape monkeying etc. Which I decline. At long last one of the agencies comes through with a price that would bring tears to the boss's eyes. I get the details and am thinking about it when the boss walks in.

"I'll take it," I say, as the boss discreetly tunes into my conversation.

"Take what?" he asks.

"The job I was just offered," I reply, smiling cheesily.

He rallies under the pressure and responds: "And just in time too!"

"For what, Christmas shopping?" I say, applying pressure.

"No. Just in time for us. I've found your replacement!" he gloats, shaking a wad of barely readable faxed paper.

"You're not serious!" I say, pointing at the paper, "you can't even read it!"

"Don't need to," he smirks, "I rang them and verified the details."

"You're not going to trust THAT agency are you?" I cry. "They can't even place an advert properly, let alone a computing professional."

"That's where you're wrong!" the boss snarls. "They HAVE found me someone. Far more experienced than you, and only a fraction more expensive. And he starts this afternoon. SECURITY!"

The moment the boss has been dreaming of for months has arrived.

"Escort this member of the public to the street. Don't let him touch anything, and take his access keys off him at the door. He's to speak to no-one. And have him removed from the contractors' register IMMEDIATELY! Have his personal effects checked for items of the company's, then forward them on to him."

Job done, he swaggers back to his office, the John Wayne of networks and systems.

I am escorted to the street and hand over my access keys. I take a quick survey of the building that was once my workplace, then wander back in to reception.

>Ding!< "Hello," I smile to the receptionist. "I've just been appointed to a position as Network Administrator. Could you ring my supervisor please..."

Can't wait to see John Wayne's face. Or my new pay cheque. Or the memo saying that as a new entry on the contractors' register I am required to attend a paid week's-worth of safety lectures.

3.38 The B.O.F.H. plays safe ...

Today, to fulfil the terms of my employment as a newly arrived contractor at my old job, I'm attending the site safety course. It's the usual routine of switching equipment off when not in use, and so on - kids' stuff.

"Does anyone know what this is?" our instructor asks, holding up a section of mains flex with exposed wiring.

"An accident waiting to happen," I answer helpfully.

"Excellent. Completely correct," he gushes, pleased with the audience participation so far.

"And what about this?" he asks, holding up a length of data cable in a similar condition.

"An accident waiting to happen," I reply once more.

"Ah well, not exactly," he chuckles.

"It is if you tie it two inches from the ground on the third step from the top of a darkened sixth floor stairwell."

Our instructor's eyes narrow for a moment as he tries to place the face ...

Recognition strikes.

"You've done this course before, haven't you?"

"Well, yes I have, but I didn't get the certificate at the end. No-one did as it turned out; not after you fell down that stairwell, broke your clavicle and lost our evaluation papers. Lost your footing on the third step from the top, didn't you?"

He snarls lightly as it all comes flooding back. The fall, the ambulance ride, the chance statement beforehand that my policy of 'Plug and Pray' was not company policy. His manner warns me that 'forgive and forget' is not company policy either...

Sure enough, slipping back early from morning tea, I notice that my chair isn't where I left it. A quick once-over informs me that it's missing some vital supportive parts. I slip it to the back of the room and select another.

As I'm still alone, I check out the presentation on our instructor's PC and make a few modifications to his slides. As

everyone returns, I fall back into my new chair with a comforting 'thump'. I can't help but notice the look of irritation on our tutor's face, an expression which gets progressively worse as we're entertained by his most interesting display of slides. The slide about not picking your nose and eating it in the lift seems to be a real crowd pleaser.

"Well, thanks very much for that," I say at the end of the course. "And rest assured I will pay close attention to that slide on not eating the local beef. Valuable advice - and such a change from the usual warnings about checking the floors in cable ducts."

The next morning the boss wanders in looking harassed.

"Ah Simon, I have a complaint here about you."

"A complaint! About him! I can't believe it!" the PFY cries, clutching his hand to his brow and, it must be said, overplaying the shocked co-worker just a little.

"Yes, our safety tutor has complained that you tampered with his presentation slides."

"TAMPERED WITH HIS SLIDES!" the PFY continues, silenced with a dry look from the boss.

"Well, I may have made a few grammatical corrections," I admit. "But nothing that didn't improve the document overall. Anyway, if it was that bad he could always recover his old presentation from the back-up system."

"Yes, that was the first option - until we found the missing screen degaussing wand in the tape rack."

The PFY stifles a guilty giggle.

"The off-site back-up tapes?" I suggest helpfully.

"Yes, there seems to be some problem with that," the boss replies suspiciously. "The tape content doesn't match the barcode index."

"Well, the barcode reader on one of the drives has been playing up," I reply. "It's possible his archive was written to a tape with a similar checksum."

"And how many tapes could that be?"

"About 2,000 - they all have the same checksum unfortunately - it's a bug in the software that I noted in a memo to you about, let's see, two months ago?"

"Ah. Well, I don't see why he can't type it in again," the boss says, sweeping the whole thing under the carpet and wandering off.

"Was there really a memo?" the PFY asks.

"Yep. A Buck-Pass memo with lots of buzzwords at the top to scare him off. Now he'll read it and find out the buck stopped with him."

"So what will happen?"

"Oh, the usual cover-up - an apologetic phone call in a couple of minutes followed by the rapid and angry entrance of a safety instructor through that doorway over there..."

Twenty five minutes later my practical demonstration to the PFY about the dangers of tying a piece of data cable an inch from the ground in a darkened doorway is complete. I grab a blank certificate of attendance from the pile left on the floor by the First Aid nurse and get the PFY to fill in the blanks.

The world of networking is full of accidents waiting to happen.

3.39 The B.O.F.H. suffers from phone trouble ...

"We might have a little problem with the UPS", the PFY calls as he passes, indicating with a sneaky nod the comms room. I grab the laptop with the UPS diagnostics on it and follow him.

Having no real need for the laptop I slip it onto the floor as soon as I'm inside and "stress test" any listening devices

that may have been "accidentally" left there by the boss by inserting my pen into the cooling fan at the rear of the UPS "What's the problem?" I ask, shouting over the noise of a plastic ballpoint being buzzed away by the heftiest cooling fins in the room.

"The boss has found out about the help line" he shouts, looking around warily, expecting capture and torture at any moment.

Oh dear. A great little money spinner that too. A reasonably simple idea in theory - automatically divert every newly disconnected phone in the company to an 0898 number which gives you sound computing advice.

Advice like "Your problem sounds like inadequate air cooling. The only possible solution is to water cool your computer. Go to the water fountain..." etc. Amazing how many calls a person receives once they leave - at 99p a minute - and yet more amazing how many phones don't have forwarding toll-bars.

As quickly as possible I ring the 0898 people and reluctantly shout to them that we wish to discontinue the service, then get the cheque sent on to my accountant under my little-known pseudonym of "Deceased". (no first or middle initials - Great for tax purposes). The figure they mention cheers the PFY and me up though. Obviously more calls than I'd imagined.

"How did they find out?" I ask

"I think I might have keyed in a typo the last disconnect and got a live one instead" the PFY confesses, with a due amount of trepidation.

Forgiveness being the key in times of crisis, I figure we bide our time looking like we're fixing the UPS until the Boss can't take it any more.

Minutes later the boss bursts in full tilt to collect what his listening device can't and collects my laptop with his shoe instead. His tardy reflexes divert his shoe mid-stomp so that he catches the side of it, flipping open its cover and sending him hurtling face first into a comms rack.

Nasty.

"Oooh" the PFY mutters, "I bet that hurt".

The look on the boss's face as he roughly extricates himself from the dangling cables confirms this guess..

"What the hell are you doing in here?" he snarls, dabbing at his grazed facials with his handkerchief

"Just checking out this noisy fan. It looks serious", I say, giving it a hefty jab out of his sight for old times sake.

Did I say old time's sake? I meant last time's sake. The fan, having had enough of the extra load of my pen, stops completely, emitting nothing but a tiny >click< and shuddering to a halt.

"BLOODY HELL!" the boss shouts over the UPS alarm, which is no mean feat considering it's made to be heard through the sound-proofed wall.

"SWITCH IT OVER T...o the other unit" he finishes as I press the Alarm Silence button

"There's not much chance of that", the PFY calls, bringing over the shredded remains of the laptop, the condition of which would seem to have got a lot worse in the last few seconds.

"Sorry about that", he says, "but someone left a cable laying on the ground ..."

We turn to the boss.

"...which I tripped over."

"Well it's too late for that - get another one!" the boss shouts, self-preservation at the management meeting key in his mind.

"We can't", I chip in. "The backup's got a dead hard-drive that you wouldn't let us replace", I add, applying a recent situation to my advantage.

"Whew!" The PFY mutters, "wouldn't want to be in your shoes. It won't look at all good that - your budget being the

cause a site outage ...”

”A SITE OUTAGE!?!” the boss gasps.

”Well, you did say that all faulty UPS units in the comms cupboards should be replaced with a feed from the central UPS to cut costs ...”, I add

The boss gets that hunted look.

”All right, what do you want?”

”I think you already know that”, I smile, benevolently. Or is that malevolently, I always get those two mixed up.

Ten minutes later I have the printed copies of his telephone enquiry as well as the photocopies he hid in the safe just in case.

I pop back to the UPS as it’s nearing its temperature cut-out point and demonstrate how simple it is to manually reset a fan circuit breaker ...

It’s funny how things work out for the best, isn’t it?

3.40 The B.O.F.H. has heated exchange with the boss ...

It’s a balmy mid-morning when the PFY slips back into the offices with this morning’s purchase following my specific instructions.

”One finely crafted plastic electric kettle, with safety cutout to prevent element burnout,” I say, smiling at the perfection of my plan.

”But we’ve got a coffee and tea maker!” he cries.

Filling the jug from the water fountain I shake my head. ”What happens every summer?” I ask.

”It gets hot?” he guesses.

”Correct. And our air conditioning system does what?”

”Fails.”

”And we have to what?” I ask.

”Sit in the comms room all day.”

”Correct. Grab the variable step-down transformer and meet me in the comms room.”

He does as I bid and moments later I’ve set the variac at five volts, plugged the jug into it, and hidden the lot under a sub-floor ventilation grill.

”Your mission, should you choose to accept it - you don’t have a choice by the way, it’s just an expression - is to keep this jug topped up while increasing the voltage by five volts a day.”

I take him over to a wall thermostat and pull the cover off.

”Step 2, turn the set screw on all the thermostats anti-clockwise by five degrees every day, making the air-con think it’s getting cooler in here. Now - any questions?”

”Yeah, what happens when the variable transformer gets up to 200 volts?”

”Twenty quid says the jug won’t get past 50.”

”You’re on!” the PFY gasps, seeking easy money.

”And no cheating by not filling the jug!” I add, knowing his nature.

The bet agreed, I busy myself on network load testing for a few days. When I’m sick of networked Doom-II, I ring the boss up and tell him about the air-con problems in the comms room. True to form, he wanders around the comms

room tapping the thermostats and sniffing the air for moisture. Exhausting his technical repertoire, he calls in some heating professionals who inform him that our measurements are OK.

"You'll need another unit," the technician tells the boss. "Your current ones look to be overloaded."

"I told the boss last summer that this was going to happen," I add, "but he did nothing about it and now look what's happening."

The slight throwing down of the gauntlet here will set his mood for the entire event. He probably suspects something is up but can't think of what it is and is desperate to thwart me - especially with my recent UPS fan victory.

"Yes, well, we'll have to put another unit in, but where..." he smiles realising the prime location right in front of his eyes. "What about there?" he asks, pointing to the wall between the comms room and the networks room.

"Not a good idea," the heating tech says, "the heat exchanger exhaust would make the room behind there a sweatbox."

"Well it doesn't look like there are any viable alternatives," the boss replies smugly.

"What about over there?" I ask, pointing to a gap between air conditioners in the opposite wall.

"No can do," the boss chimes in "too many units there already which would make the building structurally unsafe."

Something tells me he's done his homework on this one.

"So that wall it is," he smiles, gleefully indicating an area which would be right between my desk and the PFY's.

The PFY's look of horror speaks volumes.

Two weeks later, the control room is getting a tad uncomfortable, especially since someone authorised our windows to be riveted shut.

Visitors are at an all time low, with only the boss stopping behind the double-glazed viewing window to gloat every day or so.

Until D-Day that is.

The PFY and I are in exceptionally early to take my plan through to completion. Completion being removing the air-con from its mounting, turning it, and slipping it back in.

"The boss is bound to notice!" the PFY cries.

"He doesn't come in here any more - no-one does," I reply, soothing his fears.

"But he does go through the back way to the comms room and he'll see the back of the unit."

"Not when you swap the covers he won't."

"That won't fool him!"

"I believe it will - he only found out I swapped the covers of the fax machine and the shredder the other day. Pity the 'shredder' autodialled the newspapers with that expenditure blowout report of the other day. Tabloids can be so irresponsible."

"What did the boss do when he found out?"

"What do you think? Admit he was responsible for making us a laughing stock? Now I've got a quick job for you."

"What is it?"

"Redo your time sheets - they were his last 'fax'."

"You bastard!"

"In the flesh, on the prowl, and waiting for my 20 quid..."

3.41 The B.O.F.H. becomes a contract killer ...

I'm not happy. True, that's not such a rare occurrence, but today I'm VERY unhappy.

The boss has just dropped a bombshell in that he has single-handedly negotiated a bulk deal maintenance contract from one of our hardware suppliers entitling us to a 50 per cent discount on the maintenance of a machine.

Now I'm as much in favour of maintenance discounts as the next Systems and Networks Administrator who believes that most maintenance engineers should be struck about the head with a rugby sock full of thin-wire terminators, but this sounds a tad suspicious.

The boss, well known for having problems negotiating hallways, has somehow managed to cheat the highly skilled, money-grabbing, shafting professionals that make up the maintenance sales team at 'Rob-me-blind' Corp.

Uh-huh.

And while he was at it, he found his office without asking for help.

I don't think so.

So all that remains is for me to see what sort of complete pants-downer we've got.

"So what sort of contract is it?" I ask him, once he's back in his office gloating.

"Standard contract as before, only I've got the bastards LOCKED INTO IT for 20 years!" he cries gleefully. "IT'S AIRTIGHT! I had their lawyer squirming!"

"And OUR lawyer?" I ask, expecting the inevitable. "Overrated!" he replies. "Could have done it with my eyes closed"

Looking over the contract, I see he probably did.

"Mmm. One small question," I say, teeing up for a long drive down the fairway of hopelessness.

"Yes?"

"You do realise that WE are also locked into this deal for 20 years?"

"Of course."

"Well, bearing that in mind, could you point me to any - ANY piece of equipment we've had for more than five years, let alone 20?"

A penny starts the long drop.

"Uh...Ummmm...well...nothing?!?" he squeaks as his penny investment policy matures.

"Not quite true," I say. "We do have the large IBM card punching machine in the computer room. And do you know why we have it?"

"To punch cards?"

"Not when we don't have the corresponding reader..."

"Air conditioner ballast!" he blurts, just guessing.

"No. True, switching it off would relieve the necessity for a couple of the larger aircons, but no. The reason we have it is because it was put in when the building was first commissioned. It's not even ours. It's worth about 200 as scrap, only we can't collect BECAUSE IT'S TOO BIG TO GET OUT THE BLOODY DOOR!"

"I don't get the point," the boss confesses.

I check the document to make sure.

"Well, you have signed, a BINDING, AIRTIGHT contract which says that we will pay them 2,000 a month, every month, for the next 20 years, to look after a minicomputer that in about five years' time won't even put up a good show against a pocket calculator. And you didn't ask to see their licence beforehand?!"

"Which licence?"

"THEIR BLOODY LICENCE TO PRINT MONEY! YOU'VE GIVEN THEM EVERYTHING! THE ONLY THING YOU MISSED OUT WAS AN ACCIDENT INDEMNITY CLAUSE!" I shout in a frenzy.

An ice cold thought hits me. "You didn't give them complete indemnity against damage, did you?"

"What do you mean?" our skilled arbitration professional asks.

"Complete indemnity against damage. You know, they trip on a floor tile and drop their screwdriver down a ventilation hole and short the power supply to the backplane and blow a machine to bits. Their responsibility ends with 'SORRY'."

"Uhhhhmmmm... No. No, in fact I'm sure I didn't because once an engineer snapped the lead in my propelling pencil and we made him pay!"

"Yes, well at 2,000 a month, I'm sure the cost of a pencil lead will have them insuring themselves to the hilt."

Two weeks later the engineer from Rob-us-Blind-for-20-years arrives.

To make us feel like he's earning his dosh he unscrews the cover, gives the diagnostic lights a look, writes down a couple of numbers, then smiling smugly, puts the cover back on.

In fact he's so smug he doesn't even notice the PFY snaffling one of his screwdrivers and wandering off.

Nor does he notice the floor tile which is sitting a little higher than the others. Until he trips on it, tool-kit bursting on impact (as planned) followed by an extremely loud 'BANG' as our priceless, museum piece, very first company card punch machine explodes with his screwdriver between the power supply and the wiring loom.

Being an old machine it catches fire as well. Or that could be the petrol-soaked rag the PFY and I stuffed it with beforehand.

The boss and one of our lawyers gaze soundlessly from behind the viewing screen, the lawyer contemplating damages, the boss contemplating the humungous favour he'll owe me at contract renegotiation time...

3.42 The B.O.F.H. explains, dummies don't grow on trees ...

"Hello. Is that Network Support?" the user asks over hands-free.

I remove our topological LAN Viewing equipment (VR Glasses) and disconnect from our powerful network analysis server (VR Tank-Combat Games Machine) and direct my attention to the caller.

Caller-Id indicates a user at beancounter central is on the line.

"Yes, this is network support," I reply.

"Oh. I have a problem with FTP-ing from an Internet ftp server in Brussels. It keeps dropping my connection just after I've downloaded a megabyte."

The PFY looks over to me with a cheesy grin and scribbles out a hasty message: "TODAY'S LIMIT 1024K" and points at his packet filter software.

He's getting good.

"Ah yes," I say, flicking over the page on my excuse calendar, "We're getting a lot of this at the moment. We believe it's due to...Network Destabilisation from Low Voltage Fluorescent Lamp Spikes."

"Come again?"

"Well, when a fluorescent lamp starts, it sends a spike back down the power cable which in turn induces an interference current in network cabling nearby. In low voltage circuits this effect is magnified."

>DUMMY MODE ON<

[From the bastard Glossary:

DUMMY MODE, n. The mode in which a user, overcome by technical terms, will believe, and/or do, anything he or she is told.]

"DUH-HUH. So what do I do?"

[Told you so.]

"Well, today nothing, as there's obviously something generating spikes. How big was the file you wanted?"

"About 1.6 Megs"

I scribble: "TOMORROW'S LIMIT 1.59 MEGS" and pass it to the PFY.

"Well," I respond, "are there any low-voltage fluorescent tubes on your floor?"

"I don't know."

"Well, they'll be smallish, bar-like lights - usually inside signs or displays."

"THE FIRE EXIT SIGNS!!" my caller shouts from the end of the garden path he's been led down.

"Of course!" I cry, sharing his enthusiasm. "They're right above doorways, which is where our cable is fed. Well, there's probably nothing you can do about it now, as we can't refeed our network cabling, I'm sorry,"

"What about if we moved the exit signs?"

"Oh, I'm afraid WE couldn't do that, even if we had the time."

"Oh?"

"No, we simply do not have the time to remove the cable duct covers, slide the exit signs along the duct for a couple of yards to get them away from the data cables, then replace the covers in the newly vacated space for every exit sign on your floor."

"Oh" he replies, mind ticking over almost audibly. "Never mind then. I'll just try bringing the file across in pieces then."

I hang up then cross out the 1024K on the PFY's bit of paper and put 50K in its place, nodding to him to action it.

"He won't do it you know..." the PFY says, so little faith in one so young.

"10 Quid?" I ask.

"You're on," he says, thinking naive "easy money" thoughts.

The next morning comes and I stash a crisp new 10 pound note in my wallet with a smug grin. The PFY notes with disgust the repositioning of the Exit signs halfway along the walls, well clear of the "network cabling" in the doorways.

"Never underestimate the desperation of a user," I mention, furthering his education once more.

To take his mind off it, I get him to install the new 'Infra Red Wireless LAN Transceivers' (infra-red cameras), in the floors mentioned and drop some cable boxes around the place so it looks like we're going to do something.

Later that afternoon, Network Control is crammed to capacity with a dozen or so fellow network engineers from other companies.

"You all know the rules" I state, "20 quid a player, except for the PFY and I, who, as host, get first pick of a free player"

Nods all round as the PFY takes the bets and we switch on the gaming screens. Once the choosing of players is complete, we're ready to go.

"Let the game commence!" I shout, flicking the switch to cut the lights to Beancounter central and its stairwells. I then activate the fire alarms.

"The person whose player is the first to the safety of a stairwell, takes the pool!"

Through the infrared monitor we watch the pandemonium break out, as in the darkness, everyone runs for apparent safety.

The toll of the newly shifted exit signs is fairly high and will probably leave an impression on the wall that only a thick coat of plaster will put right.

Next on the obstacle list (for the smarter contestants) are the boxes of cable the PFY left randomly in the cubicle "corridors" earlier on.

"It's like a multi-ball game of pinball down there!" the PFY cries watching in disbelief.

Ten minutes later I'm counting my winnings - of course I did back the mover of the signs in the first place....

And they say there's no money in networking any more.

3.43 The B.O.F.H. attempts some artistic expenses ...

It's a balmy day at Network Central when I roll along to a meeting with the bean counter types about the expense claims that I've put in over the last two months.

It seems the brand, spanking new, state-of-the-art, bells-and-whistles character recognition software (to recognise expenses claims and whack them straight into a spreadsheet to perform mystical analyses of who's spending all the expenses money) has a slight hiccup when it comes to my claims and receipts. Perhaps, and I'm only guessing here, it's because I don't WANT anyone recognising what the hell my expenses really are.

If I wanted the boss to read 'beer and spirits' on my meal allowance form, I could have printed, in bold capitals, 'BEER AND SPIRITS', and not scrawled 'Breek and Sprorts' in a dyslexic manner.

It's a network contractor's prerogative to fork out their own money for a couple of packets of salt and vinegar crisps, then clock up a humungous bar-tab and get it paid for by the firm! In fact, it's a God-given right!

I mentally prepare for the interview with a couple of glasses of lager and a plate of chips at the local. Ten minutes later I'm in legume-reckoning central, talking to one of its many representatives.

"OK, meal allowances...what on earth does that say?" the beancounter challenges. "Breek and sprorts. What the hell's breek and sprorts?"

"Let me see..." I answer, feigning contemplation. "Oh! That's beef! I must have had the steak!"

"And sprorts?"

"Sprorts. Hmm...brussels sprouts!"

"You ate 150 worth of beef and brussels sprouts?"

"I might have. They were out of season.. Quite yummy if you serve them right. Expensive out of season too. And it was a rather large steak..."

Half an hour of creative food visualisation later...

"What's this one?" asks the accountant. "Breek and escrot?"

"Well, the first one's obviously beef again and the second one...hmmmmmm... almost looks like ESCORT doesn't it?! HA HA HA! Imagine that - work paying for an escort! No, I don't know what it could be - some form of delicacy that they serve at the Amsterdam Convention Centre?"

I saw it coming of course. That new handwriting analysis software could have taken my 'breek and sprorts', my 'ligord and amno' and come up with 'beer and spirits', 'liquor and ammo', spill the beans on where I bought them, how much it was a shot, and what her name was!

I don't think I need to tell you that this is a bad thing.

Luckily I am a firm believer in the ideal that as technology advances, people should regress as a form of self-defence. So I started varying my choice of writing implement and size, filling my forms out half in crayon, half in finger paint (all perfectly acceptable under the current expense claim directives which dictate that claims must be filled out in the claimant's handwriting).

Perhaps it's the writing in letters that varies between 16 point and 1600 point that's throwing the software off...

I'm drawn back to consciousness by the arrival of a new bean counter to replace my one, who by this time has worn out...

"Simon, just a couple more hiccups," my new bean counter starts.

"Mmmm?" I respond, only wanting to help.

"This one. It's a vertical line, in crayon I think?"

"Yes. That would be correct. I believe that was the first line of the V in the word veal."

"Huh?"

"Had a hand cramp, couldn't write any smaller. I could hardly hold the crayon in fact. And I didn't want to forget. Surely I'm not going to be penalised for a personal disability?" The words 'personal disability' have him almost wetting his pants with fear. The new huggy-feely fringe in upper management is so politically sound they echo, and even a sniff of insensitivity would be treated with lightening quick dismissal.

"Ah. OK. But 100 worth of veal?" he asks nervously.

"There was a side-salad too. Had grapes in it."

"I see. And this? It looks like a paint slur?"

"Finger paint." I reply. "Steak Sandwich. Extremely rare. See, you can see where the tail of the Y was."

"It's a smudge!"

"No, it really says that. I had to squish it up to fit it on the form due to the resolution of my finger."

"Why didn't you use a pen?"

"What? And risk RSI?"

Ten minutes later, another broken beancounter can be added to the tally as he gives in completely and adds up the totals.

"Oh!" I say, suddenly remembering "I've got one more."

"What's that?" he asks. "Breek and clops from today?"

"That would be...beef and chops."

"You had two meat dishes."

"Of course, got to keep my protein up!"

It's a dog's life really...

3.44 The B.O.F.H. puts a price tag on user access ...

It's training time and today I'm showing the PFY through the computer room when the phone rings. What the hey, no-one's around, so I pick it up.

"Hello."

"Is that the Computer Room?"

"Yes..."

"Is that the Systems Operator?"

I look around quickly - apart from the PFY there's no witnesses.

"..Yes..."

"I think you've got a dead hard disk on the database server."

"Really? What makes you think that?"

"Well, my database updates are very slow."

"What updates?"

"I'm capitalising the middle initial of all staff and contractors since 1991."

"How ... useful. And you expect that to rocket through in a couple of seconds do you?"

"So it's not a disk problem?"

"No, we'd know ahead of time if our disks were faulty - they have predictive failure."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I predict that they will fail in three seconds"

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm going to switch the power off."

I hear a flurry of keystrokes, but it's far too late to have any effect ...

Some wire jiggling and a loud click later and an impromptu transaction rollback is scheduled for disk restart time. The PFY, taking his education seriously, notes everything.

"No witnesses," I mention as we move on to the next piece of kit, just in time to catch sight of the boss bounding past the observation window on his way in. Another >CLICK< and the evidence disappears.

"What happened?" the boss blurts, rushing up.

"When?" I ask, innocent and confused.

"Just then - my database session has hung!"

The PFY and I play dumb while the boss examines the system console screen for signs of bastardisation. None are evident, so after a few seconds he wanders off. When I'm sure he's not coming back I plug the console cable back in and watch the disk repair messages roll by.

The Computer Room phone rings again and the PFY reaches for it. I shake my head, mouthing the word "Set-up". The boss is so predictable he belongs in the drive cabinet. I pick up the phone.

"Help, my spreadsheet's gone funny!" the user cries.

"In what way?" I ask

"Well, the bit where it gets the info from the database has just stopped!"

"Hmm. This sounds like you have an pre-revision embedded SQL statement."

>DUMMY MODE ON<

"Huh?"

"Okay, go back to your spreadsheet. There's an option in the menu somewhere to Examine Sql."

"Uuuuum... Oh, yes, there it is!"

"Okay, click on it. A window pops up saying something like SELECT something FROM something else WHERE some other stuff."

"Yeah, it does."

"Cut out everything except the stuff between the FROM and the WHERE."

"Okay, it's just HR_IDX, a comma, HR_SAL_SCALE a comma and HR_NAME."

"Right, those are the erroneous SQLs that you want to get rid of. So before each word type 'DROP', then add a semi-colon instead of the comma. One drop command per line. Then check the 'auto-commit' box. Lastly, use your boss's username and password so that it fixes the bad SQL."

"But I don't know his passw ..."

"Yes, you do. It's his wife's name isn't it?"

"Her middle name. But he said not to use it because it's got rights to ..."

"To repair SQL like you need to..."

"Oh... >clickety-click< ... That's funny. My spreadsheet has gone blank now!"

"That's right, because the repairs are taking place. Now when your boss gets him, tell him about the 'repairs' that you made."

"Okay. Thanks!"

"That's okay. It's my pleasure. Really."

I haven't even lifted my hand from the receiver when it rings again.

"Computer Room ..." I sigh.

"Hi, we're having a problem with the Human Resource Database. It's almost as if half the tables have disappeared!"

"Yes," I mutter, "We've been doing a lot of work on that recently."

"Oh. Well, is it working now?"

"Of course it is. And you'll be able to use it shortly ..."

"Great!"

"... when you get access. And the access charge today is five quid."

"What?!"

"Each!"

"You're joking!"

"Per minute."

"You can't do that!"

"You're right. I can't - it's my lunchtime, perhaps my assistant can help you."

I direct them to the PFY and head up to the staff cafeteria to check out today's contractor perk.

"Ten quid," I hear the PFY chant.

"What"

"Each. Per minute."

Fifteen minutes later he joins me in the cafeteria to outline the band of blood-seeking users lurking outside the computer room in wait for the return of the systems operators.

You can't pay for satisfaction like that. Unless you're a user of course.

3.45 The B.O.F.H. puts in a day on the helpdesk ...

"Well I feel it would be good for intra-departmental understanding if we were all to work in other positions for a while", the boss says, defending his master plan of having 'job share' once every six months "The CEO was very impressed with my initiative!"

"But surely you must realise that we'll be leaving network operations completely open with no staff?"

"Which is why I've put you in the helpdesk area" the boss replies smugly. "You'll be the first to know of any problems that arise..."

All my arguments are defeated by the boss in double-quick time, which means that a day in the helldesk is inevitable. The PFY, bless him, smells a rat.

"So what's going on?", he asks suspiciously. "The boss couldn't answer an operational question if he'd been up all night studying, yet today he had solutions for everything! And you didn't even put up a fight. It's almost as if you wanted to work on the helldesk! What's up!?!?"

Sadly it is necessary to let someone else in on my master plan, if only to prove that I am still in possession of a full quota of marbles.

"Cast your eyes around the department", I say. "Look at the equipment therein! Where does the newest of that equipment reside?"

"Well, the helpdesk - they need the latest and best to test out all the caller's software on their own machines. What's your point?"

"How much RAM has your PC got?" I ask

"16 Meg"

"WINDOW DRESSING!", I cry "Why, every single helpdesk machine has at least 32, and a couple have 64!"

"YOU'RE GOING TO STEAL THEIR HARDWARE!", the PFY cries, shocked. "Errrrmmm ... we're going halves in it though, aren't we?"

"Ja, mein Freund!" I cry, stuffing my 'lunchbox' with tools.

The next day I turn up before start time(!) to assume my new post. The phone rings at 5 minutes to opening, and I'm in such a good mood I answer it.

"Hello, is this the helpdesk?" a nervous voice asks.

"It most certainly is", I gush, all enthusiasm.

"I'm running short of space on the display machine and someone said that I should 'compact' all the unused stuff with a compaction program on the system? Which one would that be?"

"You're on a Macintosh, right?" I ask.

"Yes, the department graphics server" he answers.

"Right. Well, you'll want to use the default compactor that's stored on the desktop. 'Trash', I believe it's called".

"Isn't that how you remove files?"

"No, that's what the ERASE key does. And you don't have one on your computer, so you're completely safe. You just drag the file into the Trash 'folder', and then select 'Empty Trash' to invoke the file into the compactor."

"Really?"

"Yes, it's very efficient too, you'd be surprised how much you can fit on your hard disk if you run it through the compactor."

I leave the poor pleb 'compacting' his entire department's work and get back to removing all the coprocessors and

extraneous memory from the machines after replacing their ROM diags to report the missing hardware as present. Child's play, really. To delay discovery I switch virtual memory on wherever possible.

The PFY, meantime, is busy erasing our numbers from the helpdesk phonelists and shorting the batteries to their phone memories, to the inevitable but somehow satisfying detriment of all those saved numbers.

The phone rings and as the PFY's machine still has its internals hanging out, I answer.

"Hello, Helpdesk?" the caller asks.

"Yes, what can we do for you?", I ask, still pleased with the rapidly growing pile of saleable hardware in my 'lunch-box'.

"I upgraded my software and now my CD-ROM won't play music discs any more" the user bleats.

"Well, it's probably just some dust deposited on the CD-ROM lens" I respond, knowing full well that this is a bug documented on the first page of the manual. But who reads manuals?

"So what do I do?"

"Well, have you got a vendor-supplied, drive-specific, CD-ROM cleaning caddy?", I ask.

"Uh ... no", my user replies

>DUMMY MODE ON<

"OK, not to worry, you can improvise with a lightly abrasive disk."

"Great!" the user gushes "How?"

"Well, pop down to the Buildings Maintenance desk tomorrow and borrow a 80-grit orbital sanding disk from them. Slip it in your drive and let it run"

"How will I know when it's complete?"

"Well, you'll hear it spinning, then gradually slow down until it stops. When it's stopped your drive is done."

"Hey, thanks", my user gushes, then rings off.

...

They PFY and I are almost sad to leave at the end of the day - the helldesk has plenty of potential. I allow a faint smile cross my face while I push a matchstick into the keyway as the helpdesk door locks shut. Late start for them tomorrow, then ...

3.46 The B.O.F.H. and his pimply sidekick spread their network of misery ...

The PFY and I are in celebratory mode. The bosses have finally seen reason and agreed to become a Corporate Internet Service Provider in the cities that we have offices in, as an attempt to defray operating expenses.

A long-term attempt of course. In the short term however, it will mean long hours of overtime in foreign cities for the PFY and I as we struggle to make our systems foolproof.

It was a done deal from the time the CEO saw the interesting video conferencing tools available on the Internet. The bit about recovering our Internet operating expenses passed him by as he finally saw his very own project achieve fruition after its many stops and starts over the past year. His eyes watered as he thought of his image addressing all our offices simultaneously. I didn't think it politically sound to inform him of the MUTE control that accompanied almost every conferencing client ...

Once I had his signature, I set the wheels in motion immediately by cancelling the contract with our current ISP. A company that still didn't know which side of the information superhighway you were supposed to drive on, and thought that World Wide Web had something to do with driftnets and dolphins. Not that it didn't charge completely through the nasal cavity for its knowledge. When we got stung with a consultancy fee for ringing to say its router was

down AGAIN, we knew the end was nigh.

The PFY puts a brave face on it as he heads off to one of our Scottish offices for a week, forced to stay in a luxury hotel as the company's courtesy apartment had apparently been leased to a Mr Babbage - the same person who hadn't shown up to the Welsh courtesy apartment last week. I too, was forced to stay at a hotel - not that I had much time to see my room with all the work I had to do. The hours of which incidentally coincided with the hours that the house bar opened. Pure coincidence, as I explained to the boss, two days later when he queried me about the astronomical bar-tab. In fact, I could quite honestly say that I had ABSOLUTELY no recollection of ever being there.

Anyway, to placate the boss about all the spending that's been going on, I show him the extra-special bonus advantage we obtained when a company across the road (and only a short trip down some municipal piping away) asked to connect to us. We were only too pleased to connect them to our LAN.

The boss notes carefully the heavy three-phase power cable going into their tiny router, and the four thick-wire-like segments and one UTP segment that emerged. Back at our offices he noticed even more carefully the termination of the 'thick-wire' segments on the input of one of our UPS units. Even he can see that three 2.4KW supplies is an investment in the power bill of the future. That the company is also paying us for the service has him almost smiling. A frightening thought.

He is, however, not the only one to notice. "This Internet thing uses a ton of power," our client's network expert ('ex' being a has-been, 'spurt' being a little drip under pressure) complains. "Our comms room power bill has rocketed skywards!"

"Well it would," I reply. "I mean, after all, you have to push that data all around the world, not just to the next office. Just imagine what your power bill would be like if you weren't connected through us!"

"Oh!" he mumbles. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"No, and consider the traffic speed difference. What speed do you get from home provider?"

"Oh," he mumbles. "14.4 or 28.8. Much slower than work. Although work does pause from time to time."

"Well we could speed you up of course," I say. "But then that would involve another set of cables and more power consumption. Then if you wanted, we could run a redundant server over in our offices as well, on our UPS, but you'd have to pay for the power bills for that too."

"Well, the bosses do want redundancy once we start putting up our own home pages..."

I hate me, I really do. It's just like shooting a fish in a barrel. With an elephant gun.

To celebrate my recent successes, I ring through to our other Scottish office to sort out my arrangements for next week's installation.

"Hello? I'd like to reserve the courtesy apartment please...Babbage. London Office. I've already booked? Excellent."

That PFY is damn good.

3.47 The B.O.F.H. brings the anoraks back to earth ...

It's trade show time again, and this time it's off to the east coast of the US for a week of seeing what's new in the land of wire wiggling. Of course, I read clippings from the computer press from time to time but it's far better to see an ATM switch in the flesh than on the page.

Actually, it's even more essential to see the inside of a posh hotel bar than to see an ATM switch in the flesh; one must get one's priorities right, and hey, if I wanted to look at flashing lights I could do it in my own air-con comms room instead of a sweaty exhibition hall.

Life is sweet as we cruise over the Atlantic. The canapes are splendid, though the smoked salmon has perhaps been a little over-chilled. We're talking first class, naturally - my turn-left-at-economy-and-it's-by-the-bog seat was mysteriously exchanged for that of a Mrs E. Windsor ... well, it's a pretentious name anyway. I think there must be

someone important down the back also, as there are lots of men in dark suits arguing with stewardesses over seats and reservations and stuff; I must complain to the airline about the lousy soundproofing on the first class section - it's very noisy.

"Excuse me, what processor does that have?"

My five-star-brandy-induced trance of peaceful smugness is broken.

"I'm sorry?"

"What processor does your laptop run? Mine's a 133 meg Pentium."

Great. Even worse than the nutter on the bus, I get the computer bore on the plane. At least on the number 2 Routemaster you can push them off the open platform on the Edgware Road.

"It's a 437 meg SPARC Ultra." Only a slight exaggeration - I like to start gently.

"Really? I didn't know Windows ran on a SPARC."

"It doesn't."

"So what are you running?"

"Solaris 2.7."

"Hey, wow! You must be a serious user."

"Yeah. Something like that." Which makes you a serious luser. "You running Windows 95?"

"Yes."

"Hey, wow. You must be a serious sad bastard."

He smiles uncertainly, trying to convince himself that I'm jesting. Time to sort that misapprehension out for him.

"Did you know that you can speed up that model with a simple hardware mod?"

"Hey, no! Really? How do you do it?"

"Well, I shouldn't really say, as there's a slight risk involved - it will invalidate your warranty."

"That's OK, I'm happy to try it as long as it's pretty certain to work. What do you do?"

"Right. Have you got a paper clip? Actually, any smallish bit of metal wire will do."

"Yes, here you are. What do I do with it?"

"You're going to crank up the speed of the SCSI bus by increasing the power a little. Turn the machine round so the back's facing you, and connect that pin there in the SCSI connector to the earphone plug."

He fiddles about, and manages to lodge the paper-clip appropriately. No blue smoke ...yet.

"Okay, now what?"

"Now you have a machine that you can selectively make faster when you need to. You don't want to just crank it up permanently as that'll eat battery life, so it's best to just speed things up when you really need to."

"So how do I speed it up when I need to?"

"Just play a music disc on the CD. That will cause the voltage in the earphone socket to go up, and so the bus will be energised. Don't play it too loud, though, or you could damage something; something like Dark Side of the Moon should be OK, but watch out for the alarm clocks."

"Hmmm...I don't have any audio CDs here. Can I use the microphone instead?"

"Sure - just set it to 'play through' mode and shout in the mike when you need the speed. Careful not to shout too loud, though."

Fifteen minutes goes by, and I'm beginning to regret what I've done. My friend has discovered that whistling into

the mike is the easiest way to make a loudish noise, and it would seem that his particular make of laptop is far more resilient than those I've come across before. Fortunately, help is at hand in the shape of a flustered gentleman who advances rather angrily.

"WILL YOU PACK THAT BLOODY WHISTLING IN!" he screams. At that moment the paper clip does its worst.

Interestingly, Boeing's air conditioning is particularly well-attuned to the smell of smoke - a fire alarm goes off in the distance.

"I think that's a 1,000 fine," I smile sweetly as the stewardesses move to break up the fight breaking out between my geeky companion and the flustered gentleman. Soon, the parties involved are rapidly strapped to their seats with a burly looking steward in attendance. Once again all is calm.

"Sorry for the disturbance, sir. Can I get you another brandy?"

3.48 The B.O.F.H. avoids a team-building weekend ...

I'm experimenting with some infra-red remote reboot hardware when the pimply-faced-youth wanders in.

"Who's that?" he asks, pointing at some besuited individual in the next office.

The face seems vaguely familiar, then the ball drops ...

"Something to do with personnel," I reply. "One of those huggy-feely types into team-building and customer expectation, if I remember rightly."

"Our customers already know what to expect!"

"Yes. That could be the problem ..."

"The boss is being a bit brown-nosey," the PFY observes, as the boss welcomes Mr Huggy.

"Yes, and judging by the crawl-factor, I'd say he's been got at from above ..."

Two hours later the PFY sprints in.

"There's something you should know," he says.

"What? You've not been eavesdropping on the boss have you?"

"No, just checking the connectivity of his spare UTP lines. True, the test device has good aural response."

"Almost microphone-like?"

"Ummm ..."

"All right, what is it?" I interrupt.

"They're setting up a divisional retreat!" he blurts.

"A Bloody what!?" I shout, losing composure for a second.

"A divisional retreat. It's not that bad really, is it?" he asks.

"You're joking aren't you? A weekend locked away in team-building hell with people who think that a benchmark comes from not using a doily under your coffee mug?"

"Uuuuhh ..."

"They have client representatives there to annoy you night and day with lame questions like, 'How do you justify your fault resolution policy?'"

"How do we justify it?"

"We don't. Accidental equipment combustion is a proven and documented phenomenon."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Not go. Unless, of course, you look forward to 'Trust' exercises, where you fall backwards into the arms of a group of people who have trouble catching a cold without written instructions."

"Apparently, it's compulsory - or at least the contracting bonus is dependent on attendance."

"The sneaky bastards!"

"So what do we do?" the PFY asks.

"First things first - when is it?"

"Three weeks from Saturday."

We put our heads together and formulate a battle plan so sneaky it would make Rommel weep. The next day we're the first to inform the boss that we'd be delighted to attend. He breaks open a new roll of antacid tablets.

The PFY handles the fax-interception, reducing the 45 single-room accommodation bookings to 10, changes the food budget to alcohol and swaps the light jazz-band evening entertainment to a popular Soho Cabaret act ...

I borrow Mr Huggy's credit card - carelessly locked in the visiting staff office - rewrite the personal info track with "Stolen card - Detain", then crank the rumour mill into action by leaving empty, alcohol-based cough syrup bottles in his rubbish bin at nights. I then swap his laptop power adaptor for a dud.

The next day, the offensive begins ...

"There seems to be something wrong with my adaptor," Mr Huggy says in a surly manner. Apparently, being detained at a garage for an hour by a burly mechanic until his credit card could be verified didn't improve his sense of humour.

The PFY gets him a heavier duty replacement and a loud >CRACK!< later, Mr Huggy walks back in, smelling of smoke.

"Oh dear!" I cry. "The PFY didn't give you a step-UP transformer by accident, did he? I'll tell you what, we'll sort you out with the emergency 386 until your machine is repaired. Four meg should be OK for Windows 95, shouldn't it?"

"Oh, the one with the new infra-red mouse you mean?" the PFY asks.

The next day, the boss gets involved after he receives the query from the bean counters about Mr Huggy's proposed alcohol bill. The rubbish rumours have filtered through by this stage and once he finds out about the cabaret team, the boss calls the PFY and me into his office.

"Have you had anything to do with this?" he asks.

The PFY and I shake our heads.

"Personally," I add, "I've heard the rumours and I think perhaps he's a little too unstable to be doing team management activities."

The seeds of doubt planted, I wait for the PFY to do a bit of fertilisation and watering ...

"Is it just me, or is it hot in the office?" the PFY asks, right on cue.

"Yes, I'm a little hot myself," I reply.

The boss leaps to his latest favourite toy, the air conditioning remote, and adjusts the temperature for us, thus re-booting Mr Huggy's machine for about the third time this morning. We all watch in silence as Mr Huggy pushes his replacement machine off the desk in a fit of madness, then starts taking his office apart.

Ten minutes later, security has carted him away and retreat plans are in the bin where they belong.

And they say that life isn't fair.

3.49 The PFY battles it out with the B.O.F.H. ...

"I believe that's another 500 down the toilet and another two points for me," the pimply-faced-youth gloats, adding another tick to the lengthening line in his favour.

True, a competition to see who can destroy the most equipment in a week was a little childish, but it's been slow recently and experimentation is good on-the-job training. We play for the usual stakes, a pint at the pub across town.

"What was it?" I asked, effecting a slight interest.

"I told a user that his problem was power leakage in getting electricity to the sixth floor. The excuse calendar gave me the idea and I worked back from there. Told him the voltage was much lower when it got to his room, so he should ..."

"Switch his PC to 115 Volts," I finish tiredly.

"Was there something wrong with that?" he asks.

"Not per se. But remember our job isn't really to destroy equipment or frighten the daylights out of our users. That's an added bonus in our selflessly devoted lives as technical support persons. Our job is to ensure the smooth running of our networking subsystem."

"By eliminating users on it."

"Show me an Ethernet collision and I'll show you a network that could do with one user fewer," I reply.

"But you're always going to have collisions!"

"And I'm always going to be devoted to network performance enhancement."

"Whilst making a truckload of dosh on the side," the PFY chips in.

"Not necessarily. The truckload of dosh is also an incidental bonus. I encourage 'daily bonuses' because a happy worker is a safe worker, and a safe worker is a good worker."

"For instance, last week when I mailed the video tape of what occurred in the lift at 11.17pm the previous Friday to one of the parties concerned. Upon receipt of a large envelope of unmarked bills from that person, I, as a happy worker, then configured a router in record time. If I'd had things on my mind that displeased me, I may not have completed the job quite so well ..."

"So why did you play the tape on the lunch room share price monitor the next day?"

"Strictly for the good of the company. You saw how much people enjoyed it. They were cheerful and happy, and therefore more productive later that day."

"And the three people concerned?"

"They, being not so cheery, resigned shortly thereafter, proving once again that this is a workplace for happy and productive persons."

"Well, you're still miles behind," he gloats again, flashing the score sheet.

"So what's the score then?"

He counts feverishly and comes back with "40 to nine - to me".

"So, I'm chasing a 26 point lead."

"No, 31!" he corrects.

"Ah, no, 26," I repeat, pushing the boss's laptop off the desk onto the floor and jumping on it.

"That's hardly fair!" he cries.

"Life's not fair," I reply. "But the root password helps."

All this does not disguise the fact that I'm waay behind, which concerns me. In fact, there's only 32 minutes between me and having to say the words "Lager shandy", which the PFY doesn't normally drink, but would, just this once, to

make me look bad in front of the bar staff and regulars.

With all this at stake, I crash a router and answer the next call.

"Hello?" the voice on the phone asks nervously.

"What seems to be the problem?" I ask.

"It's our machines, they've all hung."

"Yes, it'll be Power Leakage from Heat Displaced Breaker Elements."

>DUMMY MODE ON<

"Ah-huh ... What do I do?"

"Well, you'll have to call the service electrician to replace the service circuit breaker for the power points along your side of the office."

"But we've got urgent work on!"

"Well, I shouldn't really tell you this ..." I whisper.

"What?" the user asks, hooked.

"Well, you can manually reset the displaced elements."

"How?" he gushes, envisaging fame, fortune and promotion opportunities.

"Just go to the powerbox by the stairwell and flick the switch with the same number as your floor box on and off about 20 times, as quick as you can."

The PFY looks on loathingly. Sure enough, 10 minutes later the full ramifications of my advice have been revealed; I'm only 2 points behind ... which is where I remain until 5pm when the PFY accompanies me to the tube station.

"Some people just haven't got it," he chirps smugly.

His good humour is unbearable, but luckily only lasts until our tube train whistles in and I nudge his laptop bag onto the rails.

"Woopsy!", I say, as I reveal the real time and my part in the clock tampering: "One minute too ... I guess that's a beer you owe me ..."

"You BASTARD!" he says, as the sweet smell of victory fades.

"Chalk it up to the cost of education," I say. "And I hope you'll enjoy that lager shandy ..."

3.50 Beancounter central takes vehement action ...

I am shocked. Mortified ... In an out-of-the-blue attack from beancounter central - a veritable leguminous dawn-raid - our espresso machine was written off and disposed of overnight.

"I ... I ..." the PFY mutters in disorientation.

Having worked in computing for some time now, I know the importance of back-ups, and bring out my emergency plunger and freeze-dried grounds.

"THAT'S below the belt," the pimply-faced-youth sniffs, as life returns to normal. "I just can't believe they'd do it!"

"Why not?" I reply. "After all, we've been pretty much engaged in an inter-departmental war here, despite what the boss says about us all working towards a common good."

"But the espresso machine!" he cries. "That really hurts. What're we going to do? We have to do something!! Nicad 'RAM' upgrades all round? Another game of blackout fire alarm beancounter pinball?"

I shake my head.

"No, that's just what they'll be expecting. And no dropping out network connections either - they'll be logging it all as an excuse for external service contracts."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"For now, nothing."

"But ..."

"... but at a later date, we hit them where it really hurts."

Two weeks later the machine is still gone and the PFY is manifesting symptoms of plunger RSI. It's time for action.

"Right. The accounts database!" I cry.

"We can't. I tried yesterday and they've changed the password!" The PFY replies.

Mentally assessing the originality of our beancounters, I try a series of possibilities, hitting paydirt at 'PROFIT'. The database reveals a pristine payments system so well designed that a child could understand it. Which means it's aimed at its correct target audience.

I make a few minor retroactive changes and disconnect. The PFY kills time by leaving an anonymous tip with the company auditors.

The next day dawns and the PFY and I are in bright and early to witness a couple of stony-faced business professionals riding the escalators.

A double click of the escalator PLU control window later, and the escalator performs an impromptu emergency stop, scattering auditors and paraphernalia in all directions. The bleeding nose is sure to add to the impartiality of the impending investigation. Yet another double-click three-seconds later ensures this as recent events are replayed.

Fearing another bank of escalators, the auditors make their second mistake of the day and head for the lifts. Sadly for them, my new lift-control joystick is up and running and they're taken on a G-force adventure, of the sort normally associated with a roller coaster.

The remains of a hearty breakfast down the front of one of the auditor's jackets leaves absolutely no doubt as to the effectiveness of my latest gaming addition. Their mood appears to the casual CCTV viewer as 'aggressive'.

An hour later, the PFY and I wander up to beancounter central to 'fix some networking problems'.

"That's the bastard!" a beancounter shouts, pointing me out to the auditors.

"I'm sorry?" I ask, innocently and humbly.

"Who tampered with the lifts and escalators!"

"I'm sorry?! No-one has touched the lifts or escalators since this department froze the buildings maintenance budget six months ago!"

"We most certainly did not!" the head beancounter cries, emerging from the relative safety of his office.

"Ahhh ... someone did," Auditor one mentions, looking up from the payments database. "The money is now being paid to a ... Clinton Ash."

"C. ASH," I mutter quietly. "Hmmm. Oh, that Panamanian Company! You were just over in Panama six weeks ago weren't you?" I ask the head beancounter.

"Did you post the cheque or deliver it personally?"

Head beancounter is not stupid (surprisingly) and recognises an extremely dodgy situation when he's in it. He dares not discover what else I have up my voluminous electronic sleeves ...

"Ah, Ash and Associates," he ad-libs hurriedly. "Service and Maintenance Contractors."

"Of course!" I gush. "And fitters of espresso machines too, aren't they?"

"... Yes," head beancounter agrees, realising the direction this dialogue is heading.

"Isn't one of their subsidiary companies due to do an installation in our Lunch Room today sometime?"

"...Yyyess, I'd forgotten about that. I'll check on it this afternoon."

"Why wait?" I ask, passing my cellphone over. "Call now. Hell, they might have even forgotten about the whole thing."

That afternoon the PFY and I are relaxing over a strong brew, contemplating the turn of good fortune that upgraded our old single head espresso machine to the new triple head, auto-grind model.

"I still have a lot to learn," the PFY admits thoughtfully.

"Try to think of it not as learning," I say, "but just as doing your job to the best of your ability..."

3.51 The B.O.F.H. bides his time to unravel a mess ...

I'm trying to make a deal with Raoul, a local cabling contractor, about supplying us with some Cat 5 cable, only he's playing hard to get because he knows he's the only one who has any in stock ... which is all according to plan, as I've mentioned the secret code, 'the boss wants', which instantly means I'll go halves in any excess profit.

The boss has suspected something like this for some time but has never had hard proof, despite his request that all telephone transactions be done on 'Hands Free' so he can listen in. Deciding to plan the cabling of a set of refurbished offices single handedly was his second foolish move.

"Well, it's a bit of a tricky one," says my supplier down the phone.

"You see, I have the cable you want - in fact, I have about twice what you'll need - but it's already been purchased and is going to be delivered today. Have you tried another supplier?"

Smooth as greased silk ...

"Yeah, but unfortunately they're all out of Cat 5 too," I reply.

"You're joking!" he gasps, convincingly.

"Yep, it's as if someone has ordered up the entire cable market in one gulp - everyone's sold out for the next couple of days. Are you sure there's nothing you can do?"

"No, not really - about all I've got left is a stack of that untested stuff that we got dirt cheap. It looks like Cat 5, but it's got some foreign military spec on it which doesn't equate to any known rating."

"We'll take it! Get it here by lunchtime!" the boss shouts.

"Hang on a minute there," I say, sneakily flipping on the voice recorder. "Wouldn't it be better to find out what the spec is - it could be field-phone cable for all we know."

"We haven't got time, I've committed to having the new offices up and running in three days!" the boss cries, then dashes off to confirm the attendance of our cabling contractors.

I switch the voice recorder off.

"So, what are we getting?" I ask.

"Not really sure. It was salvaged from a sunken Romanian container - I only bought it for the copper value."

"And will it carry signal?"

"Oh yes"

"Really?"

"Well, maybe - unshielded, untwisted - I'd think twice about using it for Christmas tree lights myself, but there you go."

"So why did you say it looked like Cat 5?" I ask.

"Well, the sheathing is similar, and it comes on a drum," he replies.

"And all ours comes on easy-flow cartons?"

"I didn't say it looked exactly like Cat 5!"

"Excellent!" I chuckle. "Talk to you later."

Later that afternoon, I'm interrupted by the boss in an agitated mood.

"That bloody cable is crap!" he cries.

"Well, I did warn you not to purchase it," I mention, indicating the voice-recording lamp on my phone. "Which reminds me, I must get that bulb fixed."

The boss is now trapped; he has no cable, a deadline, and four or five cabling contractors kicking around in the lobby at a reasonably hefty hourly rate. And he's just paid good money for crap cable.

Being a benevolent sort, I decide to help the boss out. I call Raoul.

"Raoul, what would we be paying for some Cat 5 cable?" I ask.

"I've already told you that we don't have any c..."

"Sorry, let me re-phrase that, what would we be paying for someone else's Cat 5 cable?"

The boss's eyes light up as a solution presents itself. Raoul mentions some disgusting figure which the boss nods at rapidly.

"But our delivery van has been stolen," Raoul adds, according to plan. "You could pick it up from here though."

"No can do," I reply, "my car's a two seater."

"TAKE MINE!" the boss cries, mental clock ticking.

Half an hour later, the pimply-faced-youth and I are loading cartons of cable into the back of the boss's palace on wheels. I decide to drive back now that the PFY has admitted he's actually only had two driving lessons.

Still, I'm sure all the dents (except for the ones left by the three parking meters) will hammer out eventually.

I bid Raoul goodbye and ask him to cancel the mass of Cat 5 orders I placed that caused the artificial shortage of the last two days.

Back at the office, the boss is so pleased he doesn't even mention the remains of his radiator left by the PFY's parking meter interlude. He sends the cabling contractors over.

"Right ...," I say, "... your cable's on the drum over there."

"That stuff?" one of them asks. "Isn't that Romanian writing?" Ten minutes later Raoul is making me an offer on some excess Cat 5 that I just cannot refuse...

3.52 Don't let the Boss set up a network ...

Things aren't well in boss-land. Sadly, the managers have found out about his poorly planned foray into network design and installation. They are NOT pleased. How they got wind of it is anybody's guess, but I did notice that the pimply-faced-youth has completely finished the 'to do' list I left him last night. His attention to detail is commendable.

Fitting substandard cable wouldn't have gone so badly for the boss but for his choice of installation technique. Although it may have been adversely affected by a friendly discussion with the PFY and myself over a couple of lagers.

Boss: "So I'm looking at multi-pair plug looms running along the bottom of raised floor offices, and terminated at the three outlet points I've allocated per room ..."

Me: "Plug looms? Not like the ones we used in the offices downstairs a couple of years ago? One nudge and the connectors went open circuit."

Boss: "But then I thought that single runs of Cat 5 direct from the comms cupboard would be a better option."

PFY: "Along the floor? So when someone spills their coffee it'll trickle through onto the cable, shorting out th..."

Boss (quickly): "Did I say along the floor? I meant inside the wall cavities ..."

I'm sure you can imagine the rest - like shooting a fish in a barrel.

Still, the three useless wall outlets make interesting conversation pieces. But I could even have forgiven the boss for that, had he not tried for a save by installing some expensive wireless LAN equipment in the outer offices, in the mistaken belief that infra-red was some form of short distance radio transmission medium. (I have absolutely no idea where he got that idea from, although the PFY's nose does look a little longer in recent days). From this, the boss has discovered the negative career potential of installing networking that only works when your office door is open ...

"We've really got a problem here," he chirps in a hunted manner as he paces my office.

"What's that?" I ask helpfully.

"The bloody network, it's a shambles!"

"Well I don't mean to rub salt into your wounds, but you probably should've let us do the planning. After all, that's what we're paid for."

"And what would you have done that was so different?" he demands offensively.

"Hmm..." the PFY cuts in, "I would have run some multi-pair plug looms of real Cat 5 (and not some cheap imitation) under the raised floors, and terminated them at the three outlet points that I'd have allocated per room."

"But that's what I proposed!" he blurts, realisation hitting him.

"Well actions do speak louder than words," I sigh. "Speaking of which, I believe there's a legal one heading your way real soon."

"What am I going to do," he wails in a voice very reminiscent of a user at disk defragmentation time.

"Well you could have the cabling replaced," I reply.

"Yes, you're right, I'll do that."

"Only its cable-tied every six inches inside a wall, and that means they'll have to partially demolish it to ..."

"That's no good!"

"Well then there's only plan B left."

"What is it?"

"You pay a one-time subscription to 'Bastard-Net Inc' and agree to large overtime bills. The problem will be gone by tomorrow and just a memory by next Wednesday."

"What's the subscription and where do I pay?" he blurts.

"Two hundred quid; the PFY and me."

Seeing the rock and hard place at close proximity once more, the boss reaches for his wallet.

The next day, security are combing the building for the eight office doors mysteriously stolen during the night. Strangely, the CCTV noted nothing but a rerun of *The Beverley Hillbillies*.

Network stability in the new offices is at an all-time high, except for when the head of PR (a heavily built gentleman who looks like he was poured into his clothes and forgot to say when) passes by. His popularity around those offices appears to be waning fast.

One week later, the sub-floor recable is completed and the PFY and I present our overtime sheets for approval.

"Hang on," the boss shouts. "168 hours? That's 24 hours a day for seven days!"

"We did work extremely hard," the PFY chips in.

"You can't seriously expect me to sign this," the boss says, ever so slightly annoyed.

"Of course not," I reply. "We'll just put the network back the way it was then. Oh, and I wonder ..."

"Wonder what?!" the boss snarls.

"Whose fingerprints were on that pile of stolen doors that security found ..."

"When?!"

"Tomorrow morning ..."

One autograph later, the PFY and I take the rest of the day off to recuperate from our stressful overtime.

3.53 Infiltration of the e-mail system ...

I'm fine tuning the satellite WAN antenna and encryption system when my e-mail client signals a message. I turn from the calibration screen (and US Military movie channel that it has unfortunately become irrevocably locked on to), and check the message.

To receive a message is strange as my normal e-mail address simply discards messages once it's forwarded the sender's e-mail address on to several bulk e-mail marketing lists.

Examining the message, I find it appears to have come from inside the company. Strange, as my e-mail address is known to no-one but the pimply-faced-youth. I know it's not from the PFY as he's organising the distribution of the recently delivered phone directories.

Curiouser and curiouser ...

Further examination reveals that the e-mail has in fact come from the new helpdesk (alias helldesk) software which has trolled the password file of the mail server to build its recipient list. The message itself is anathema to me - a helldesk request.

I hate helldesk software, always have. The thought of some piece of software not accepting the resolution date of 'When I get around to it, if I get around to it' annoys me intensely. Intensely.

So intensely, I log in to the helldesk server.

Twenty minutes later, one of its users calls me.

"Hi, it's the helpdesk here. We were wondering if you knew what's up with our server?"

"No idea," I reply. "Why?"

"Well it's got very slow on updating entries."

"Really? Perhaps it's just poorly designed software with limited scalability," I reply, whipping a couple of convenient buzzwords out of the bag.

"Check to see if it changes over time - it could just be running some internal journalling procedure."

"Oh, of course! Okay, thanks."

She rings off and I crank up the disk-exerciser software from 80 per cent activity to 95 per cent and wind the seek distance from 'Minimal' to 'Potentially Destructive'.

Luckily, I have a patched version of the exerciser which doesn't enforce the standard 15-minute time limit on destructive testing. Well - lucky for some, in any case.

"Five quid says it won't last the night," I call to the PFY.

"No deal," the PFY replies, after checking out my 'testing' parameters, remembering all too well the extremely high failure rate of the disks we 'tested' for the beancounters prior to installation. Eighty-seven per cent within the first month if I remember correctly. And the real tragedy was that they installed an incompatible version of their desktop

back-up software too.

Still, a lot of them probably needed the late night typing practice.

Sure enough, the next day there's a very unfortunate head crash on the helldesk server, and everything grinds to a halt. The boss takes a personal interest in the events, but can find no evidence of foul play. I notice that he is personally looking after the helldesk software tape and not trusting the tape library. Hmmm.

I give the PFY the boss's new Yellow Pages to deliver. We share a knowing glance ...

The helldesk server is reinstalled and configured and its entries are re-keyed. A repeat of yesterday's e-mail message arrives in my e-mail queue, just as I notice one of my cron jobs on the server getting stuck in an infinite loop and setting the clock back by five minutes. Every five minutes. But I'm sure the helldesk resolution alarms won't be affected ...

Dedicated to the cause, I call in on the boss.

"I thought I'd just take the helpdesk software tape to the tape library," I offer helpfully.

He hands it over and I accidentally drop it on the floor. In my enthusiasm to pick it up it gets crushed by a chair leg. Four times.

I look up to see the boss's smiling visage. In his hand is a tape indelibly marked 'Helpdesk Software Backup'.

"Wasn't born yesterday," he smirks, placing the tape down on the only cleanish area of his desk - on top of a recently delivered Yellow Pages.

A brief 'hmm' later, I exit the office.

Getting back to my office, I refire up the disk exerciser at 97 per cent and 'Definitely Destructive'.

The next day, horror of horrors, the helldesk server encounters another head crash. I go straight to the boss's office.

"I just thought I'd take the helpdesk software tape to the technicians so that they can reinstall it," I say.

The boss smiles and shakes his head sadly.

"Oh," I respond. "Well, in that case, I'll just get back to work. You haven't seen the portable bulk eraser have you? I'm concerned because it's really sensitive to shocks and things. That's why I made it a protective case out of one of our left over Yellow Pages ..."

The boss's face takes on a slightly pasty look as he glances at the phone book on his desk.

"Ah ... that must be it," I say, and wander out of his office, having found my missing hardware.

Play with fire, get burnt ...

3.54 The B.O.F.H. engages in some underhand practices ...

It's a calm afternoon in the office when my personal phone rings. I answer it, listen, then hang up.

"Stress Relief Session," I tell the PFY and we break to the local pub.

I notice that my caller's in place, so I have the PFY get the drinks in.

"Afternoon George," I open, as the PFY and I join him.

"Afternoon," George replies, with a distinctly furtive look.

"You haven't met my assistant have you?" I continue. "PFY, George; George, PFY."

The PFY is giving me a reassuring look that's usually reserved for the mentally unstable (which he'll pay for later if the slamming of his top drawer has anything to do with it).

"George is one of our janitors," I mention, waiting for the gears to turn in the PFY's head.

As his expression remains unchanged I realise I am going to have to remove the spanner from his mental works and kick-start his thought processes.

"George empties the bins of the rich and powerful..." I hint.

The flame of enlightenment splutters in the PFY's eyes as he realises an excellent source of potentially damaging information.

"Hello," he says, holding out his hand.

George doesn't move. I sigh.

"That's not the way you greet George," I explain. "THIS is the way you greet George."

We shake hands and George slips a crisp new 20 quid note into his pocket.

"The videoconferencing project is back," George mentions quietly.

"EXCELLENT!" I cry. "Should be good for a lot of new equipment."

"Not if the carbon of a certain hand-typed order is to be believed..." George mumbles.

"HANDSHAKING PRACTICE!" I say to the PFY.

He ferrets around in his pockets then shakes George's hand. Another 20 quid note disappears and a piece of litter flutters to the floor. Being a tidy type of person, I pocket the litter to dispose of later.

"Well, can't hang round all day I suppose," I quip. "Work to do, etc."

Scant minutes later the PFY and I are poring over an invoice carbon with a lot of zeros in the bottom right hand corner. A lot. An invoice that would've rung a lot of bells on the 'network monitor' had it been processed in an orthodox manner.

"Smell that?" I ask the PFY.

"What?"

"A rat." I reply. "A big rat, with a flat tail from being stomped on in the recent past."

The PFY looks out to the Boss's doorway.

"A rat with a penchant for mismatched clothing?" he surmises.

"Bingo!"

Further examination of the form identifies the kit being ordered as the latest version of the kit destroyed some months back in an incident which cost my boss's predecessor his job, sadly.

His successor obviously believes (correctly, as it happens) that the person who installs this equipment will have a life-long pal in the CEO.

Losing no time, I phone the supplier in a boss-like voice and ask to change the delivery address. As I ring off, I recall that the words 'as discussed' were on the top of the order.

I dive to the telephone exchange console and swap the boss's line with mine. And not a moment too soon. The supplier's voice again assails my ears.

"YES!" I growl, boss-mode on.

"Hello, I was just ringing to verify a change of delivery address..."

"WHAT?! I JUST BLOODY RANG YOU!!!"

"Yes, but you expressly said..."

"Yes, yes, you're right," I admit. "I'm just anxious to get this kit up and running."

"Well how about we send you our demo model, for a couple of days' head start," he offers graciously.

A day later the PFY and I take delivery of some state-of-the-art videoconferencing equipment then cruise the Internet to find the software we require. While we're at it, we download some useful images.

A day after that we observe the boss via the CCTV as he sneaks his 'newly delivered' equipment to an office near the CEO's.

Within a week the CEO performs his first live company-wide broadcast, timed to reach all our overseas offices at once.

The PFY and I discuss it afterwards.

"I feel that the impact of the address was perhaps heightened by the transposing of the CEO's head onto that naked, gyrating, female body," the PFY offers.

"True," I agree modestly. "However, your morphing of the CEO's head into that of a large pork-producing animal was truly a work of art."

The boss will not be drawn into conversation. Probably because he's so busy packing his desk before security can arrive to 'assist' him down the stairwell.

If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times - it's a funny old game.

3.55 Ever tempted to play computer games at work?

"Hello. Have I got through to the network guys?" the user simpers.

"You sure have. How can I help?" I gush, doing my best for PR.

"All the files on my network disk are gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes. Gone. I had some back-ups of some work stuff on the network disk."

"What was your user name?" I ask.

He tells me, pointlessly, because our caller-id now lists name, room, user name and position in the organisational hierarchy.

In this case: name: Ronald Williams; room: 2.23; user name: prsrw; and position: 'cannon-fodder'.

"Oh yes," I reply, "and your work revolves around executing the various versions of Leisure Suit Larry, Doom, and miscellaneous other games then, does it?"

There's a quick gasp of horror down the line as he realises his fatal mistake of being caught.

"They were there as an evaluation of ..."

"Don't," I sigh. "It's unlikely you could come up with even a mildly convincing excuse that would prevent you being prosecuted for software piracy."

"Prosecuted?"

"Unless, of course, you have the original disks, which would seem unlikely as the files were multi-part archive ..."

"Hang on, how do you know? They were encrypted!"

"With your initials as the key. Honestly, if you're not even going to try ..."

"I can't believe you'd do ..."

"Did it. Done it before. And will do it again. Bye now," I sigh, easing the receiver back down onto the cradle.

The PFY looks confused.

"It's not like you to give a toss about piracy," he says.

"I don't. I just want some space to upload my games on to, and I can't be bothered cheating the boss out of another disk."

The phone rings. I gaze over at the caller ID. It's 'cannon-fodder' again.

The PFY answers it.

"All the files on my hard disk have also gone!" he bleats excitedly.

"Just being thorough," I whisper, leaving the PFY to adlib.

"Yes, that's right," the PFY replies. "That'll be the ..."

>flip< >flip< He takes a quick look for the Excuse Of The Day.

"... Dynamic Transient Magnetic Re-allocation Policy of your hard disk. You should back up your hard disk regularly."

"But I do!" the caller blurts. "It's all backed up, even my files on the server! Can you restore them for me please?"

"Hang on," the PFY replies. "I'll just put you through to Systems Operations to sort the problem out. Extension 8002, in case you get cut off."

He diverts him and hangs up.

"Two minutes, two calls," the PFY says, placing a five-quid note on the table.

"Six minutes, 10 calls," I counter, placing my five quid on top of the PFY's.

We watch cannon-fodder's extension from the Exchange Console and, after five minutes, see him hang up after not getting an answer from Systems Operations, which isn't surprising considering the phone he's connecting to is locked behind a panel in the basement. Seven retries later I pocket 10 quid.

The PFY isn't pleased, expecting more intelligence from the user. His naivety is a constant source of surprise (and income) for me.

We watch on as he calls the real Systems Operations' number.

"Well, there goes your disk space," the PFY says.

"Ten quid it doesn't," I offer.

"You're on," the PFY replies, hoping for the double or nothing approach.

I grab the scummiest tape cartridge from the floor at my feet and we wander into the computer room and wait for one of the systems people. Sure enough, one arrives shortly thereafter with some back-up tapes. Upon seeing me, he clutches the tapes to himself more carefully for some reason ...

"Don't mind me," I say, holding up my tape cartridge, which obliges my true purpose by dropping a bit of its case.

"You read that cartridge on our drive?" the systems guy asks.

"Of course I did!" I reply. "And it worked fine - only a couple of read errors; not bad for a tape this old."

The systems guy rolls his eyes in despair and grabs the cleaning tape from the top of the tape unit. The PFY looks on confused, not knowing what's going on.

His confusion disappears immediately after the cleaning tape is inserted.

"Ah ..." he says, listening carefully to the noise it makes. "Sandpaper and ... is it grinding paste?"

He is good.

"Okay - and - for the 10 quid you owe me ..." I ask, nodding in the direction of the systems guy struggling in vain with the drives' eject lever.

"Ummm ... it's not QUICK-SET EXPOXY RESIN, is it?"

"Today's winner is ... THE PFY!" I cry.

We wander off back to the control room.

"When did you ..." the PFY begins.

"'Enhance' the cleaning tape? About six weeks ago - they never use it normally, so I knew it was the perfect remote destruction utility. You could call in from anywhere saying you have read errors ..."

"But you're just buying yourself time."

"Not exactly," I say, removing the labels from some recently abandoned tapes I found in the computer room into the "Scratch Tapes" bin.

"You bastard!" he cries respectfully.

"In the flesh, on the job, and ready for a game of Network Doom."

"You're on!"

3.56 Encryption is forced on the Bastard ...

So the Pimpily-Faced Youth and I are heading through the corridors of computing central when our progress is impeded by the departmental Dead Wood Discussion Group.

It is a matter of concern to me and the PFY that the group appears to be growing in size. Once a group of two or three old salts whose technical skills consisted of the ability to fix eight-inch floppy drives, it's now the final resting place of brown nosers and work dodgers alike.

To disguise their true purpose (work and responsibility avoidance) they indulge in long conversations about what's new in computing, where it's heading and why, what we should be looking at and who's up with the play.

This in itself wouldn't be so bad except (a) they either congregate in corridors or someone else's office and (b) they sometimes infect the boss with the forward-thinking-stupidity virus.

Today is one of those days. Encrypted TCP/IP and how it should be implemented is the topic of the four-hours.

We pause briefly...

"What does that guy do?" the PFY asks quietly, indicating one of the key speakers who's obviously attracted to the conversation by the possibility of slipping one of his strategically polished boat shoes one rung further up the corporate ladder with a display of superior knowledge.

"Besides providing a load for the deodoriser in the air conditioning?" I ask.

"I'm not sure, they all look alike to me."

The boss meantime is enthralled, envisaging a workplace coup in pushing back the frontiers of networking security.

This is not a good thing.

Sure enough, two hours later, the boss is wandering around the office with some hastily prepared notes in his hand.

"Tell me," he asks. "Why aren't we using encrypted TCP/IP?"

"Network overhead," I throw out to test the waters of his preparation.

"But isn't the overhead minimal when combined with private key encryption software or better, single-stage encryption?" he asks, so far out of his depth that the appearance of a shark's fin wouldn't be out of place in our conversation.

"Hey, I never thought of that!" I cry in an enlightened manner.

"Well, get right onto it," he responds, gushing enthusiasm.

"Sure thing."

The PFY is looking at me with the same thinly disguised contempt that was present on his features in the corridor

scant hours ago.

"You're not going soft are you?" he enquires.

"This will speak for me," I say, indicating a recently installed PC in screen-save mode.

True to form, the PFY hits the return key...and the wall behind him microseconds later.

"It's good isn't it?" I say as he recovers his wits. "The word 'return' is in fact a carbon track, which, when the key is depressed, is connected to a high, but mostly harmless, earth return voltage. Now what was that about being soft?"

Doubting no more, the PFY helps me implement the Boss's request to the letter.

The boss receives this news with a smug expression and spends the next day composing a memo about the frontiers of networking, new era of security, blah, blah, blah. He words the memo so as to give the impression that he single-handedly soldered bits together with a cigarette lighter to make this possible.

To increase the effect, he selects the following Monday as the switchover date.

The day arrives, and the boss bowls in with The Head of IT in tow. With baited breath he waits for 9am to so that he can press the key to start encryption.

With a click from the clock, a clack from the keyboard, and a thud as the boss's stunned body hits the cast iron frame of an old tape rack with lots of nasty protruding edges that the PFY and I had only removed from the computer room that morning, encryption begins.

Then the calls start. Hands-free allows the head of IT to eavesdrop.

"Hello, networks," I say.

"Hi, this is the help desk. We're getting lots of calls from people who say that their machine is throwing up TCP/IP errors."

"Yes, that would be the one-step encryption."

"Well how do they decrypt?"

"You can't. I thought you knew that. If you could, it would be two steps wouldn't it?"

"ARE YOU SAYING THAT WE'VE JUST INSTALLED A SYSTEM THAT CAN'T TALK TO ANYTHING?" the head of IT blurts anxiously.

"Not we," I say holding up a recent memo.

"I see," the head says, recognising the buttered side of bread when shown it.

Sadly the boss's attempts to switch the system off resulted in a lot of unnecessary damage to the tape rack, but luckily the head was keen to let all the members of the DDG have a crack at it and eventually things got back to normal.

Status Quo reinstated - all systems go.

3.57 The PFY falls under a spell ...

It had to happen eventually, and to be frank, I'm surprised it's taken this long. Despite all my teachings, my vigorous expressions of displeasure at the merest mention of such a concept, and the countless reminders of the consequences of such actions, the pimply-faced-youth has let me down. He's in love.

One of the sad facts about working with networked computers all the time, especially when you see so much intimate stuff flying up the screen of the packet-watcher, is that your guard can drop. This is what happened with the PFY - he 'found' this woman talking to one of our junior bean-counter types on Internet Relay Chat (well, they were mad to think their Internet activities were unmonitored). He instantly persuaded her that PFYs who discover people in this way are much more fun than bean counters. Not that hard, of course, when you realise that making up UTP patch cables constantly for a fortnight is more fun than talking to a bean counter.

The phone rings.

"Network support, how can I help you?" sings the PFY in that sickly, lovey tone. You know the sort I mean.

"I seem to have accidentally deleted my Christmas card list from the server - could you possibly recover it from tape for me?"

"Hang about." >CLICK< >WHIRRRRRR< >CHUNKACHUNKA< "... there you go."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

"No problem."

I check the said Christmas card list and it seems to be a Christmas card list.

No logic bomb, no Word prank macro, just a Christmas card list. This lad is ill.

I lean over to catch a glance of the SNMP window on the PFY's workstation to see which floor's network has this morning's intermittent drop-out. All I see is green, not an 'accidental' bandwidth saturation in sight. Worrying.

I also happen to notice that the background picture of his workstation seems to have changed to a picture of someone blonde and female.

"Is that ...?" I inquire, pointing at the backdrop.

"Yup. Gorgeous, isn't she?"

I must admit, the word 'babe' isn't far from the front of my mind, though the urge to suddenly pull the fibre out of the back of the beancounter server pushes through and saves the day. I suddenly realise that while it's almost acceptable to carry a photo of one's other half in one's wallet, exchanging JPEGs is strictly anorak material.

"Did I tell you we're meeting up for the first time tonight?" sings the PFY's sickly voice. It's like fingernails on a blackboard, honestly.

"No," I reply wearily. I've managed to feign vague enthusiasm for a couple of days in the hope that he would see sense without assistance, but to no avail, so my patience is wearing rather thin.

"Where were you thinking of taking her?"

"Oh, I dunno - I'm quite new to this sort of thing, so I was hoping you would have an idea."

"Hmmm ... why not try that new seafood place on the High Street? It's pricey but highly regarded, and hey, you can charge it to the Boss's 'secret' expense account anyway."

"Good idea. I'll e-mail her now." Either my 'sincere' face hasn't worn off yet or he really should know better.

A quick filter on the mail hub soon has my afflicted colleague's beloved looking forward to a curry in Highgate.

Now to organise the other half of the plan; I send the PFY off down the road to buy his sweetheart some appropriate romantic shrubbery. This gets him out of the way for half an hour, so I take the opportunity to call in a favour.

The PFY takes the opportunity of a long lunch (thankfully, as all this lovey talk is making me feel rather queasy), and so it's not too bad enduring the last couple of hours of the day before he skips off smiling like the cat who got not only the cream, but half the dairy produce in the Home Counties.

Morning comes, and I rush in especially early at 11am in order to find out how my underling's evening went.

"Bloody awful. She was built like a smallish office block, she had a voice like Arthur Mullard, and she talked about her new Aveling Barford rock-grader all evening."

Funny, that sounds just like Julie, my next-door-neighbour's sister. But no, surely it couldn't be; she's not into computers, and she doesn't get time for dating - what with driving that dumper truck all day and doing her evening roly-poly-gram work.

"But what about the photo?"

"It's a fake. Oh, hell, I've had it with women".

>RING<

The PFY answers the phone.

"Network Support."

"My filestore is full."

"So?"

"So can I have some more space?"

"Sure, I'll give you some space ..." >CLACKYCLICKYHWOP<

"... there you go."

You've got five megs free now."

I glance at his console. 'rm -rf *'. Now that's more like it.

3.58 Where do you find a new PFY when you want one?

It's a sad day in network operations. The pimply-faced-youth has decided to move on. Apparently, there are greener pastures out there that have a greater attraction for the young and foolish. He's accepted a position as a networks engineer for an oil company where the workmates are reasonable and the pay compromisingly attractive.

With a small amount of sentimentality, he takes his leave after two weeks' notice, during which time the boss gains the not unfamiliar "permanently hunted" expression...

Apparently, a 'misprint' in the on-line phone directory has seen his 'wrong number' count rise dramatically. Changing phone numbers didn't seem to help either for some reason. Finding out that he'd put in for, and been granted, a transfer to Wales led to some quite involved and desperate legal wrangles that kept him busy for a couple of days.

The interview process for a PFY replacement begins and it seems obvious that the calibre of applicants is not even up to prospective PFY potential.

Me: "A user complains about network speed. Would you investigate the problem or disconnect the network port altogether?"

They: "Investiga..."

Me: "Thank you, we'll let you know. Next!"

Me: "It's 4.54pm on a Friday and a user calls with a TCP/IP query. What do you do?"

They: "Answer their query?"

Me: "Trick question. You never answer the phone after 3pm on Friday! Even IF you're still at work! ...NEXT!"

Me: "You discover that the router firmware is several revisions out of date. Which do you do first: fill out a change-control form, arrange for storage of the old eproms, or order the upgrade?"

They: "Order the upgrade?"

Me: "No, crash the router every three hours until the boss begs you to upgrade as soon as possible, which will be four hours overtime at double rate. NEXT!"

After two days of interviewing, the boss decides that he'll pick the applicant. Sure enough, he picks Ronald, one of the worst people imaginable, one with blatant depth perception problems. And the users love him which is always a warning sign. I make the most of a bad thing until I can figure out a plan.

"OK Ron, I'll just show you ar..."

"No, Ronald, not Ron."

"I see." I make a mental note to leave a few floor tiles balanced precariously for his benefit.

I prepare him for his career in network support by getting him to dust out all the cabling ducts.

Two days and one ducting accident later, Gerald starts as our latest PFY. A puerile addition to the workforce, but at least he's rude to the users. Still, he lacks the killer instinct which distinguishes a true networking professional from the amateurs. And the technical intelligence not to wear the raincoat with the large metal fasteners when he's directed to the roof to 'calibrate the satellite antenna' during a thunderstorm. Whoopsy. Still, surface burns apparently heal fairly quickly.

Gerald follows Ronald's example in taking extended sick leave, and I'm left to hold the fort by myself. Things are very hectic as there's a limit to the number of phone calls you can listen to whilst still leaving time to play network Doom against the old PFY over the Internet.

Also, it seems to be getting extremely difficult to get applicants for the PFY's position. In fact, nigh-on impossible. Apparently, word has got out to the agencies that there is safer work juggling chainsaws full tilt on a unicycle down Battersea Rise, and they're staying away in droves.

Because I'm so short-staffed, I don't get round to fixing a lot of the network errors that plague the place. Like the boss's UTP port, which suddenly appears to have gone open circuit. Luckily, I'm able to restore interim connectivity to him by giving him a spare 2400 modem so he can dial the internal extension of our modem banks. At 2400 baud, his file server really hums. Not to mention the power supply of the modem which draws so much power that the lights dim when he switches it on.

The boss is at his wit's end when I offer him a possibility. If he offered a finder's fee and a reasonable rate, I might be able to replace the PFY.

The boss jumps at the outstretched straw and mentions two very acceptable numbers. I give the PFY a call and make him an offer he could refuse but won't.

He doesn't.

A day later the PFY is back in business having returned from his holiday to a pay rise. What the boss doesn't know can't hurt him. Except for that carpet tack I drove into the base of his chair.

A high pitched scream filters through to the control room as I shake the PFY's hand.

I LOVE this business.

Chapter 4

BOFH 1997

4.1 A visit from the auditors ...

Things aren't good. The board of directors is after blood. Nothing's been said yet, but everyone in the building knows what a visit from the auditors means...

They didn't go up to the executive offices first, which means they're primed with all the information they need. Someone's upset the top brass big time, and that someone, judging by the troop of 'yes-persons' laughingly referred to as my 'co-workers', can only be me. Or possibly the pimply-faced-youth...

I remember electronically signing up the entire board of directors to the mailing list of a seedy video parlour, but I hardly think that would qualify for all this attention.

The auditors are a 'good cop, bad cop' team who'd make a VAT inspector look like Mother Teresa.

I've got about a minute before they pay us a visit. So I dial up head office's router and start a packet sniff operation, and then configure some extra phone lines onto the voice recorder.

I've just finished when they arrive.

"This is a secure area," I call out, playing the dedicated worker to the full.

"Company auditors," bad cop sneers.

"You have some ID?" I ask, buying time until I can clear my screen.

Their pictures look rough enough, but I make a point of checking their ID photos under the magnifying lamp.

"They seem OK. Now, what can I help you with?" I ask.

"We're here to audit and inventory your equipment. You're to make yourself available until we've finished the audit."

"How long will that take?" I reply.

"As long as it takes," bad cop says.

Excellent. I write them up in the visitors' book, then swipe them through the door on my ID.

They potter around a bit calling out inventory numbers and making rude noises to themselves. I pass the time by listening to my latest voice recording on the headset. It only takes a few minutes of secretarial gossip to find out that someone noticed that one of our microwave dishes points at the middle of beancounter central instead of the sky. Mind you, it's not as if we're actually transmitting through it... Still, with the psychosomatic headaches and general illness it'll cause, I guess it's worth the hassle.

"OK," bad cop says wandering back in.

"According to our records, over the past year you have written-off as unserviceable; three televisions..."

"Ah, satellite reception monitors," I quickly interrupt, "very poor quality, yes."

"Two stereo video recorders..."

"CCTV recorders with dual audio channels, again, poor quality"

"A microwave cooker..."

"Short range microwave transmission test device."

"And 112 videos."

"CCTV recording media, yes."

"Bought from the Megastore?"

"At a good price."

"Blank media at 15 quid a piece?"

"Quality costs money..."

"Then why are the titles listed?"

"Invoicing error. Call them, I'm sure the Megastore's records say blank media. Now..."

"And you wrote them off?"

"Corporate secrecy requires us to destroy confidential media after three months..."

"Well, what about these multi-colour indicator lamps?"

"We use them all over the place..."

"Yes, well they could be anything... Hell, Christmas tree lights fit that bill."

Perceptive bastard really...

"I'm sure everything's in order," good cop says, in a manner designed to engender trust. No doubt the same form of trust that preceded the statement: "Watch my back Brutus." It can only mean one thing.

"Just one thing," bad cop asks, switching to pleasant mode. "You DO have the asset disposal forms, signed by your head of department and co-signed by the head of purchasing?"

Whoops. Things have turned a little grim for the home team.

"Because if you don't, you WOULD be liable for the loss of the assets concerned. With a current book value of about 5,000..." he says, savouring every syllable.

"Of course I do," I smile, indicating a huge pile of miscellaneous papers kept expressly for occasions like this. "In there somewhere. Sorry it's a bit of a mess."

While they wade through the pile, I look up the vehicle associated with the identification cards of our two friends, then e-mail the PFY his mission.

An hour later the auditors call it a day and wander off. The PFY and I follow suit, in time to witness another 'random' security check at the car park exit. We are both shocked and stunned to see a boot-sale-worth of 'written-off' equipment in our erstwhile auditors' vehicle, along with 30 or so 'asset disposal forms', blank but for an incriminating signature and co-signature.

"So that's where all our kit has been going!" I blurt in passing in case security has lost the plot, even after the anonymous tip-off.

Status quo returned, I offer to buy the PFY a beer to ease the cramp in his signing hand.

It's a tough life at the top - don't let people tell you otherwise...

4.2 A little light fraud ...

The boss is, as they say, rabid. I haven't seen him this mad since the PFY and I convinced the beancounters that Windows 95 was two years obsolete and that they needed to upgrade to this year's version - OS/2.

"What the hell's happened at public relations?" he snaps. "I've had their head of department yelling at me. He says you told one of his secretaries to erase the install media and virally infect their machines!"

"You're kidding," I reply, oozing disbelief. "Hang on, I haven't spoken to anyone. Did they ring me?"

"No, they rang the helpdesk, but you picked up the call."

"I don't think so - I was working on the network all day," I reply, bearing in mind our automated network attendant makes a convenient alibi.

"What about THIS then?" he cries, brandishing my virus disk.

"It's a disk with a copy of a virus on it," I say.

"Then why did you label it 'VIRUS SCAN'?"

"It was a note to myself to check it. I found it was indeed infected, then put it in the bin, but someone has obviously and foolishly tried to recycle the disk."

"Well their whole server is infected now and they need to stop users from accessing it and reinfecting their machines until it's been sorted out."

"Of course," I say. "The PFY and I will get right onto it."

The PFY is surprised at my eagerness to aid the PR plebs, but it's just the chance I need to get into their machines and make those little changes to the end-of-year report. Very few people noticed the fangs and horns on the Head of IT in the management photo last year, so it would appear that I'll have to have a less subtle printing overlay for the final version this time.

Security has, however, been tightened after some nit-picker noticed the company figures didn't quite add up - not the sort of thing you want the shareholders to see. On the other hand, the bonus from the printing company for the extra batch of reports did put the bastard operator's benevolent fund back in the black.

"Good," the boss chirps, interrupting my reverie. "I'll oversee the operation myself - good for internal morale and all that."

Sadly, the boss is unlikely to top the morale boost he gave the department a few days ago when he slipped on a grease spot in the cafeteria and face-planted the vegetarian lasagne, however this thought is only second in my mind. My creative juices are unlikely to flow with the boss peering over my shoulder the whole time.

Some diversion strategy is called for...

"Good Lord!" I shout, kicking the power plug from the PFY's machine. "Those earth spikes are getting ridiculous."

"What earth spikes?" the boss blurts.

"You know, the spikes from the earthing strip at the side of the building. We've been waiting six weeks for a contractor to go out and look at the connector just up from the window."

"But we've got several earthing conductors," the boss replies, having no idea of the resale value of copper at the moment (or, to be more precise, six weeks ago when the PFY and I were short of cash).

"No, just one - economic downsizing by your predecessor," I ad-lib glibly.

"Oh? Well, let's have a look then."

I lead him to the window and point up at the earthing strip.

"Why do you need a contractor? You could shin up there and fix it in no time."

"I'm only responsible for the INSIDE of the..." I say.

"Oh for Pete's sake - open the bloody window!" the boss cries, obviously switched into idiot mode.

Five minutes later he's at the offending junction giving it the old once-over.

"I've never noticed how high up we were..." the PFY mentions, dreamily.

"Yeah. If you fell from this height they'd need a shovel to get you into the ambulance," I reply.

True to form the boss looks down. The gleaming whiteness of his knuckles indicates he is now locked into place and going nowhere.

After two hours in the PR department, 'fixing' the virus, the company reports look perfect. That is if you like to see a PR chief with a set of Lennon glasses and buck teeth and two of the more right-wing directors holding hands.

Of course, the company accounts don't quite add up either - for the second year running.

I pause briefly to watch the boss being led out of the building in his new and rather attractive strap-round jacket. Security must have found 'his' note about stress and so forth on the window ledge.

Looks like a morale peak on the horizon... not to mention a nice little bonus from the printers.

4.3 The bean counters try to get sneaky ...

It's not often that we're 'honoured' by a visit from the chief bean counter.

In fact, the last time he disturbed the peace of the BOFH sanctuary was when he discovered that the 'satellite-based data reception technology' seemed to be pointed at the local bookie's and was carrying mainly racing results.

I can sense that this time he's got something to tell me. He's looking decidedly pleased with himself. His well-fed face bears an uncanny resemblance to a wolf spying a solitary sheep. Pulling himself up to his full five-foot-four, he speaks firmly but with a noticeable hint of nervousness.

"In view of the fact that your idea of technical support is idiosyncratic to say the least, we've decided to install our own server and employ our own network manager."

He pauses as the implication of what he's saying slowly sinks in.

"Can I take it that you're not happy with the support that my assistant and I offer you?" I reply, gesturing at the PFY.

"Him?" gurgled the bean counter. "He's nothing but a psychopath."

The PFY beams at the compliment. The suit from upstairs continues.

"We're going to employ a proper networking person so we don't have to let you two maniacs anywhere near our network again. ANYONE we find is bound to be an improvement on you two."

Foolish words, but hey, I was bored anyway.

A week or so later, the memo is delivered from on-high by the Bean Counter Central office-boy (obviously our previous confrontation used up all his boss's courage). As of 9am today, Operations is no longer responsible for technical support in the financial division.

I pass the note to the PFY, and I detect menace in his eyes. "Since we're not supporting them any more, I guess that means they have their own routers," I point out, pulling a few plugs. Interestingly, the remote probe I built into their coffee machine tells me that they're still getting packets off the Internet ... hmmm ... not daft, this lot.

I bash out a quick message and drop it on the 'pager' icon. Some seconds later my really-terribly-private cellphone blasts into action. The PFY is impressed and worried; only important, powerful people know the number to that phone, and the fact that it's ringing usually means that we're in serious trouble and are calling in some big favours. He has never heard it ring before, and looks decidedly worried.

"Hello? Yes, that's right ... yes, I thought so ... no, we're not allowed to touch anything, it's entirely down to the new network manager up there. Oh, you are, are you? That's nice ... yes, okay, the Victoria in fifteen minutes."

The PFY looks puzzled, and is startled to hear the fire alarm. I point out that the fire alarm might be something to do with the smoke emanating from Bean Counter Central, and he rushes outside to see. The penny drops and he dashes back in and demands to know how I knew that something was amiss upstairs, given that you can't see the smoke or the alarm panel from where I'm sitting.

"Well, okay. You remember Martin?"

"What, that guy you introduced me to once?"

"I've introduced you to so many people..."

"Okay, the one with the pony tail and the alcohol fixation whose temperament and attitude to users makes both of us look like St Francis of Assisi?"

"Yes, that's him."

"The one who you told me last week was out of a job?"

"Hmmm ... more like the one whose name by some chance found its way to the top of the Bean Counter recruitment list," I point out.

It suddenly dawns on him. Now he knows why I spent so much time on the personnel database last week - and why I was so keen in calling in a few favours to that friendly recruitment consultant.

A thought struck me. "Heh, heh ... wait until you see the router they've got upstairs. It's one of these cobbled-together things that you don't see very often. I predict they're going to have a lot of trouble with that in the future.

"In fact there are only two people in the world with the code, and they're the guys who wrote it. And you're looking at one of them."

"And the other?"

"... knows the number of my private cellphone and is now on his way round the corner to the pub. Come on, my expense account has some beer to buy."

4.4 The B.O.F.H. masters the world of personalisation ...

We have a problem. The boss is to spend large amounts of otherwise useful money on standardising the corporate telephone.

"Why's he doing it?" the PFY asks.

"Because he rests under the mistaken belief that it will have some bearing on the number of phones that are 'liberated' each year and end up in the homes of our employees."

"You mean they TAKE the phones?!" the PFY asks, naively believing that larceny stops just outside our door.

"Of course," I cry. "Good grief, it's an office perk, always has been. In return for our shiny new phone we get their lifelong guilt and another crusty old monster from the year 200 BT, which in turn justifies all the room we have allocated in the basement ..."

"And this goes on a lot?"

"Ahem. Dial a number, any number, any number at all!"

The PFY types a number on hands free.

"Hello, drawing office."

"Hello, networks here. We seem to have an inventory anomaly regarding your desktop phone, serial number 138728."

My monologue is interrupted by the slamming of the receiver.

"What happened?" the PFY asks.

"I dare say they are at this very moment rushing down the stairwell to retrieve the item from their home. Remember to make up a serial number so that they don't just steal one from somewhere else. Great for getting people out of the office..."

The PFY and I watch as an employee bursts from the main entrance and hurtles across the road to the tube station. I then ring the number again...

"Hello," a gruff drawing-office-boss-like voice answers.

"Pete," I gush. "Glad I caught you before you sneaked out. Say hi to Sheryl from me when you see her, you smooth bastard."

"WHO IS THIS?"

I hang up quickly.

"Well, I'm sure HIS absence won't be noted ... now, let's get upstairs and steal his desk phone. He'll be too scared to take his work one back home tonight and will be incommunicado till payday."

"You really are a bastard," the PFY admits grudgingly.

"Of course. Now, let's get to the boss's office ..."

"... And how do you think this will prevent theft?" I ask the boss, after hearing his phone proposal argument.

"Because they're a special model - slimline with a digital display that are ONLY going to be made for THIS company with the company logo on the front."

"Well, you're way off," the PFY quite rightly points out. "If you want a phone no-one will steal, just make it weigh 20 pounds and sound like crap."

Good lad.

The boss is a little flustered at this because he knows that for such a move he's got to present the proposal to the board for approval. And he doesn't want the PFY and I making his master plan sound similar to what comes out of an unstealable phone ...

I decide to let him temporarily off the hook.

"Well, can't hang around here all day, networks to fix and all that."

We wander off to his relief.

"I don't think the board will go for it," the PFY surmises as we wander back to our room.

"Don't you believe it," I reply. "Whack a company logo on something original and you'll have them drooling - especially if the competition hasn't done it before ..."

I leave the PFY to worry while I duck up to the boardroom to 'tune-up' the boss's presentation. At the appointed time, the PFY and I are hanging out at network central when the boss calls.

"What's wrong with the test line in the boardroom?" he growls, according to plan.

"Don't know," I say, "We'll be up in a second to check it."

"There's no nee..."

Quick as a flash the PFY and I are in the boardroom.

"Wow," the PFY cries, delivering his lines perfectly. "New phones, exactly like the ones the opposition's just got."

All heads turn as the boss reluctantly takes delivery of 'The Shaft' - he knows the board would never copy the idea of a rival ...

"There's your problem," I say, looking up from my test-set. "It's just the RAL of this phone. I'll make a note."

I pull out a personal disorganiser that I liberated from a user early last year with a company logo recently glued to the cover.

"What's that?" one of the board asks.

"Oh, just a personal organiser. I just put the company logo on it to stop people stealing it at conferences."

"I could use one of those," he says. A few murmurs of assent follow.

The boss then realises that as far as 'The Shaft' is concerned this is a two-for-one sale.

As planned, two hours later the PFY and I are downing a couple of pints on our recently transferred 'research fund' while we discuss the new 'Corporate Personal Organiser'. It'd be a challenge if it weren't so easy.

4.5 The Boss gets all safety-minded ...

The boss is on the warpath! Never one to take a good moral kicking lying down, he's decided to retaliate for the demise of his corporate telephone plan by making our lives a general misery.

He's enforcing every single safety standard known to humankind. As well as this, he's checking our arrival and departure times and even pulling us up on the creative book keeping that produces most of our timesheets.

It's not good.

Still, you know what they say, the best defence is a good offence.

Sure enough, it's not long before the PFY and I are called into the boss's office for failing to put up warning signs after opening the cabling duct in the basement. My suspicions are confirmed when I notice the head of personnel sitting in on the meeting. He's never been a big fan of mine or the PFY's - well, not since he got a crossed line with the DP pool while talking to his doctor about a personal and very private problem. He probably would've believed it if we hadn't thanked him for not doing anything 'rash' ...

The boss winds up for the delivery. "Much as I deplore these things, I'm afraid I'm going to have to give you both a final written warning after the exposure of general staff to that dangerous drop," he says.

"The dangerous drop of three or four inches to the cable duct floor."

"A dangerous drop nonetheless," he replies, egged on by the head of personnel.

"Could I just have a word with you in private?" I ask, a picture of piety.

"I don't think that would be necessary," the boss replies.

"Uh, I wasn't actually meaning you, I meant the representative from personnel. Just as we're talking safety issues I thought the PFY and I could have a word about that cheap microwave dish."

As if by magic, the tone of conversation changes. Could it be that the boss has remembered WHO recommended and ordered (against the advice of the networking technicians) the said dish?

"Perhaps I can spare you a minute," said the tight-lipped boss.

"Well, it's mainly a safety concern you understand," I say, once we're in private. "As this is my final warning I can expect my contract not to be renewed for another year, and I'd just like to organise someone to pop up onto the roof every two or three weeks to tighten up the bolts on the cheap microwave dish you recommended we buy last year.

"Apparently it slowly tilts over till it's pointing directly at the roof. We wouldn't have found out except that one of the auditors in the office underneath rang to complain about the coffee in his mug boiling every time transmissions passed 20 per cent bandwidth..."

The boss is, as we in the trade say, up the creek without a paddle user's guide. He tries unsuccessfully to disguise his utter horror at the possible legal action that could result from this. And even more importantly, who would be taking the precipitous fall for it...

"Who was that auditor again?" he said, feigning mild interest.

"Oh you know!" I reply. "Wilson, Wilkins - something like that. You know, the guy who's always off sick with

headaches and stuff.”

He’s now out of the stream and heading out to sea - he KNOWS we’ll have kept an autographed copy of the memo (complete with our response) safely stashed in some fireproof location that he’ll get access to shortly after Satan starts ordering antifreeze and winter woollens.

52 seconds later we’re back in his office...

”Well I see no point in taking this any further,” the boss says, to the personnel head’s disgust. ”It appears the signs WERE there after all, in fact I saw them myself! Now, hadn’t you better pop up and do that maintenance ...”

”Running all the way,” I agree. ”OH! And look, there’s those timesheets that you were querying before. Ah! I see why you were querying it! The PFY and I didn’t put in those 10 hours work - we did, uh ... network tuning on two Sunday nights. I’ll just fill that in now so you can sign it.”

The head of personnel leaves with a burst of language I’m sure isn’t approved by company policy while the boss signs away an amount of overtime probably equal to the GNP of a small communist state.

Victory and overtime ours, I foster goodwill in the boss by sending a back-up tape from our off-site storage contractors.

”What was that about?” the PFY asks.

”Oh just returning the boss’s memo about that microwave dish he recommended.”

”Are you sure that was such a good idea? He’ll just destroy it.”

”It’s probably for the best,” I respond. ”After all, it’s the only remaining documentation about it. And without documentation...”

”I’ll get the scrap dealer on the line.”

4.6 The B.O.F.H. puts in a week on the Helldesk ...

It’s a slow day in Mission Control and I have a hangover that would have even the toughest superhero whimpering.

I’m not exactly sure how I got home, but I think it had something to do with a very long taxi ride and someone else’s credit card...

It was inevitable after spending most of yesterday ’supplier baiting’ at a computing exhibition on the other side of town, then trundling off with some slavering salespeople to all night drinkies. The first one to collapse loses - the sale, the initiative and his corporate credit card when he’s not looking.

Because of my health, I’d temporarily forgotten that we’d told the boss that the PFY and I would sit in for the Helldesk while they attended a health and safety course on how to type a whole word without dying of RSI or whatever they call it these days. The boss, of course, did not come down in the last shower and is well aware I’m up to something, but lacks the mental capacity to work out what it is. No surprises there then.

Sadly, he shall be wondering about it at the RSI course along with the other mortals as the company’s health and safety policy makes it mandatory for all computing staff to attend. His protestations of already having attended amount to nothing in the light of the fact that there’s no record of it in the Human Resources Database (whoops), nor does he appear to possess the ’get-out-of-jail-free’ RSI course completion certificate.

The PFY and I, on the other hand, have several of these certificates and corresponding database entries, yet still have no idea what the instructor looks like nor what exactly the course is about.

Knowing he’s beaten, the boss goes quietly.

Meanwhile, in the Helldesk area, I’m reconnecting the smoke detectors after the freak fire that destroyed an RSI Course Completion Certificate with the boss’s name on it. I blame the heating system - it’s been working overtime recently.

”Hello? Is this the helpdesk?”

"Yes it is," I answer, all sweet, fluffy loveliness.

"Can you tell me the number for the modem pool?"

"I sure can!" I gush, then give the number for a fax machine on the fourth floor, which should keep them confused for a couple of weeks.

I hang up and have barely dropped off to sleep when the phone rings again.

"My laptop seems to be running quite slowly. Can you help?"

"Of course I can. Now don't tell me, you're still using the power filter unit aren't you?"

DUMMY MODE ON

"The power filter unit?"

"Yes, the one that filters the power coming into your machine. It should be a black box about three inches by two inches square."

"Oh... yes, I see it."

"Okay, you want to remove that and put the non-filtered cable onto it."

"The non-filtered cable?"

"Yes, it would have come in the box with the machine. It's probably still there."

"But I threw the box out!"

"Hmm. Well, I can order you one, but in the meantime do you have a spare power cable?"

"Uuuuuuuuu..."

"Well, just borrow one from someone else's machine - then it's their problem."

"Yeah, hee hee..."

What a plonker.

"OK, switch the filter off, then chop the cable off halfway between the filter and your machine. Then strip back the wires and poke them into the two holes in the sides of the socket of the new power cable ..."

"OK, done that."

"And plug her in."

"OK, thanks."

He hangs up and I wait for lift-off. About 10 seconds later the fire alarm goes off, which I take to be an encouraging sign ...

At the end of the day the boss wanders in. He's not impressed. Apparently he'd heard about the PFY's advice to a user to change the screen saver passwords on their department machines to completely random text in the interests of safety. News of the post-lunch lockout made it across the building in minutes ...

In the face of the PFY's completely innocent and apparently naive grasp of security issues, he comes into the office and raves for a couple of minutes about time lost, production down, company money wasted, disgruntled colleagues, blah, blah, blah ...

We concur dutifully with his arguments and promise to do much better on future occasions, should they arise.

"By the way," he continues, with a worried little frown, "has anyone seen my RSI Course Completion Certificate? I'm sure I left it on that table over there ..."

He wanders off in search of it while I disconnect the smoke alarms and the PFY makes an update on the Human Resources Database ...

Looks like tomorrow's just going to be work, work, work.

4.7 The B.O.F.H. won't 'wear' the Boss's ideas ...

Something smells fishy. Very fishy indeed. Positively tuna casserole.

The boss is in a good mood. Almost radiant, in fact. It can only bode bad tidings, especially as his phone log notes that he's been talking to one of the company lawyers.

Sadly, the text of the conversation was lost due to an oversight on the part of the PFY, who forgot to change the tapes on the voice recorder. A mistake he won't be making twice if the power stapler has anything to do with it ...

It's obvious something's up - he's scheduled a meeting with us at 10.30am, a time normally quite unknown to us.

The smug expression on his face leaves me in no doubt that he feels his position is unassailable.

"Gentlemen," he says, with an uncharacteristic show of camaraderie, "Why don't you take an hour's unpaid leave to go and get changed?"

The PFY is in like a shot.

"And why don't you take an hour's paid leave to go and get f..."

"I'M SORRY?!" I interrupt, saving the PFY from the quagmire of disciplinary action, "As you're well aware, we're permitted to wear attire applicable to the nature of our position."

"Unless", the boss says, holding up a heavily highlighted copy of a contract not unlike the ones signed when we joined the company, "your position involves interaction with ..."

He pauses for a moment, giving us time to fill in the blank whilst simultaneously savouring every millisecond ...

"... begins with C ...", he adds, "... ends with S ..."

Neither the PFY nor I are forthcoming, so the boss finishes.

"CLIENTS."

"Oh," says the PFY. "That wasn't the C word I was thinking of. But I think we're talking about the same people though ..."

I cut through the PFY's bolshiness and come straight to the point.

"We don't deal with clients," I explain, as if I'm talking to a simple-minded child.

"AHEM," the Boss replies, priming the bombshell he has hidden. "As of the initiation of our ISO and Advanced Helpdesk Initiatives, the helpdesk and support staff are now officially your clients." His smug expression says it all. He's been doing his homework on this one.

"And you suggest?" I ask

"Standard client representative dress. Suit..."

The PFY gasps.

"...business shirt, tie..."

I suppress the gag reflex in my throat.

"...and of course hard-soled shoes, preferably leather."

"Well," I rally, "it's not often we agree on things, but I'd have to admit you do have a point. I'll be ready by the morning."

The PFY's widened eyes lead me to believe he doubts my sanity. But the boss is not a complete idiot. Well, actually he is, but I cut him some slack for the moment, as he can smell the rat but just can't figure where it is. We leave him to ponder...

The next day heads turn as the PFY and I stroll into work in the required apparel, and present the receipt for our new attire to the boss, who promptly has some dramatic form of seizure.

An hour later he's revived by the company nurse, but not before the PFY and I have a couple of cracks at the task with a impromptu defibrillator made from pieces of his desktop machine.

"Where am I?" the boss asks.

"In your office," I reply. "You had some sort of fit!"

"That's right. What the BLOODY HELL IS THAT?!" he asks, pointing at the receipt.

"It's the invoice for our clothes. Remember in our contract it specifically states that any specially-made safety apparel is to be provided by the company. Do you know how hard it is to get Italian-made steel-cap shoes with that professional look with only six hours notice? They had to fly them in specially!"

"You won't get away with it!" he snarls, noticing again the large collection of figures at the bottom of the page.

"Now don't you worry," I respond soothingly. "You've had a nasty turn, but we've taken care of everything. One of the nice accountants with a predilection for viewing Internet strip-shows was only too happy to supply the blank cheque to us yesterday afternoon ..."

"Then I'll have it STOPPED!" the boss says smugly, victory in sight.

So much in sight in fact, it obscures the still live remains of his PC from his vision...

I give him a good 10 minutes of heart boosting electricity before I call the nurse back again, during which time the PFY calls our clothing supplier to advise a quick clearance time ...

And they say a blue pinstripe is dressing for success ...

4.8 The B.O.F.H. is labelled Politically Unsound ...

Things are bad. The forces of evil (i.e. the huggy-feely brigade) are causing problems. The PFY and I have been targeted as 'politically unsound' for not turning up to some meeting on "harassment in the workplace".

The boss has apparently dipped his oar into troubled waters for a quick stir by indicating that we NEVER attend these compulsory meetings; I put his attitude down to some recent electrical first aid.

Sure enough, a meeting is organised with the Head of Personnel and Head of Staff Counselling (i.e. the Huggy-Feely Dept).

"Ah, yes," the Head of Personnel begins, "apparently you saw fit not to attend your course on harassment in the workplace."

"Yes", I reply, "the truth of the matter is that in our position we are simply too busy to (a) harass people; or (b) attend a course on how not to do it."

"Well, you might think that, but I can assure you that attendance at this course is mandatory for staff and contractors alike. I don't think I need remind you that your contract requires you to attend all relevant training courses", she replies, the steel in her voice reaching the thickness of armour plating.

"I don't think so."

"I beg your pardon?!"

"I'm sure you do", I respond, "but let us suppose, merely for the sake of conjecture of course, that the PFY or I did in fact wish to harass someone. Say someone like yourself for instance. Would I, as a networking and communications engineer, go all the way to your office to make some lewd and obnoxious remark to or about you, insinuating some theme or activity you (and quite possibly I) would find distasteful, OR, would I instead find and publish some image of you in an indefensible position - say in the office of a superior, in less clothing than is normally workplace practice?"

A chill fills the room. The Head of Personnel has taken on the look of someone who would rather be elsewhere and has completely forgotten the axe he has to grind.

"I don't know what you're insinuating, bu...", Ms. Huggy begins.

"Oh nothing, I assure you! I'm sure it was just an air conditioning problem that was recorded on the securi.."

"AH! I don't really think there's any need to pursue this matter", the Head of Personnel stutters, "at least not if the original proof of this could be ..."

In other words he wants the tapes.

"Well, as I said, it was an example", I reply, "and not based in fact. Speaking of fact, is it one that there's a contract rate-round coming up soon?"

He recognises the prompt. "Ah, there has been talk of a ..."

"Excellent. The PFY and I were hoping this was the case."

Negotiations complete, the PFY and I retire to our offices to plan the extra spend. Two days later the written confirmation of the rate-rise is in our hands and we're happy workers once more. The boss, on the other hand, isn't so pleased. Thwarted again, he's embarked on a one-man rampage through the department in search of the lowest morale possible.

The phone rings. It's the helpdesk.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Is that networks?"

"You know it is"

"We have a ... problem we'd like solved."

"Hardware or Software?"

"Errmmmm ... Bossware"

"Could be expensive ..."

"A night of free drinks and dinner for four at the Dorchester?"

"Deal. Do you require a call number?"

"Oh! Ok."

"One."

I love service calls. I fill the PFY in on the deal. Later that afternoon the boss storms in looking for the person who took down the mail server.

"That would be me", I point out. "You told us to move it into the Computer Room. But the electricians haven't checked the power-points yet".

"RIGHT!", he shouts. "I'll be back to deal with YOU when I'VE fired it up".

How apt. The PFY and I watch as the server's power-supply emits a burst of smoke as the power point delivers the 400 volts of badly wired 3-phase power instead of the expected 240. It's a credit to our safety systems that the doors lock immediately to prevent anyone accidentally walking into the Halon-filling room whilst the boss grabs for the oxygen mask.

"Well, he must have just cracked! He ran in laughing like a madman and destroying equipment!", I inform security later.

The boss is still appears to be crying (he obviously finds something funny) as they cart him out ...

4.9 The B.O.F.H. and PFY go on some site visits ...

The boss, for the first time in his career, has actually done something right! Amazing as it seems, but thanks to odd goings on at the masons, he's managed to arrange a co-operative site visit scheme with a few local companies to foster a frank exchange of networking information and expertise.

Like hell.

We know it's a ploy to get us out of the building so he can search high and low for the three blank, yet countersigned, order forms we extorted out of him under threat of showing the CEO what the boardroom table and a member secretarial staff have been up to in his presence lately. Who'd have thought that adding a low-light camera to the conference recording system would pay off so quickly?

As for the site visits, a skilled bastard recognises IMMEDIATELY a chance to upgrade equipment when it presents itself. The PFY and I set to work slipping the sadly unused false bottoms back into our briefcases, then load them up with outmoded networking kit.

According to plan, by the time the Network Manager on our first site has finished showing me the full beauty of their patching racks the PFY has hot-swapped half a dozen 10/100 5 port Ethernet cards for our old straight 10s. Like taking candy from a baby. And leaving it the wrapper ...

The second site is much more secure and proves to be a slight challenge, right up until lunchtime when we roll on down to the local for seven or eight pints of the hard stuff, with Tequila slammers to follow. A pittance to pay for the latest revision router EPROMS that our support company wanted a small fortune for whilst their erstwhile network manager snores his way through the afternoon.

Being a kind-hearted sod, I'll make sure to drop them back in the mail as a "bug-fix upgrade" after only making a slight change to the switching logic.

I feel sure that the competitive advantage will lean in our favour once the "Use Heaviest Loaded Segment" code cuts in ...

We're only interrupted once when their PFY (so green he needs mowing) wanders in to see what we're doing. A quick flash of my tube pass and he thinks he's witnessing a vendor-initiated hardware service check in operation. It truly breaks my heart to see trust like that go unpunished.

The effects of the lunch are a little too filling for my PFY's limited experience in the alcoholic arts so he enquires the location of the nearest Gents from his counterpart whilst I snaffle the Computer Room cardkey so carelessly left laying around in his pocket ...

Seconds later the power goes out, which can only mean the PFY's rest stop included a visit to the cabling cupboard. Darkness, the true friend of bastards everywhere is interrupted only by a couple of EXIT signs which flicker briefly, then go out. Now that's what I call a good trainee.

Quicker than you can say "High Capacity Storage Downgrade" I'm performing an impromptu one in the Computer Room whilst adding a significant weight to my briefcase at the same time. I get out in time to see hear their PFY trip over a cabling drum I'd accidentally nudged out into the centre of the room on my way into the Computer Room.

The lights come on in time to see the PFY helping their PFY into a chair. The poor bloke seems a little woozy so I try to help out by taking a few of the phone calls that are inundating the room.

"THE BLOODY NETWORK IS DOWN!" A user screams at me in a manner that would have personnel immediately calculating sick-pay entitlement at our site, but seems par for the course here.

"Yes, it's due to the power cut from the surge-current overloading." I ad-lib "You should switch your machines to low-power mode to prevent it"

"How do I do that?" The user asks, bringing back my thoughts of trust and punishment.

"Switch all the machines in your office off, switch them to low power with the switch at the back, then turn them all on at the same time."

"Is 115 the low-power setting?" the user asks.

"You betcha!"

"Thanks"

"Don't mention it!" I cry as the PFY and I make a break for the door.

Our exit is heralded by a storm of sharp crack! noises from the ground-floor offices, which brings a small song of joy to my heart ...

The last site on our visit is a surprise. We're apparently visiting the offices of our chief opposition, those who tried to take us over.

Looks like tuna casserole on the menu ...

My suspicions are confirmed when I notice the presence of several sub-miniature camera holes lining the corridors of the entrance, all but invisible to the layperson, raising the stakes somewhat ...

Then again, I love a challenge ...

4.10 The B.O.F.H. and PFY help sort out a rival's PSIC problems ...

It's time for the last site visit on the site tour agenda, and this one is the tough nut ..

The control room is straight out of Science-Fiction Land - a veritable security command centre and treasure trove of sophisticated equipment.

My fingers start itching almost immediately, but caution is the watchword. The PFY also notices the security overkill and follows suit.

A phone rings next to me and I answer helpfully, planning to use the old FDISK problem solving utility but the telltale beep of the voice-recorder tells me that anything I say can and will be used as evidence against me. I choke out some useless but unhelpful advice, then hang up in time to see my counterpart watching me with the smug expression of one who knows exactly how bullet-proof his set-up is.

The bastard!

A tour of the comms room reveals state of the art equipment that I'd sell the boss for glue to obtain - which just adds to my general misery.

"Quite something isn't it?" My opposition comments. "I suppose you'll get this sort of equipment ... one day ..."

Double bastard!

By lunchtime I've almost given up hope - It seems that the tide's completely against me. Even in the cafeteria I note the telltale black dots of a micro camera lens. Except ...

The PFY interprets my snatched glance and moves into blocking position for the fraction of a second that it requires to flick the old standby - a couple of laxative chocolates - into my counterpart's dessert. True, it's hardly sportsmanlike, but like they say, all's fair in love and networking.

According to plan, a couple of hours later my counterpart receives a priority one call from nature and the PFY and I get to work. He accidentally trips over a cable and face-plants the CCTV recording console, sacrificing a couple of bruises to the cause. With the security cameras in Alzheimer's mode, I turn on SNMP reporting on every single piece of hardware that will allow me to do so remotely.

In seconds a guy I can only assume to be the counterpart's boss bursts in ranting about horrific network response. But it can't be that bad, or those 400 odd PCs around the building wouldn't be delivering SNMP trap info every second ...

"Looks exactly like that PSIC problem we had with that new kit a couple of months ago." I comment.

"PSIC?" their boss enquires

"Yeah, Pseudo-Standard-Interface-Conflicts" I reply "A lot of the new state-of-the-art kit doesn't actually adhere to any standard, which is fine so long as it doesn't get plugged into a network with anything else. If it does, sooner or later there'll be problems ..."

"... when it gets into protocol loops with standard kit" the PFY finishes, knowing where I'm heading.

"What can we do?" asks the boss-type. "My Network Engineer tells me nothing!"

"You're joking!" I counter in horror "You mean he doesn't fill out daily reports of what he spends his time on?"

"Of course! Good lord, next you'll be telling me he doesn't have any network procedures documentation!"

"He doesn't!"

"But that's a workplace priority! No wonder you're having problems with all this new kit!! Look, I don't like to speak out of turn, but I think he's been leading you on with technical mumbo jumbo ...

Tell you what I'll do - because you know my boss and all, I'll loan you some of our kit and we'll take yours to iron out the protocol problems in your stuff."

"Would you?!?" he gushes, networking salvation on the horizon.

"Sure! Well, that is unless you think you'll be talked out of it with more mumbo-jumbo, buzzwords and geek-talk?"

"NO, I'm quite capable of making technical decisions. Tell me what we need to replace and you can take it with you when you go ..."

"Well, that Gigabit Ethernet switch did look little dodgy" I reply.

"Don't forget that handheld LAN analyser and tracker" the PFY adds.

... five minutes later ...

"And lastly, that Dual Audio Channel Enhanced Video Display"

"You mean the CEO's new 29 inch Stereo Colour TV?!?!?" he bleats.

"I bet that's half the problem all by itself" I reply.

Within half an hour all their comms room is missing is a couple of tumble-weeds. I organise a shipment of networking kit so old you can watch the bytes travelling, then make plans for the negotiation round that's soon to follow.

I can't wait to see what the "vetting fee" will be for each piece of kit we "pass" as being of suitable standard ...

This experience stuff really is worth it ...

4.11 The B.O.F.H. wins an award from his peer group ...

It's a calm Monday morning when the Boss strolls into the office with the air of the cat with the proverbial cream.

"How did that router sale go off then?" he asks, unable to disguise his smugness at managing to sell off a piece of kit that was so crap that it wouldn't even pass the self-tests needed to become a boat anchor.

"They came and got it" I reply, referring to the poor bastards who bought the kit from us and who are no doubt now in the process of trying to extinguish the fire, "but I still think it was a little on the nose selling it to them".

"Sounds to me like a case of Caveat Emptor" the boss chuckles smugly.

"Really?" I respond, "I thought it was a router! Mind you, I don't trust those foreign wines - After Chernobyl you never know if they're going to be radioactive ..."

The boss looks at me as if I've been mentally demoted to the using classes, but the PFY knows the big plan and keeps quiet.

"How DID you manage to convince them?" I ask appealing to the boss' s need to gloat.

"Oh, just told them that it was one of the original units and still as good at the day we bought it," he sniggers, mentally convincing himself that he's the brains of the outfit ...

And that's one thought that I'm not going to challenge because today is April 1st - Bastard Boss Day - and I have my eyes on a certain prize that has eluded me for many years.

This year I've decided to sell the boss on using the network as a storage medium. I casually drop a couple of remarks until the boss decides to channel his massive intelligence away from tying his shoelaces and onto the matter at hand.

"It's simplicity itself!" I cry "We've got these Gigabit Ethernet switches all around the place that we just aren't using! Instead of letting them go to waste we could be sending data continuously around them until it's needed which would actually cut down on the amount of physical disk storage we would need! And just think of the time we would save with read and write latency when the data's already on the net!"

"It would never work," the PFY counters, all according to plan. "Our networks are too short - the data would be back before it had finished leaving the machine."

"Not," I add, "if we were to make the network longer to add a short delay. Why, 10 drums of Cat-5 wired together would be sufficient".

"Hey!" the PFY smiles. "That's right - I never thought of that."

Our interplay has been enough to sell the Boss. Had I put forward the idea and the PFY agreed, the Boss would have trodden with caution, fearing the worst. With the PFY "on his side" he now knows that the idea is a sure thing.

Like lambs to the slaughter ...

"Excellent, I'm sure that the head of department will approve!"

"Would you be sure to mention that I thought of it?" I ask, placing the last two nails in the Boss's coffin. Now he's sure that it's the real thing and there is no way on earth he's going to let me take credit for it.

He toddles off to the Head of Dept while the PFY and I try to stroll nonchalantly back to the office. I fire up the CCTV recorder on the microcamera in the Big Boss's office.

This little recording is sure to earn me the Trophy I have desired for so long - the coveted "IT Idiot" Award for Least Intelligent Supervisor - at the Bastard Boss Competitions at a Central London pub later on tonight ...

We get the recorder going just in time ...

"Anyway... " the boss bumbles in simulated intelligence mode, "I was just wandering through the department today and a thought struck me. What with the rising cost of disk it might be an interesting plan to use our networks as a storage medium ..."

He goes on to paraphrase the food-waste-product that we fed him, while commenting that he's fired off an order for 20 drums of Cat-5.

The explosion is inevitable. The head of department, whilst in practical terms about as useful as loopback plug for an electric type-writer, did spend about six years teaching networking fundamentals to first year university students.

The PFY and I capture everything in case there's some question of 'doping' ...

Later that night as I guzzle a pint or two from my latest acquisition, I can't help but feel a twinge of remorse. Maybe I should have convinced him to use lift cables as emergency UPS power distribution wiring instead.

Ah well, there's always next year ...

4.12 It really hits the fan as the tables turn ...

Things are getting worse and worse in Computer Central. It looks as if a career change could be in the wind. I get summoned into the boss's office to answer a complaint about my 'attitude' ...

To make things 'fair' the Boss arranges for the head of personnel (his friend and my mortal opponent), to attend as a witness. Although I have, on occasion, had the odd difference of opinion with him, I depend on his professionalism. I'm sure he really just wants to bury the hatchet, which is why I'll make a point of not turning my back...

"Simon," the Boss begins, "we have a formal complaint about you from one of the new system programmers. He claims that you are being unnecessarily offensive to him."

"I'm afraid I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"He claims that you told him to do something with your faeces."

"I beg your pardon?" I reply, shocked. "There must be some mistake. The last time I spoke to him I told him that I had a system crash core that I'd like him to examine. I cannot possibly be held responsible for the strange way in which he interpreted that."

"You were leaving the toilet at the time."

"Purely coincidental. I simply mentioned it when the opportunity arose."

"Mentioned? It was more of a shout wasn't it? I believe I heard it myself from in here."

"I concede that it may have been slightly more than a whisper, but that was only because of the deference that I feel for his wealth of professional knowledge..." (Well, it was worth a shot).

"The words 'sniff my dump' do not engender in MY mind a feeling of professional respect."

"Well of course I'm completely apologetic if this has caused a major department disruption - I'll go and apologise immediately!"

"You know as well as I do that he's resigned."

"Not at all. How did this come about?"

"It appears that he is a little disconcerted with the frequency of explosions of his peripheral equipment."

"Really? Perhaps there's something wrong with his UPS system again. There's been a bit of that going around recently..."

"Yes, I noticed the IT divisional accountant has resigned, citing workplace stress as a reason."

"Well, I blame the makers of the equipment," I reply. "In the old days things were much more tolerant of slight faults."

"By slight faults you mean the odd 400-volt supply spike that the electricians can find no excuse for?"

"Really? I wouldn't know. Someone has stolen my multimeter."

"You mean the multimeter set to the 10-amp scale and plugged across a mains device in the boardroom so that the circuit breaker for the floor blew every time the overhead projector was switched on?"

"Really? Who would do a thing like that?"

"Any reason why security found your fingerprints all over the machine?"

"I have to check a lot of floppies in my job."

"I see. Well, it's out of my hands now anyway. The CEO wants to speak to you personally." Personal interviews are rare in the company, and quite often precede a 'resignation'.

The Boss and I get the nod to go in...

"What's this about all these problems downstairs?" the CEO barks.

"Would you like the technical answer or just layman's terms?" I ask, respectfully.

"Layman's terms will do for a start."

"Myself and my trainee are the only people in the company who really do know what we're doing."

The Boss shakes his head, smiling humourlessly.

"Yes, I'd heard that was the case," the CEO replies, having been primed during extended family get-togethers by the PFY. Oh, the beauty of an insider...

"Ah excuse me!" The Boss blurts anxiously. "But I believe you're overlooking something here."

"Of course I am." The CEO smiles benevolently. "We are, of course, sorry to see you go."

"What? I'm not bloody resigning, and there's no way you'll get me to sign it."

"But you already have," the CEO replies, confused, holding up a piece of paper with the Boss's freshly scrawled signature on it. "But who could possibly replace me?" the Boss burbles.

"You're looking at him," the CEO smiles.

"You're going to take over Networks?!" the Boss cries.

"No..."

"Then wh..." Disbelief and horror fight a little war for supremacy on his twitching face. "You can't be serious!"

"Of course he is," I respond quickly. "Now, I hear you're looking for a job and it just so happens that there's a vacancy in our network operations section. You'll be reporting to me, of course..."

You know sometimes life can be a bastard, but when it's good, it's REALLY good.

4.13 The Bastard puts his newest protege though a rather nasty baptism ...

So I'm in the enviable position of being management material. The extra income as a contracted manager is more than enough to brighten my day.

The opportunities for channelling funds from less worthy areas (the helpdesk upgrade) to more deserving ones (the network operations upgrade) abound. And having my former boss as an employee is the icing on the cake...

Still, mustn't bear a grudge. I decide to share my recent good fortune with others. The PFY has always wanted a junket to New Orleans. I browse the Web and find a plausible conference and enrol him in it.

He's overjoyed because he's never been to New Orleans before. The ex-boss expects a similar favour and I can't bear to disappoint him. I show him where the vacuum cleaner is and point out the map of every comms room in the building...

A week later they're both back, the ex-boss looking a little peaky, possibly from spending all that time in the dark. I blame myself for not reminding him that some of the comms cupboards don't have door handles on the inside. Whoops.

Still, at least he had the presence of mind to pull the power cable to the comms rack so someone would come to investigate. Although it probably would have been better if it had occurred to him before the Bank Holiday weekend. But, like they say, it's all a learning experience. It's terrible what dehydration drives you to, though.

Once everyone's back at Network Central, I allocate the jobs. The PFY, because of experience, is placed into my old role of installation, monitoring and maintenance. The ex-boss, because of his greenness in operations, is placed on the phones. I even plug it into the wall socket for him.

It does not disappoint, ringing within the first half hour. As he's in training, the ex-boss is required to answer all calls on hands-free so that he can receive instruction from me or the PFY should it become necessary.

"Hello, Networks," the ex-boss answers.

"Hello, is that Networks?" A quick glance at the caller-ID confirms her familiar voice. The PFY flees the room in fear.

"Yes, how can I help?"

"My network's stopped going again."

"I see. When did it stop working?"

"Just now. I tried to print and it just didn't work."

"OK, I'll just look at our network monitor and see if there's anything wrong with your machine. What room are you in?"

She gives her room and he trawls through the networking database looking for port information. Unsuccessfully. Not wanting to ask for help so early in his new career, he decides to perform the old 'hands-on' approach and go and see her.

Once he's gone, the PFY returns.

"He didn't go to see her did he?"

"Yep."

"The poor bastard!"

"Yep."

Every company has at least one computer-phobic paranoid. The ones who think that computers secretly change their settings as soon as they turn their backs. The ones who always ring to complain that their passwords have been changed by someone. (Every time they leave the shift key down). The ones who haven't changed anything, yet now their networks don't work. (This happens twice a year, when they change the position of their PCs in relation to the sun and pull the network cables out...).

Except in this case it's worse. The 'network' she's talking about is an RS232 cable between her genuine XT PC and its dot matrix printer.

She's never trusted the newer technology (which doesn't work and secretly conspires against her) and prefers to remain disconnected from the real world. Except to call twice a year when she pulls the cable out of her printer.

An hour later the boss is back, a changed man. Having been subjected to an hour of conspiracy theories and general X-file type mindlessness, he now realises what is lurking out there at the other end of the phone lines.

Gone is the air of helpfulness. Gone the feelings of goodwill to the using-classes. The PFY and I exchange knowing glances - we've seen it before and we'll see it again.

He's been bastardised.

The phone soon rings.

"Networks," he snaps.

"Hello, is that Networks?" the familiar voice asks. The phone makes the slightest of sounds as it's yanked from the socket and thrown into the bin.

"So I suppose I'm fired for ripping that out then?" he asks, resigned to his fate.

"Well, impromptu de-installations are usually something we teach you later on in your training, but it appears that experience is the best teacher after all..."

I wander off and leave the PFY to show him the rest of the ropes...

And the cattle prods...

And the 'video surveillance' consoles...

Who would have thought he'd be such promising material?

4.14 Who said management was easy? ...

I CAN'T BLOODY HANDLE IT ANY MORE!!! I was doing so well with the managerial position - allocating funds to worthwhile projects (stereo colour video monitors hooked into state-of-the-art satellite receivers) when the bomb dropped.

I find out that I'm expected to attend around six 'planning' meetings EVERY week! My former opinion of management dropped even further...

There's only so many times someone can ask what 'those byte things are again' before you find yourself dreaming of the company improvements you could achieve with a simple axe and a heavy duty wood-chipper.

Speaking of wood-chippers, the first priority meeting had the highly important topic of, should we hire our office plants? Given that we already own office plants I felt that the issue was somewhat redundant - but obviously my mind wasn't attuned to management. I'd forgotten that this little group had requested not one, not two, not three, but FOUR department restructures (to reflect the company's hierarchy restructures) in the past 18 months.

So after only two hours of deliberation, it was decided that we'd go with the rented product because then the rental company would be responsible for making sure the plants got watered. (As if the taste of the company tea and coffee didn't ensure that already).

And after that two hours there was another half an hour deciding what to do with the plants that were already in the building and had been since the building opened - the ones in the open areas upstairs that are far too large to move anywhere. Which is where the minor brainstorm of the wood chipper comes in. The plan is to hire a chipping machine, take it up in the freight elevator and perform some on-the-spot organic recycling.

By this time I'm pining for Network Operations. Things were so simple then - a user rang with some problem that they'd caused in the first place, you tortured them for a bit, then solved their problem in the most convenient way possible. Simple. Effective. Quick. I need help, so I go to the one person who might make head or tail of it.

The ex-boss. The ex-boss is a changed man. He now treats users with the thinly disguised contempt of a networking professional who has heard one time too many the ubiquitous question why is the network is down? He's seen what we've seen, he knows what we know.

He IS a bastard! I track him down in a comms room where he's sending 240AC down the phone lines to cremate the phones of certain users. I tell him my problem and he listens sympathetically.

"There's nothing you can do," he replies. "You just have to do it. Just keep your head down or they'll tell you to restructure your department."

A thought occurs to me. "Do you want your old job back?" I ask.

"Nope!" he replies, without pausing. "Go on," I plead (being a manager, so it's not beneath me).

"It'll cost you," he says. THE BASTARD! I knew I shouldn't have hired him.

"How much?" He mentions an extortionate amount of dosh with the air of someone not open for negotiation.

Sadly, I sign a, >sob!< personal cheque >sniff!< for the amount he asks. He whips off to cash it after giving me some very good advice.

The arrival of the wood-chipping machine is apparently a company photo opportunity that none of the meeting group wishes to miss - being yet another new era in company policy.

I, of course attend, and stand through a set of "okay, one with you pointing to the chip catcher. Another with all of you looking into the feed funnel" requests.

When all of the photos are finished, I sidle up to the chairperson and mention what a coup it might be if he were to appear in the photos with an actual piece of wood being processed. I tap on a plastic bag I'm carrying which gives a chopping-board-like clonk.

He smiles. We wait till everyone has gone then get the photographer to set up for the shot because once the machine

starts the other managers are going to sprint for the chance to be in-shot, so he has to be quick.

He sets up and I start the machine, emptying my bag into the chipper.

To be fair, he takes the grinding to sawdust of his yachting trophy quite well, only dismissing me from my position on the spot.

A day later I get a call at home from the once-ex-now-current-boss offering me a job as a network operator with a very reasonable salary.

I accept of course. The new position is GREAT. The boss, with his experience, makes everything worthwhile. Life cannot get any better.

"YOU'D BETTER COME QUICK!" the PFY yells as he bursts into the room.

"It's the boss! He's locked himself in the management meeting! Apparently he asked the secretary to bring his axe up and now they've heard the wood-chipper starting!" Bugger. I knew it was too good to be true...

4.15 A burnt server gets things off to a good start ...

I wander into work after a hard night on the pop. My senses, however, are not so dulled that I fail to notice the smell of burning coming from the computer room. This and the PFY's jacket slung across the back of his chair can only mean one thing. He wants another promotion.

True, it is more than overdue, given that the last time he got a rise was over six weeks ago, but personnel has recently decided to put its foot down.

The PFY emerges from the computer room with a fire extinguisher and what appears to be a major part of the cooling system from one of the Human Resources servers. As per training, he seems to be putting his best foot forward - straight into the groin of anyone in the way of his plans.

"Good lad," I think, my chest swelling with pride.

I prepare myself for the inevitable call. Moments later the phone rings and caller ID identifies my 'client' as none other than the deputy head of personnel, a person with whom I've had more than one previous 'joust'.

"What the hell's up with our server?"

"Well, I'm not sure yet, but I believe that it has suffered from thermal runaway..."

"You set our bloody machine on fire?" he shouts.

"No, of course not. It's a common fault - as machines get older the collection of dust internally can combust, caus..."

"The bloody thing's only three weeks old!"

"Hmm, it happens sometimes. You can't expect the PFY to babysit the thing given the pittance he earns," I continue.

"That's it! We're running our own system from now on," he cries before slamming the phone down.

A couple of days later my fears are realised when a new server appears in HR, complete with customised operating system and no operator access. The boss fails to grasp the enormity of the potential problem - if departments purchase their own machines there's a good chance they'll find out that there is a slight disparity in what they paid us for servers in the past and what they really cost. A slight disparity of around 200 per cent.

I leave history to run its course - after a little God-like meddling from the PFY and me. Sure enough, a day later the deputy head of personnel calls, deep in grease-mode.

"Hello," he smarms.

"Hi."

"We're having a little trouble with our server and wonder if you'd give us some advice."

"What's the problem?"

"Well, we need to be able to list all the files in a directory, including their creation dates," he replies.

So, he's started with a trick question, has he? He's obviously testing me to see whether I'm going to give good or bad advice, using his extremely limited knowledge as a benchmark.

"Sure," I say. "Just 'ls -l' the directory concerned. You might want to pipe the output to something."

"Oh yes," he continues, expecting the ubiquitous 'rm' response.

"Yes, the 'more' command."

"Oh." He's obviously disappointed because he didn't catch me giving duff advice. Stupidly, he decides to trust me... "There was one other thing. We've got some problem with our system having very slow response."

No surprise there, considering that the PFY cranked up the ping-polling on their server to about 30 per cent of the network bandwidth.

"I was wondering if you could recommend something to speed it up?"

"Not really, the newer machines are usually fairly well tuned. Oh! Hang on a moment - I bet you haven't applied the Memory Expansion Patch to the kernel have you?"

"Ahhh... no, no, I don't think we have," he mumbles, attempting to feign advanced knowledge.

"Ah well, you'd best do that then, hadn't you?"

"Good idea. Refresh my memory - how do we do that again?"

"You know," I respond casually. "Echo 'MEMORY-EXPANSION' > /dev/kmem - it's usually the first entry in your /etc/inittab file."

"Oh, of course it is. I think I removed it for tuning," he replies, lying through his teeth.

A quarter of an hour later and he's back on the phone, a little more excitable this time...

"The bloody server keeps crashing!" he cries, panic-stricken. "It won't even bloody start."

"Well I guess we could take a look. What's your root password?"

There's a moment of indecision before he blurts out the word "morepay". Quick as a flash the PFY and I start trolling all their other machines to see if this password is used elsewhere. Hit rate: high.

A day later the new HR server is back under our control, the deputy head of personnel is firmly back in his place and the PFY back into the well-worn saddle of 'recently promoted contractor'.

In fact he's in such a good mood he wanted to tell personnel what we've been putting in their water cooler. I persuade him to save that for another day...

4.16 The Bastard goes along to do some, err ... research ...

"I think it's time we looked at some of the newer technologies."

I can't believe my ears. The Boss buys new kit about as regularly as Thatcher votes Labour. It was his idea to forget this Pentium nonsense and get a job lot of XTs that he could acquire very cheaply. Fortunately I'd got wind of it and managed to 'accidentally' let slip to the CEO that the vendor was in fact the Boss's second cousin and the plan was abandoned. Quite right too - I can't believe he didn't include my mark-up in the equation.

However, since his spell on the hell-desk the Boss is a new man. His mind is permanently alive to the possibility of a scam.

"There's a research lab having an open day," he said. "I think you should go along and see what's new."

Actually, he may have said "steal what's new" - it's hard to tell since his recent bastardisation.

A few days later, the PFY and I find ourselves on a train at an unearthly hour of the morning chugging through the countryside with the trusty false-bottomed suitcase at my feet.

We finally make it to the concrete research-park jungle and into the show. As luck would have it, we're given a reconnaissance mission - sorry, guided tour - before being let loose to find our own way around. The tour is boring but at least the guide is too thick to see what we're up to. Eventually we're left to our own devices (and some of theirs that haven't been bolted down).

It's interesting to see the mass of toys scattered round, but my attention is drawn to the myriad security staff lurking around the areas where the smallest and most expensive gadgets live.

The first section seems to be about teleworking, something I relate to since the Boss paid for SMDS to my living room.

"So, tell me about teleworking," I say enthusiastically to the young suit on the ISDN gizmo stand.

"Well this unit enables you to connect invisibly to the office from home. All the network protocols go down the line, looking just like you're connected to the LAN," he gushes.

"Looks like an ISDN router to me."

"Er...yes it is. But it does have a nice blue box and extra flashing lights."

I look at the box disdainfully - not even worth nicking.

"Anything else you'd like to try to convince me is new?"

"Well, we have a router on a PCMCIA card."

"Why?"

"So you can connect your laptop to the office network via a router rather than a dial-in server."

"Why?"

"So that you don't have to install a dial-in server beside your routers."

"Of course. Using an expensive router instead of a cheap dial-in server. How economical."

My musings are interrupted by a nudge from the PFY. "They've got an iris-reading authentication system like ours."

"Not quite - ours doesn't do semi-permanent damage to eye tissue and isn't linked to the sprinkler system like theirs is."

There's still so much for him to learn.

The lunch is much better than expected, mainly because we skipped the canteen and slipped into the VIP eating area instead. The card reader takes mere moments to fine-tune so that it will accept our business cards. Watching real VIPs attempt to gain access afterwards makes interesting lunchtime entertainment, while ensuring that seconds are available.

Suitably fortified by the chateaubriand and the rather decent claret we are ready to tackle the rest of the exhibition. The false bottom of the suitcase is only heavier by a bottle of excellent Cognac carelessly left locked in a liquor cabinet.

Our progress is impeded by one of the security droids. While he's telling me why we have to wait for access to the good stuff, the PFY slopes off through the shadows.

Section six suddenly opens way ahead of schedule, allowing us to see this power-free optical cell device.

"...so as you can see, there is no power cable to the base station," drones the techno-bore on the stand, obviously trying to figure the intense interest in the video stream that's going down this seemingly power-free network gizmo. "As you can see, we've put a gap here in the fibre, so if I put this piece of card in the gap it'll cut the stream off to prove that we're not cheating." He places the card in the gap and turns to the screen for the first time to smugly point at the frozen image. His expression turns into that of a man who has just encountered a water buffalo in his jacuzzi.

"Debbie Does Dallas. Nice touch," I congratulate the PFY.

Time to make ourselves scarce...

Halfway to the corner pub, all hell breaks loose. Klaxons, fire engines, people running from buildings, the whole caboodle.

The PFY's puzzlement is directly proportional to my smugness as I adopt a leaning position at the bar.

"Five quid says the chairman of the US parent company has just been required to iris-authenticate himself," I comment, noticing the water pouring out of their office doorways...

"No bet," the PFY replies. "Pint?"

Funny business, this new technology...

4.17 The Bastard Operator From Hell is off to the movies ...

The people upstairs want to play with some new toys again. Just because the CEO has seen an article about videomail, he feels that the company is not complete without it.

Naturally, I'm delighted as the opportunities for mark-up are immense. The finance director was concerned however, but then he wouldn't pass an expense form unless it was signed in blood. Of course, it was the FD who tried to block the part I play in the purchasing process, it seems he got suspicious when I junked the wreck I drove in favour of a brand new BMW.

With the boss's instructions ringing in my ears I dial our network suppliers.

"Hello, Network Express."

"My name is Farquarson. May I speak to Jon, please?"

"Please hold."

>Click<

"Good morning, Mr... errrrrrrr... Farquarson. Is the line secure?"

"Yes, it is. Morning Jon. I need a couple of servers."

"No problem. What kind of load are they likely to get?"

"Pretty heavy. We're going in for videomail. You know, you have a graphics tablet and a camera and it stores all your words as phonemes and stuff."

"Neat. Twin Pentium Pro 200 then?"

"Errr... it's not my cost centre."

"OK. In that case do you want eight, 10 or 12 processors?"

"12 should do it. Plenty of disk too."

"40GB each?"

"Pardon?"

"Sorry, dropped a zero there."

"OK. Half a gig of RAM should do, too:- nothing too extravagant. What's the damage?"

"Hmmm... list price is 62,995 each."

"And after our bean-counter discount?"

"L124,999 before VAT per unit. I take it you want the commission to the usual account?"

Two boxes duly arrive. The PFY has them rapidly installed and whirring away, and connected up to the couple of dozen videomail tablets we scattered among the senior executives last week.

We go back down to Ops and the PFY fires up the videomail console next to his Quake session. A quick e-mail to the admin assistant at our other office brings up the remote execs on our console and we start to see words flying around the WAN. I sit back smugly and concentrate for the moment on psychopathic murder, albeit unfortunately in a virtual world.

"They seem to have the hang of it - I think they're competing to see who can send the longest mail with the most difficult words in," comments the PFY, neatly dodging behind a wall.

"Well", I reply, "they are kiddies with new toys. Hopefully we'll have enough material soon," I muse.

"Material?"

"Oh, don't worry about it."

>BAMBAMBAMBAMBAM<

"Ha! Die, sucker."

On returning after a brief hour's lunch, I inspect the videomail system. I'm rather surprised that they've managed to fill 40 per cent of the disks on the servers in such a short space of time, but it's all for the good. I run up my trusty copy of Premiere and start picking at the filestore.

"What are you up to," inquires my pimply colleague.

"Making a movie, what's it look like?"

"A movie of what?"

"Our CEO. Loyal, huh?"

"Very. That's what worries me."

It takes a while to remember my way around the controls in the new version, but soon the phrases are coming together nicely. The PFY is wearing his look of utmost puzzlement and goes off to nuke someone's server in the hope that it will ease his mind. An hour or so later he's just sweeping the last few bits into a bin-bag and I sit back, satisfied.

The PFY sees my contented smile and wanders over. He spots my notepad beside the PC and notices the phrases scrawled there.

"Annual bonfire night supper... financial director... rumour has it... security department... audio interference... had goat's cheese as a starter... what's this all about?" he asks.

"Just wait; the phone should ring about... NOW."

He jumps as the telephone springs to life.

"Hello, operations. You want whose account removed immediately? But isn't he the FD? OK, OK, I'm not arguing, I'm just surprised. I thought he was unsackably married to the CEO's sister. Who gave the authority? What, himself? Oh, by videomail... how apt."

The PFY bids farewell to our remote-site admin assistant, who needless to say is on a percentage and is therefore totally tame, and looks suspiciously at me.

"Care to give me a private viewing of your new movie?"

"Sure."

I hit 'play' and the PFY is presented with an extremely convincing image of the CEO telling the rest of the execs that some of the FD's extra-curricular habits just aren't in line with the company's requirements of directorial behaviour and that he's going to have to let him go. A couple of variants contain the instructions to the admin types and security to implement the logistical side of the person-disposal and police-calling. Of course simple voicemail would never have sufficed, but with videomail you can actually see the CEO himself saying the words. And we all know that you can't forge videomail - don't we?

4.18 The PFY is hardly the life and soul ...

I could be over-reading the signs slightly, but the PFY seems to have all the symptoms of an advanced case of the blues. Questioning him on the matter is fruitless.

His work is suffering because of it - yesterday I caught him refilling the paper tray in one of the fax machines in response to a user's request. Also, password-change logs note that he's helping out users who forget their passwords by changing them to words like 'temporary' and 'changeme', instead of the usual 'goshiamaplonker' or 'imaginebeingsostupid'.

The final straw comes when he does a complete recovery of a hard disk after a user accidentally erased it.

A serious talk is required, so I corner him and the truth comes out.

It appears that the PFY's favourite piece of firmware in the DP Pool has chucked him in favour of a newly contracted Internet Policy Consultant who's so smooth he's ready for varnishing. I'd seen the signs of course, but thought the PFY was more than up to the challenge. Looks like there are still some jobs you have to leave to the experts.

It's a sad state of affairs for the PFY, made worse by the fact that we've been directed from above to aid Mr Slimey's 'Internet Political Correctness' investigation - a thinly disguised attempt by the boss to justify the persecution of those who invest hours in company time perusing the screeds of Internet porn sites.

I try to divert the PFY's depression with a little light-heartedness...

"Perhaps you could do with a trip to Dr Bastard's Lab?" I call, unveiling my latest gadget.

"It's a mouse," the PFY responds.

"Not just any mouse," I say. "A remote controlled mouse, see?"

I twiddle with the arrow keys on my infra-red enabled personnel disorganiser. The mouse moves accordingly.

"Neat," the PFY comments, unimpressed.

"And what about that?" I ask, pointing at a recently modified office item.

"A briefcase?"

"Yes, yes - but with a customised addition," I reply. "Bring it over."

He grabs it, straining under the unexpected weight, and starts to my desk.

With the press of the key on the disorganiser the latches burst open, freeing a couple of bricks which fall onto the PFY's feet. Sometimes you really do have to be cruel to be kind.

"What the hell did you do that for?" the PFY cries.

"Education," I respond. "You're suffering under the misapprehension that life is fair. It is not. Which is why empowered individuals like you and I make it so."

"I don't understand."

Wearily I explain. "Picture if you will an Internet Policy Consultant-like individual, tired out after a hard day's work of warming his office chair."

As he boards his tube train, his briefcase - full of homework on how to annoy Network Operations - suddenly springs open, emptying its contents onto the line."

"Ah, so he's taking the tube home today then?" the PFY responds.

"I don't know. I'm merely outlining options here. And speaking of options, I believe we don't have one about attending his Internet policy report this very afternoon."

The PFY, at one stage, lapses back into pseudo-depression.

Time for a reserve plan that I was hoping to save for another occasion.

A little tinker in SNMP-land later and the fire alarms go off in response to an undetermined smoke detection.

Later that afternoon we show up at the boardroom for Internet Policy suggestions from the slimemonster. The presence of the PFY's erstwhile companion does nothing to improve his spirits.

Slimey starts off on the offensive, playing the 'sensitive new age guy' role to the hilt, while simultaneously down-playing the 'caring unbiased networking type' that has been the cornerstone of my many years of service. Within minutes, he has the audience eating out of his hand as he outlines his plan for an isolated network, his laptop pumping out one intranet proposal after another.

The boss looks on smugly as things look to be going his way.

"I think you know what to do," I whisper to the PFY.

He looks blankly as I pass my disorganiser to him.

"Something on his hard disk perhaps?" I prompt.

Deep in the recesses of the PFY's psyche, meglomaniac awakes from its deep sleep.

Half an hour later I'm sipping a pint with the PFY as he forgives and forgets with his DP attachment.

The shock and outrage that followed the display of a few still lifes from the ladies' powder room didn't enhance the credibility of our so-PC consultant very much and his exit from the building was rather rocket-like. Still, it was probably for the best.

"Another?" the PFY asks.

"Well I can't really. I'm just off to teach the boss the dangers of stashing his house keys in the brand new briefcase that was anonymously sent to him."

Experience, as they say, is the best teacher...

4.19 Members of the new stripy shirt brigade are full of beans and raring to go ...

One thing that has been bugging me for some time is the continued existence of the separate bean counter network.

The stripy shirt brigade took exception some time ago to the level of support they were getting from us, and no matter how hard we try to make them see the light, there's always some rebel faction which strives to maintain at least some separate systems.

I can't understand it myself. We've put ourselves out for them over the months, stress-testing their notebooks and all that. The anvil business was a pure accident. And we still haven't figured how transactions with the local bookie managed to get a paragraph all of their own in the annual report, but I'm certain it wasn't Ops-induced.

Yet despite these tremendous efforts, the beancounters still insist that they need their own technical department. What's worse is that they seem to be making a decent fist of it. The guy they hired to run the network does seem to have a strange attitude to users, though - he genuinely believes that is duty to help them.

What's worse is his presence means that the accountants know the real value of the all the kit we've been buying over the past few years. It took some fancy footwork to ensure that the CEO didn't receive the information that the multi-directional, electro-magnetic, mobile communications devices that we'd billed at L1,200 were in fact cordless phones that the PFY's mate was flogging off at knockdown prices down the local market.

It's imperative that we bring the bean counters back into our domain for good. Not only are we missing our 'bonuses' that comes as part of Cap. Ex., but there are also rumblings around the building that other departments are getting bright ideas about our support efforts.

Fortunately, our boss has a vicious streak in him since his brief spell on the hell desk, so he's right behind us on this one. He's had it in for the accounts department since his own expenses claim for the 'wherever you want' hostess service was rejected as a genuine business expense.

It doesn't help that the bean counter's network manager is one of those irritating individuals who walks around with a smug smile on his face all the time. He looks like one of those alligators that you see when you're cruising in the everglades, except with a slightly worse complexion.

He guards his territory jealously, which presents something of a challenge.

"I see your network's down again," he muses in passing.

The network accidentally crashed during an upgrade that we carrying out, just before the big race was about to start. "It's amazing that people are prevented from working on the network every time there's a race meeting or big football match, isn't it?" He smiles knowingly.

"Yes, we're having a lot of trouble with bottlenecks," I find myself saying, before politely slamming the door in his face and pouring another Espresso.

A few days later I find myself 'broken down' in front of Smiley's car on my way to my parking space. He leans on the horn, but my vehicle's illness is looking terminal - or at least it is after I pocket one of the spark plugs.

"I can't see what's wrong with it," I shout from under the bonnet.

"I'll go off and get help."

I know that the car park attendant is not likely to spring into action; partly because he's about 90 and partly because I left him the tapes I happened to have of the head of personnel talking to the deputy sales manager about some new high performance techniques they wanted to try out - in the hotel down the road.

"Quick," I shouted to the PFY. "We've only got a few minutes."

We know that the board meeting is about to start soon. A few minor adjustments to the server and they're ready to roll.

Back in my own office, I switch on the audio-monitoring device - OK, bug.

We hear the CEO's dulcet tones. "Now, I'd like to give you a demonstration of our latest product. I'd like to thank the technical whizz-kid in the financial department, Anthony, for his help in this demo. I believe we have a live feed to our R&D labs."

Live feed, yes. R&D Labs, no. The 3.30 at Newbury, definitely. Gasps from the board cause Smiley to be quickly summoned. His protests of innocence are to no avail as security, having emerged happy (and in my debt) from the car park attendant's hut, 'discover' the receipts for the local racing service in his desk.

The CEO is soon announcing the disbanding of the finance network, completely and for good. "I think I'd better bring network support back under one roof - at least departments can't pursue their own activities that way."

Networking - there are winners and there are losers. And I always seem to get such good odds ...

4.20 Local culinary delights with the Bastard ...

"You bloody nobbled him, didn't you?" the boss snaps at me and the PFY in a fashion that betrays his pent-up frustration at losing yet another 'client services liaison manager' candidate. Four in one week - at this rate we'll never get to improve customer relations, sadly.

"I beg your pardon?" the PFY responds, pausing only briefly to display an innocent expression.

"He's not going to show is he?" the boss asks.

"Au contraire," I reply. "I saw him just this morning. In fact the PFY was with me. He was looking a little seedy however - apparently he went late-night drinking with a couple of his soon-to-be workmates."

"You took him out drinking?"

"Well, I might have had a couple of lagers last night, purely in the interests of better understanding," I admit grudg-

ingly.

"So where is he now?"

"Well, that's the funny thing. The last I saw of him was when he was in the lift with me and the PFY when we were trying out those tasty new one quid cigars they sell at that stand down the street. He really did look ill. Next thing I knew he was rushing out of the lift and away."

"Why?"

"No idea. I think it was just after the PFY offered him those bacon fat sandwiches."

"Ah no," the PFY counters. "I think it was after you showed him that jar of pickled livers."

"Really? Oh well, I'll take your word for it."

"I suspected this might happen," the boss replies smugly whilst fingering the intercom to reception. "Send in the next applicant will you please?"

Ah... the old double-up-on-the-applicants trick.

Sure enough, the new applicant ("Call me Dave") takes his place at the desk and the boss gives him the standard glossy-brochure, entirely fictional account of what we do here, then asks what Dave's relevant experience is...

"Well," he blurts. "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

My hand involuntarily tightens on the seat armrest as I consider the horror of working with somebody this geeky.

"When can you start?" the boss asks, anxious to fill the position before the head of IT has another downsizing-binge.

"Well, right away - I like to think I'm dynamically configurable."

The PFY's armrest creaks dangerously in tune with mine - great minds think alike.

Later that morning our new 'representative' is ensconced in the comms room to 'get a feel of our operation'. The PFY and I enhance the tactile experience by lowering the temperature and starting up all the noisy kit that we save for special occasions.

By lunchtime he's starting to get the blue-lipped, sleepy demeanour that only exposure can give, so we slip an empty vodka bottle into the comms room rubbish bin and mention the 'sly-grogging' to the boss.

He breaks the habit of a lifetime by not being fooled. The next day our co-worker has recovered and is back on the job, getting a rough introduction to the network hardware area when the cabling tray he was crawling along had some form of unexplained earthing problem resulting in a 'potential difference anomaly' between his torso and feet. Shocking!

I'm disturbed in my work a short time later when the boss comes wandering by.

"Have you seen Dave?" he asks.

"Not for a bit," I reply. "Why?"

"Oh, someone tripped after one of the removable floor tiles was left unsecured."

"Yes," the PFY mentions. "He left one open in the comms room too - could've been a nasty accident - still, all screwed down securely now."

The boss smiles uneasily at the proof of our safety point while trying to slip a piece of paper onto the desktop unnoticed.

"Oh," I cry, snatching it up. "An official safety memo designed to alleviate employers' responsibility for workplace accidents - in the area of... oh, securing floor tiles left open? Dated yesterday? I don't remember receiving this yesterday - do you?"

"Nope," the PFY says. "Not part of the official safety policy as of this morning."

The boss puts on his 'we're all playing on the same side' face and appeals to our better nature to prevent his looking bad at the next occupational safety review.

"That'll be 20 quid each," I reply, cutting him off. A deal is struck and the boss goes off with the knowledge that the buck is not stopping with him.

"Notice," the PFY mentions. "That nowhere on this memo does it say that you should check that there is no-one underneath the said floor at the time that you secure it."

"You didn't," I cry.

"Well you didn't think that banging was the air conditioning playing up again did you?"

"But that's terrible, I can't believe you'd do such a thing!"

You can never be too careful when it comes to networking.

4.21 The Bastard Operator From Hell and the Paintball session ...

I love the smell of burning components in the morning. Smells like victory.

I skip victory and concentrate on the voices entering the radio mike in the desktop calculator on the Boss's desk. (First rule of bugs, pick something in plain sight that isn't going to get used)

I think it's a FANTASTIC idea!!" the CEO burbles excitedly.

"It's BRILLIANT!" the Boss sucks up, "A game of bloody paintball war! It's sheer genius!"

I tune out. The fruition of months of subtle hints, endless misdirected web pages, countless spammed email messages. The gauntlet has been taken up...

..Sigh..

"PAINTBALL WAR!" the PFY cries queasily "They wouldn't dare!"

"Oh yes they would" I respond "Us versus the Beancounters! It would appear that the CEO, *YOUR* flesh and blood however indirectly, has been got at by some slimeball in accounts and decided that it would be a wise and proper thing to end the apparent inter-divisional war between us and accounts on the paintball field of honour - no hiding behind technology or purchase approval rubber stamps!"

"You sound like you're looking forward to it!" he cries, still not at all happy about the idea.

"Well, given that it is fairly much inevitable now, 'looking forward' is perhaps a little strong, but yes, I admit I do relish the opportunity of meeting our opposition fair and square on the field of honour, harbouring no grudges (like them docking my petrol allowance simply because I sold my car and hadn't been called out to work for the past three months) in a free-for-all"

"But they'll cream us!" he bleats "They've got weekend soldiers on their side!" he snuffles, coming to the point at long last.

"And we have subcontractors! I'm sure I can rustle up one or two who know how to point a gun! Besides, it's all booked from above. The best we can hope for is to do our best, take our medicine like men, and charge double time for weekend work... Oh, and take some of them with us."

The PFY is unconvinced..

"Oh, did I mention that in the interests of morale, the boss - you know, the one who gave out your cellphone number to the helpdesk - is going to find out on the day that he's a member of the team?"

"Really?" the PFY says, doubt now a thing of the past...

A week later the fateful day arrives and we exit the bus to the smug countenances of the opposition - they having had both extensive education and practice in the past few days...

My own education in the arts is sadly lacking, having only read a couple of posts to a usenet newsgroup on the topic. Sigh.

The paintball guy issues the rounds and weapons to the troops and the game commences. Our recently ordered library book tracking system is getting a bit of testing "in the field" with detectors sewn into the lining of the opposition's combat suits.. Looks like a worthwhile investment...

A buttock presents itself to my hiding place so I fire point blank with my reserve weapon - one that has just a tad more pressure than the standard issue and happens to be loaded with frozen pellets...

The resultant scream does two things to bring a smile to my face: (a) Confirms newsgroup accuracy, and (b) alerts the rest of the team to a sitting duck..

..

Half an hour later we've surrounded the beancounters in their makeshift fort.

"We surrender!" they cry, coming out with weapons raised.

"Now you see" I say to the PFY "In a real war-time situation, we would now be taking prisoners. Sadly, however, the Geneva convention does not extend itself to the paintball sports.."

The resulting massacre is needlessly quick.

"Quick!" the PFY cries "They're heading back to the bus!!!"

"You mean the one currently parked at a quiet country pub 4 miles away.."

The CEO pops in to see how things are going and if grievances have been solved.

In the absence of the enemy, the boss has taken on a definite hunted expression with the team seeming to be made up exclusively of people he's annoyed in the past few weeks.

"Friendly Fire" I comment to the CEO over his protests "A documented wartime phenomenon. Purely Accidental.."

...

The following Monday we're back at work and, true to the CEO's expectations, interdivisional bickering is at an all-time low.

True, with most of Accounts apparently suffering from some form of "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" - the aftermath of the ambush in the snug of the 'quiet country pub' apparently - there isn't really anyone to bicker with.

Accounts isn't the only one to suffer from this. We're snowed under writing proposals for equipment purchases for the boss to sign - apparently he's heard there's a rematch on in a couple of weeks and wants to curry favour with the masses.

Looks like time to order that Stereo 29inch Video monitor for my telecommuting from home....

4.22 The PFY takes the 'how to be a Bastard Operator From Hell' test ...

"I don't think you realise who I am."

The PFY pauses for a minute. "Hmm...Carter, accounts. Room 402, extension 6473, date of birth June 22, 1963. Married, one child - not yours. A cider drinker. Drive a red Volvo with a faulty rear light and collect beer coasters. Your password is...ahhhhhmmm."

"Something to do with fish," I hint.

"Driftnet," the PFY cries.

"Excellent," I respond, turning to our latest visitor. "Can I have a sports question please?"

"But...I..."

"No, sports," I reply firmly.

While our user wanders off, I fill out the practical section of the PFY's final exam sheet.

"Let's see. Yes, you achieved the correct amount of disorientation and demoralisation. You also get a couple of bonus points by planting the seeds of doubt with the 'not yours' comment. Now, onto the theoretical section. The hard disk on your personal machine fails out of warranty period. What would you do?"

"Swap it with the boss's so he gets it replaced immediately, then, when the new disk arrives, format the boss's old one and reinstall it in his machine."

"Yeeesss. But remember that you're being marked for proactivity too..."

"Oh of course!" the PFY blurts guiltily. "Then swap it into one of the consultants' machines so that you always have a standby disk for the future."

"Excellent. Now, you're helping users out in your spare time, when..."

The PFY laughs out loud.

"Correct. Next question: the boss has bought a piece of kit that is so old that even the engineers understand how it works. How would you get rid of it?"

"Drop it down several flights of stairs?"

"Too suspicious."

"Flick the mains switch to 115 volts for a little while?"

"He'll replace the power supply."

"Umm... I know, direct a heat gun into its cooling vents."

"Correct. Complete this statement: all power corrupts, absolute power..."

"..is even more fun!"

"Correct. Your boss and a client are plummeting towards the footpath after cornering you for two hours with their thoughts on the future of computing. Who would hit the ground first?"

"Who cares?"

"Correct. Judging solely by his attitude, how does the boss believe our network is managed?"

"By FM management."

"Be more specific."

"F***ing magic."

"Correct. How long would it take an engineer to change a flat?"

"It depends on how many replacement flats he brought with him."

"Correct. Still on that topic, an engineer happens to mention the words 'that's interesting'. What has happened?"

"Uh, he's either broken your computer, lost his screwdriver inside it somewhere, put it back together with lots of parts left over or encountered some error that he's never seen before."

"So?"

"Oh, he just says it to pass the time because he's not allowed to say 'bollocks' in the presence of a customer."

"Precisely. One of your users brings his home computer for you to fix. You..."

"Solder the circuit breaker shut, crank the voltage adjustments to full power, swap out any good memory chips for crap and install a virus on their hard disk."

"And?"

"Whoopsy - charge them mates' rates of 20 quid for your time."

"Yep. Complete this: the meek shall inherit..."

"...what they're bloody well given. And be thankful for it."

"Correct. You have scored a total of 10 out of 10 in the theoretical section, passing on none. As your final task you must generate, then deal with, 50 user complaints in two minutes. Your time starts now!"

An hour later we're observing the smoking remains of the beancounters' comms cupboard.

"Freak wiring mishap?" the PFY asks the fire investigating officer.

"Looks that way," he replies, much to the annoyance of the head beancounter, who is not as stupid as he looks. "It seems that someone had replaced the five amp plug fuse on a portable lamp with a piece of nail resulting in a small fire when the cord insulation became pierced when it got trapped in the door. Just an accident waiting to happen."

"Yes, and how particularly tragic that accounts were storing all the historic purchasing records for the IT department in this very cupboard, even though we warned them of the fire risk," I add.

"Very tragic," the PFY concurs.

Later at a pub in the heart of Soho I congratulate the PFY on his promotion to the position of 'master bastard' by buying him a lager for a change.

"So that's it then?" the PFY comments.

"IT?" I cry. "This is just the beginning. Starting tomorrow it's time for graduate studies." Even at this level, the poor guy still has so much to learn. Like how easy it is to slip a laxative into a lager for a start.

4.23 The B.O.F.H. is given lessons in how to be a shiny happy IT manager ...

It's mid-afternoon, and we're in the middle of our annual 'improve the perception of IT' fortnight. Things are going just great.

The boss has a bee in his bonnet about my liberal interpretation of the promotional slogan 'delivering what the client needs'. Apparently, my helpdesk instruction sheets on how to deliver 'a damn good kicking' weren't within the intended scope of the motto...

He was in an even worse mood after the hand-proximity sensor on the line printer failed to operate while he was attempting to stop said instruction sheets from printing. The fast moving paper gave him a large and deep paper cut that he won't be forgetting in a hurry. And the PFY and I certainly don't know how that heavily salted water got into the first aid antiseptic bottle.

But his irritation began after spotting a publicity photo of one of the members of the company's football team (sponsored by the IT division) walking around with his football jersey untucked. Beautifully crafted, and costing enough to make a beancounter weep, the jerseys have a lovely little IT crest (a couple of crossed keyboards on a burning PC background, emblazoned on the left breast). The words 'IT - giving you more' are in large letters on the back. When untucked however, the words 'of a shafting' become visible. The boss was not impressed.

The PFY and I make no attempts to escape his wrath knowing full well that he has to pass the head of IT's room to get to us. He's not so keen on doing that since some complete bastard uploaded a new ring sound to the head's cellphone - a sound not dissimilar to that made by a lentil casserole after its trip through the digestive tract.

Accordingly, the IT department managers' meeting he attended this morning was a swift affair, and certainly not one that really should have been 'aired' as a live video conference and PR opportunity. Even the cafeteria staff saw it and wouldn't serve him the onion bhajis at lunchtime.

Not that I feel sorry for the boss. The whole 'improve the perception of IT' initiative was all his fault in the first place for mentioning that it 'must be about that time of the year' to the head of IT.

No-one likes these PR weeks because the bosses like to answer all those stupid user questions such as: 'Can I send 1,000 copies of my CV to the printer? Can I talk to one of your network guys for an hour or two?' and 'Do you know who set my car on fire?' with 'yes', 'yes', and 'no' instead of the far more appropriate 'not if you want to see another

birthday, not if you want to see another birthday', and, 'us, we thought it was your birthday.'

But the thing that really puts the boss under the gun is that he's invoked a 'response time' clause in our contracts that was meant for call-out duties which says we have to respond within a reasonable amount of time to a user's problems.

In PR week, 'reasonable' means 10 minutes. Now perhaps the boss can have a good game of MDK in 10 minutes, but a networking professional cannot!

Sure enough, I'm just firing up MDK when the phone goes.

"Hello?"

"Yes?" I ask, expecting the worst.

"I've got a problem with my network."

Here we go...

"Hmmm?" Why waste words on these morons? They're much happier with a bit of grunting and a few soothing clucking noises.

"It's a little difficult to explain over the phone - could someone come up?"

Sigh.

I flip the PFY for it and am stunned when I lose. Then I realise that the little bastard has switched my double headed 50 pence for a double tail model.

It really does me proud to see him turning out so well.

Of course, I still won't be telling him that I removed the safety grille from the whirring blades of the cooling fan at the back of his PC, but there you go.

I get to the user's office and it's the same old thing. They moved the PC and the network stopped.

"But it never used to do that."

"No, but now that we don't use thin wire network cabling it does."

"That doesn't sound like a good move."

I manage to extricate myself an hour later (after the story about how technology was much more reliable in the 1950s) and get back to the office.

The PFY chuckles maliciously.

"He rang back - the lead's fallen out of the computer and he's scared to plug it in."

"A separate call," I cry, "that makes it your turn!"

"Toss you for it?" he asks, not understanding where the line should be drawn.

"I'll go for tails for a change."

"Bastard!" Sensibly, the PFY doesn't admit to anything.

"Oh, by the way, make sure to mention how reliable IT is nowadays, especially when compared to the 1950s..."

The PFY grumbles a bit before slouching over to the door.

"Have you seen my access card?"

"Yeah," I reply, "I needed it to get into the comms room this morning. I think it fell down the back of your PC. On the cooling fan side..."

4.24 A little sabotage is in the offing ...

It's the final week of the PR fortnight and things have calmed down. People don't call us for the 'guaranteed response' so much. Perhaps it's something to do with the type of response they're guaranteed.

The geeks in the systems department are miles ahead of networks in the popularity stakes after blatantly bribing the users by shoving a terabyte of disk at them and electronically yelling "help yourself." Nothing short of upgrading everyone to 100 Meg Ethernet is going to bring us up to their level. The systems department must be brought down.

The terabyte of disk space is the first to go - about 20 in-depth 'treatments' with the rapid-freeze spray then the heat-gun along the drive electronics is sufficient to introduce the fabled 'random factor' into file safety.

The boss, meantime, is trying to curry favour with the masses by announcing a massive memory upgrade to the applications server to give it some real performance, disregarding completely the bottleneck analysis software pointing to desktop network speed. There's no helping some people.

Sure enough, a few hours later we have an engineer outside our office trying to edge into the computer room.

"What the hell's he doing here?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" The PFY is momentarily confused.

"Shouldn't he be stuck in a lift somewhere?"

"Oh of course! It completely slipped my mind. You'll be wanting the 5th floor." He indicates a lift only ever used by operational staff and very stupid people.

Ten minutes later, the engineer is back.

"There's no bloody server up there," he snaps, a little agitated at the nasty delay caused by the lift problems.

"Server?" the PFY responds, "I thought you'd come to fix the girder up on the 5th floor."

The engineer looks at him unkindly, then enquires about the processor needing the new memory.

The PFY swipes his card through the computer room reader and receives the much feared 'denied' beep. I try my card and a similar thing happens.

"Security must be having a problem again. We'd better wait for a bit until the system comes on-line. Coffee?"

"Sounds like a bloody dodgy system," the engineer says following the PFY out.

As soon as they've gone I break out the scalpel and the roll of tamper-evident packing tape.

Five minutes after that I try my real card on the reader and we all enter the computer room.

"So, two gig into this baby," the engineer says reaching for the apps server off switch.

"Hell no," I cry, panic-stricken. "We don't want that upgraded, we want that one upgraded." I point to a system so old it makes a 286 look state-of-the-art.

"You're joking."

"No. Why?"

"Two gig for that would take up half this room, if it could address it, which it can't."

"So why did your guys sell it to us?" The PFY elbows in on the act.

"We bloody didn't. I'm here to install memory in this." The engineer is getting agitated now - the little veins are sticking out on his forehead.

"But that doesn't need memory."

"Look, there's obviously been some mix-up here," the engineer says. "I'll need to talk to your systems guy."

"He's off sick." I don't think I need to tell him about the poor guy's skin inflammation, which is completely unrelated

to that consignment of tanning machine lamps which was mistakenly delivered to our department a week ago, just after his terabyte of disk battle plans were overheard. The PFY just happened to be monitoring his phone line for clarity. Purely in the name of good service of course.

Suffice to say a few of his brighter staff have taken to wearing sunblock and heavy jumpers, even when the central heating accidentally came on for four hours the other day.

"OK," the engineer crumbles in the face of resistance, "I'll get my boss to contact you."

Ten minutes later he's gone, leaving with a couple of MFM hard disk controller cards sealed with tamper-evident tape in his memory upgrade box.

"I think it might be time that Kamakuza Memory Systems 1997 gave the boss a call with an offer he can't refuse, don't you?" I say to the PFY, wielding a couple of spanking new memory cards. "While I'm about it - couldn't the two central routers do with a processor upgrade?"

By the end of the week network's goodwill stock is high, with the surplus memory upgrade dosh going into 100 Meg Ethernet cards for the key players in the PR stakes. Meanwhile, in the pub, the CEO of Kamakuza Memory Systems 1997 meets with the CEO of Kamakuza Router Upgrades 1997.

"Whose round is it anyway?" the PFY asks. "It's yours isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe it is," I sigh as I go to the bar. It's not all fun and games, this CEO business. Bankruptcy looms at every bar corner, if you play your cards right that is...

4.25 The B.O.F.H. goes on a trade show outing ...

"There's that smell again!" I cry to the PFY, happily recognising that all-too-familiar scent in the air ...

"What, onion bhajis?" he asks, his senses dulled by years of soft music and educational films.

"No! *THE* smell".

"Fear?"

"No!"

"Burning Equipment?"

"NO! Can't you feel it, in your bones?"

"Rhumatism" he replies sarcastically.

"No," I respond, "But there could be a fracture in the wind if you don't tune in your senses ..."

"Well I don't feel anyt... oh yes!" he cries, suddenly enlightened.

"TRADE SHOW!" we cry simultaneously.

"Now we're going to need a convincing excuse to go as the boss is a bit against trade shows for some reason".

"Could it be because of the last time you went to one?" the PFY asks.

"Which time was that?" I ask. "I don't remember anything out of the ordinary?"

"You mean the time you spent a couple of weeks prior to the event at the tanning clinic, then turned up at the trade show calling yourself Sheik El Al Hand Kebab and claiming to want to network up every home in your Emirate State, no expense spared?"

"I can't recall such an inci..."

"When you drank two suppliers into receivership, disappeared for three days along with the boss's car, secretary, Visa card and nude holiday snaps - only one of which ever turned up again - you - claiming you'd been in a skiing accident on the M25?"

"Well now you come to mention it, the skiing accident rings a bell. Yes, I remember now, it was on work time and so technically they were responsible for my rehabilitation ..."

"At the Betty Ford Clinic?"

"Only the best for the company's contractors, I'll say that for them. Anyway, there was no proof I was linked to the car, Visa, secretary or holiday snaps"

"The ones in your second to top drawer, in the envelope marked MFM Disk Formatting Instructions?"

Hmm. I appear to be slightly outflanked by the PFY's skills at determining the truth no matter how low he has to stoop. Taught him everything he knows, you know ...

"Well, anyway, that's all water under the bridge," I cry, attempting to change the subject.

"Along with the boss's car if rumours are to be believed," the PFY interrupts. "Still, at least you obviously didn't pull a complete Ted Kennedy, as you're still getting those postcards from Spain ..."

Things aren't working out quite the way I planned. The PFY seems to be holding the upper hand in the conversation - something I'm not altogether used to, or comfortable with.

"ENOUGH!" I cry. "I admit, mistakes were made, not least of which was getting lagered the week after and possibly divulging more of that which transpired to you than you needed to know. "

"I'll say!" the PFY cries. "You could have left the bit about you, the boss's secretary and the train in the Underground Museum right out of the conversation, as far as I'm concerned".

Sadly, I'm all out of verbal conversation modifiers. The use of unnecessary force is mentally approved and I give him a taste of the negative ion generator, dangerously modified to put out a few more amps than is safe in an office situation. And sure enough, the PFY does seem to be a lot calmer afterwards.

"BACK ON TOPIC!" I cry. "We have a trade show to go to, and I don't want any more interruptions!"

The PFY nods obediently.

"Now, we need some foolproof plan to enable us to go".

"I could ring my uncle".

"Yes, yes, but cashing in favours with the CEO isn't the plan. A far better plan is to give the boss absolutely NO power of veto for technical reasons".

"After last time nothing short of an earthquake is going to shift the boss's views ..." the PFY chips.

"OF COURSE! AN EARTHQUAKE! GENIUS!"

"You're going to cause an earthquake?!!!"

"No, no, of course not! Well, not if I don't have to anyway. No, the reason of reasons! The excuse of excuses!"

"What would that be then?" The PFY asks, unenlightened.

"DISASTER RECOVERY! It's been YEARS since anyone tested our DR kit, and a large percentage of it would probably catch fire if we powered it up anyway! BRILLIANT!"

The PFY calls uncle and starts the ball rolling.

"Ah!" the boss clucks as he enters the office some minutes later. "You know, I was thinking it was about time we tested our disaster recovery systems!"

"Do we have any disaster recovery systems?" I add, paving the way, "as there's an exhibition on that very topic in two weeks that the PFY and I are keen to go to".

"UNLIKELY!" the boss replies harshly. "We already have two DR rooms upstairs, ready to be fired up. I think we would do that now".

No sooner said than done. About two hours later, as the fire brigade is leaving, I'm taken aside by the CEO to answer

the boss's outrageous claims of sabotage.

"Ridiculous!" I cry. "The fire was caused by dust accumulating in the equipment over a period of three years. We were lucky the whole place didn't go up. It's information like this that you find out at DR Trade Shows like the one coming up in tw..."

Two weeks later the PFY and I enter the trade show for a 3 day tour of duty. It's a harsh job, but someone's got to do it. We're greeted immediately by a charming young woman working for a popular supplier.

"Good Morning and Welcome to our Show, Mr, um ..."

"Sheik Ali Mohammed, " I reply "And my son, Ahmed Mohammed. We're here to get some computing for our palace. Only the best will do, naturally ..."

4.26 The PFY is forced to dip into the favour bank ...

"So what the hell happened?" the PFY asks, looking a little worse for wear.

"I take it you don't remember locking yourself in the comms room with your friend from DP Pool for two days with a carton of salt and vinegar crisps, a crate of lime cordial and two flagons of alcohol-based tape head cleaner, claiming you were going to 'clean some heads'?"

"Uhhhh no," the PFY answers confused.

"No, and neither do I," I reply. "I woke up nailed into sickbay with that woman from the router company. I had to look at the security tapes to see how we'd made it back."

"Did you e..." he blurts nervously.

"Sure did, every copy. Suffice to say you owe me one."

"Yes, I suppose I do," the PFY admits with a touch of embarrassment and guilt.

"Still," I say, "bloody good trade show."

"I'm not really sure," the PFY replies. "I'm a bit grey in places. I seem to remember a red strobe light."

"That wasn't actually a strobe light. That was a router that you bet me five quid didn't run on three phase."

"And it didn't?"

"No no, it did - just not for very long. You know what they say about 'the candle that burns twice as bright burns half as long'? Exactly the same principle, except a better wording would be the kit that works at thrice the voltage works for about 2.5 seconds. Oh, and you owe me five quid."

"That's hardly fair."

"A bet's a bet, we never said how long it would run continuously for. Hell, if that were the case half the world's software companies would be out of business."

The PFY hands over the dosh while we wait for the boss to storm in. And speak of the devil, Hurricane Halfwit rounds the corner at that precise moment.

"Uh-oh," says the PFY. "He looks worse than he did last time when you took his company car and stuff."

"That might be because you took his company car this time."

"I don't remember that at all."

"That could be because you passed out once you'd got the handbrake off and backed it full-tilt into the basement wall. Which is why you locked yourself in the comms room..."

"Ohhhh yes, I do remember the basement bit now you come to mention it. So I'm in it quite deeply, aren't I?"

"Well," I reply, "to use an analogy, you've ridden the lift of the Tower of Turd to its lowest floor and are still pressing

the down arrow.”

A crash interrupts our conversation as the boss, fuelled by pure, concentrated anger, bursts into the room.

”Get out!” he shouts, voice breaking slightly under the strain. ”Pack up your stuff and bugger off. Now. I want you off the premises immediately, no ifs, buts or maybes.”

My attempts at placating him fall on deaf ears, and his tirade is only interrupted by the ring of a phone. The phone, the red phone. I press the hands-free pickup.

”Hello, Gotham City.”

As per usual the CEO eats this up with a chuckle. It’s the small things that keep them amused.

”I’ve just been casting an eye over this disaster recovery evaluation you sent me,” he says. ”It’s very interesting, especially the bits about simulating a comms room lockout, and a basement ram-raid as an evaluation of our vulnerability to disenfranchised groups in the community. In fact I’ve passed it on to the board members and it seems to have been well received all round at this stage.”

The boss appears to be having some form of seizure related to dangerously high blood pressure so I rush to his aid.

”Away,” he shouts, then calms down sufficiently to address the CEO. ”And may I ask why using my company vehicle was part of this simulation?”

”Well I was told you’d volunteered it to make up for the mess you’d made with the fire in the disaster recovery room last week. Is that not the case?”

”Oh yes, that’s right,” the boss crawls. ”But I think the board might be interested in seeing exactly what occurred, as captured by the security cameras.”

The PFY’s eyes indicate that he once more has that sinking feeling. Whereas I might get off with a reprimand for the unorthodox nature of my actions, the CCTV wiring the comms room has and the sick bay lacks might not reflect so well on him.

”I think my documentation covers everything,” I respond. Sadly however, the CEO is unconvinced, so we all troop to his office for a viewing.

The boss savours the moment as he presses play on the executive video machine.

”What the bloody hell do security do all day?” the CEO snaps, as the opening titles of Emmerdale pop up on the screen.

”Did I say one?” I murmur to the PFY. ”I think I meant you owe me two.”

”As I was saying in my summation,” I say, ”with the slack security around here, disenfranchised groups are a very real threat.”

”Smell that? That’s a DR budget with my name on it.”

4.27 The disaster recovery budget proves to be a sore point ...

The Pimplly Faced Youth and I are poring over computing catalogues when the boss bursts in. His mission today is to reclaim some of the budget that the PFY and I have allocated behind his back to the white elephant of disaster recovery.

We’ve been especially good about it too, recommending that we install a ’redundant’ satellite dish on the rear of the building, selflessly proposing a test angle that saves the company money by using an established ’test-signal’ generated by a Dutch TV company.

”What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?” he blurts, waving the chunky wad of disaster recovery proposals recently given to all and sundry by the PFY and my good self.

"What do you mean?"

"Recommending another satellite dish. We don't even use the first one."

"Yes, but with one at either side of the building, we have a redundant path in case the comms risers at either side of the building lose connectivity - as could happen in an earthquake..."

True, this is less likely to occur than the boss buying a round, but planning demands scrupulous attention to tiny, albeit improbable, details.

For a few seconds he struggles to absorb this. "Don't be ridiculous! We don't have a UPS on the rear of the building."

"Yes, I believe I mention that on page two, between redundant espresso machine with battery back-up and emergency response centre with complete living facilities."

"If you think for one moment that the company's going to pay for you two to have a city flat to drag women back to, you've got another think coming," he snarls, "and as for your bloody coffee machine..."

"...go with the three spout model I think," the CEO finishes, entering the room.

"And while you're still at the planning stage, I was just thinking that this would be a good colour for the carpeting of your emergency response quarters," he holds up a swatch of Axminster with a street value well in excess of most controlled substances. "It's just the right tone to reduce stress in a tense situation."

And just the right tone, if I'm not mis-taken, to reduce the chances of the PFY or I getting a look-in at occupying the room outside the CEO's holidays. Still, sacrifices have to be made for the greater cause.

And this week's greater cause is the pursuit of excellence. True, the city flat would have been nice, along with the 'rooftop coolant storage facility' (complete with diving board), but the PFY and I are going to have to be happy with upgrading equipment.

The boss trundles off - years of experience helping him to recognise defeat when it rings his doorbell - to peruse our proposals further.

"What the bloody hell is this?" he shouts about five minutes later, fingering the proposal to eliminate thin wire cabling. "It'll cost a fortune. And it's not even a disaster."

Strangely enough, seconds later it is. A nasty termination error occurs two floors above us, isolating the human resources server from the rest of the network.

"Ah, we'll be needing someone in for some overtime," the boss says, feigning a casual attitude.

"It'll have to be the PFY. I have a doctor's appointment in half an hour."

"Oh," the PFY replies right on schedule. "I've got a migraine coming on and I don't think I can manage."

"Someone bloody has to - the HR server's gone off the network!"

"But it's happened before," I say, playing innocent.

"But not when the pay cheques are due the next day! The last time this happened the staff went on a rampage and wrecked the place. It was a disaster area." The boss shuts up when he hears the distant tingling of that doorbell once again.

As a networking professional it never ceases to amaze me that the combined bandwidth of FDDI, CDDI and ATM is but a snail's-pace when compared to the speed at which bad news can find its way around the company.

The boss gives in. "How much?" Warily, he reaches for his wallet.

"What, for our silence, or for the repair?"

"Both."

"Just pass it over. We'll drop off what's left tomorrow."

One length of thin wire and a loss of memory later, the PFY and I are looking at several 'approved' stamps with accompanying signatures on our proposal. Amongst city flats, Dutch smut and new coffee machines is the dream I've

had for years. The end of thin wire is nigh.

"Let's celebrate. Waiter, your finest champagne and when the money in that wallet runs out, start on the credit cards."

4.28 The PFY has accumulated a number of complaints in his new role - and it's up to the Bastard to sort him out ...

It's a sad day for networking professionals everywhere. I, as the senior networking consultant, have been allocated the task of investigating a few complaints against the PFY and recommending some form of censure for the events concerned.

Apparently the boss has attended one of those 'progressive management' courses and come back with armloads of manuals on how to increase work levels and reduce stress in the workplace. Personally, I'd feel happier if he stuck to the literature of the same genre that mentions the seven dwarves and three bears so as to allow him to get on with the real tasks of management.

Still, it's a slow day on floor two, so I decide to give it a crack. Sure enough, I get a call from one of the human resources people - almost as soon as I get in at 11am. Apparently, all disciplinary actions require a representative from personnel to be present, so we organise a time and agree to meet in one of personnel's wastes of space on the fifth floor. Oh, I mean interview rooms.

"Right," I start, upon my arrival. "I think we all know why we're here." I turn to the PFY. "Apparently there have been three complaints against you in the past month and it is our task to investigate these to their fullest and decide on the appropriate action."

"I understand," the PFY replies.

"Right, first up we have a complaint from someone in accounts who says that he ordered a software upgrade that you'd agreed to handle."

"Yes, I remember that," the PFY responds.

"In your own words, what did he ask for?"

"Well he called the office at 4.50pm and said he wanted WYSIWYG, and he wanted it before I went home."

"What did you do?"

"I downed the lights and powerpoints on his floor."

"And he could see?"

"Nothing."

"And he got?"

"Nothing."

"So you filled his order to his requirements?"

"I thought so."

"Excellent," I cry happily. "I don't th..." the personnel guy starts, only to be stopped by a stony stare.

"My show I believe. Now, onto this ATM business. "

"Well, one of the beancounters wanted ATM in his room."

"And what did you do?"

"Well, I got the company architect to move his office to the ground floor next to the cash machine."

"Well you did your best then."

"I think he meant he wanted better networking," Mr Personnel said struggling in the deep end of technology. "After all, that's what you do."

"Really? Hmm, you could be right. But we'll never know because he's left the company. Apparently the machine's beeping drove him mad within a week. I can't think why he asked for it in the first place. Apparently he never got around to finishing those reduction proposals to IT spending..."

"Worse luck. Oh well, chalk one up for the client not being specific in describing their needs. But you did your best despite the odds stacked against you, well done. Lastly," I continue, before personnel can interrupt, again. "There's something here about problems with someone being locked in the comms corridor."

"Well, that was my fault," the PFY admits.

"One of the database guys demanded to check that his room was patched into the FDDI and must have let himself into the corridor by accident. I couldn't see him in the comms room and thought you must have let him out."

"An easy mistake to make," I reply. "As I have done on occasion myself, which is why we really should deny any access to the room in the first place."

"This is bloody ridiculous," Mr Personnel snaps in what could be called an annoyed manner. "There's no bloody way that could happen."

"It could," I respond. "Because there are no windows in the secure corridor so you don't know anyone's in there. We've mentioned it to the safety officer more than once and asked for CCTV, but so far no such luck. "

It is a great source of sadness to me that he doesn't trust our word on that.

"Well," I say to the PFY later. "I think there's no grounds for censure here. How about we nip down to the pub for a quick pint?"

"Excellent," the PFY responds. "Should I check the secure corridor?"

"No, I'm sure someone let him out while we were at tea. Just make sure the temperature's low enough in there in case there's an overnight heatwave."

Basic law of networking No.4: Opportunities, like the boss's cigars, are there for the taking...

4.29 When the boss tries to out-bastard the Bastard it's time to bring on Plan A, sit back, and enjoy the fireworks ...

I'm concerned about the boss. I just can't explain his attitude - at least not since he slipped on that section of thickwire whilst carrying a laboriously prepared OHP presentation last week.

Sadly, his slides on 'contractor versus permanent staff - ways to increase value for money', lost a little in the presentation after being delivered in a random order..

It also didn't slip my attention that he failed to appreciate my comments about the prudence of numbering OHP slides, nor the PFY's suggestion of using presentation software that does it all automatically - and cheaper.

One would almost think that he'd prepared it all off-line and on permanent media to ensure that no-one was aware of the topic of his talk in advance.

In which case using the transparency printer - dormant for 98 per cent of its life - wasn't a good way of diverting attention from yourself.

Strangely enough, one of his disjointed points did lodge in some moth-eaten corner of the head of IT's brain, and since then our lives have been a misery.

In an effort to suck up to the beancounters while justifying yet another yearly bonus, he's agreed to the proposal of the PFY and myself doing chargeable work for outside organisations...

Sure, after the first few network outages and the odd security breach, demand for our services tapered off slightly - to

nil. But credit is due to the boss for not letting a minor setback like that deter him from trying to make us pay. We'd barely got back into the office when three large boxes were deposited at our feet.

My eye for hideously expensive equipment twitched slightly as my gaze alighted on the vendor name and product code emblazoned on the side of one of the boxes. Nor was the PFY slow in detecting the presence of equipment that was the networking equivalent of the Holy Grail.

The boss sauntered in casually and addressed us in our stunned silence.

"Yes," he said smugly. "It's what you think it is. Top of the line switching and routing gear from Teranet, fully propagated with a card for everything in use today, from RS232 to ATM to Gigabit Ethernet. You name it, it's on it. And you two are lucky enough to get to test it!"

"Test it?" I ask, looking at enough power to run a small telecomms provider.

"Hell yes. You don't think I'd buy it do you? You're being paid to run it and produce an independent report for a networking rag. Then we'll send it back to the supplier - once they've checked it against the shipping docket of course..."

The bastard.

"The bastard," the PFY whispers as the boss leaves.

The boss, dare I admit it, has done the unthinkable - he's delivered a blow for the managing class. He knows full well that going back to our equipment after using this treasure trove will be like trading a Rolls Royce in on a Robin Reliant. A mental kick in the goolies from anyone's point of view.

A day later, unable to resist the temptation, the PFY and I play with the kit in question. Sadly, it's not as good as it claims to be - it's better.

The boss just eats it all up - filing our review and our recommendations for purchase in the same shredder tray before wandering off, chuckling, to lunch.

"It can't be like this," the PFY wails, eyeing the vendor's packing crew who've come to decommission the tested kit.

"It's all right, I'm sure we'll get some kit like that some day."

"When it's so bloody obsolete it'll be a cooling system load."

"OK," I mutter. "Tell you what, how about a couple of lagers at lunch. You like lagers at lunchtime remember?"

"I can't," he blurts. "I told Sharon I'd meet her for lunch and she's only got half an hour."

One pull of a piece of string later, all is revealed to the PFY as hundreds of confetti-like pieces of paper are released into the underfloor cooling system. The underfloor smoke

sensors do their magic and back up Plan A roars into action.

After securing comms central, the PFY, Sharon, and I file out along with the rest of the sheep, while on the other side of the building the freight elevator, true to it's fire alarm configuration, returns to ground floor.

The three boxes inside it marked 'Christmas decorations' are sure to be filed away in the appropriate place by stores as soon as the alert's over.

I shouldn't think we'll see them again until long after the boss has accepted responsibility (and organised payment) for some recently lost very expensive on-loan equipment.

"Right," I cry as we step out into daylight. "To the pub. I believe there's a sales rep from Teranet who has several pints with our names on them."

4.30 The boss tries to oust the BOFH and the PFY again. Enter George, some lager, a shredder and several PFYs to-be ...

I'm feeling a little seedy this morning after I put several hours (and lagers) into finding out just what the hell's going on.

It appears that George from Cleaning and Maintenance has overheard some startling conversations between the head of IT and the boss. They are plotting on winning the CEO's favour with the result of getting shot of the PFY and I.

A small amount of dosh later, George tells us how they intend to accomplish their aim...

So it comes as no surprise when the CEO and IT brown-nose crew (the boss and head of IT) enter the office.

"I'd like to ask you a little favour if I may," the CEO begins benevolently.

"What can I do for you?" I ask, getting a little naso-trouser action in myself.

"Well, it's my grandchild's computer applications class," he says.

"Surely you're too young to have grandchildren?" the head of IT blurts.

The CEO continues: "Well, apparently they'd like to see some of the theory in action and I thought..."

"...that we could show them how a real computer centre works," the PFY finishes.

"Exactly."

"No sooner said than done," I say,

taking the lead in the brown-nose hurdles.

"And I'll sort out some souvenirs, lunch and transport," the PFY adds, winning by a length, closely followed by me, and the boss.

Two days later the group of Slightly-Pimple-Faced-Youths shows up at IT Central. Half the department is on the alert as word's got around there's some form of benefit to be had from this sort of activity.

"Before we start, I'd just like to quickly cover the topic of safety in this building."

The CEO smiles gratefully, knowing I have the best interests of his kin and class at heart.

Five minutes later our attentive students are preparing themselves to enter the Comms room when a loud shriek is heard from outside Mission Control.

"And lastly," I say, removing the cable between the step-up transformer and the door handle, "a sincere thanks to our boss for his practical demonstration of the dangers of electricity." I open the door to reveal the boss, with a more vacant expression than usual, sitting on the floor outside the office with a pile of IT ID-cards scattered about him. "You can never be too careful."

The boss is ferried away to sick bay for a quick once-over (and a change of undergarments if my nose does not deceive me) while the head of IT spots an opportunity to join the class as we take them through to the Comms room. He gazes on in awe as we identify the various bits and pieces therein (half of which he signed for) and ask for questions as we wander into the tape and document safe.

"What are they for?" the CEO's descendant asks pointing at some of our equipment.

"Those are for document destruction. This is a bulk eraser and that's a shredder. Would you like to try?"

A couple of students are keen to try their hand at it so we give them some old tapes and a stack of paper and leave them to it.

"What's that TV set for?" asks one of the students, pointing at a 29in monitor.

"That's not a TV set," the head chuckles. "That's a security camera monitor."

"But it's got a stereo video attached to it."

"A security recorder with dual audio channels, isn't it?" the head asks me.

"Well, it looks like a TV and video to me. I still don't know why you ordered it."

"Ordered it?" the PFY pipes up. "He asked me to get stores to deliver it to his home."

"You requested it." The head is losing his calm.

"What on earth for? Anyway, I keep copies of all requests. Until they've been filled, at which time they get shredded..."

The head, in Superman mode, attempts to leap a high tape stack in a single bound, faceplanting the shredding machine. A nasty sight for the young and impressionable, but not as nasty as what follows when his tie slips into the shredder blades... The PFY switches it off at the wall saving the boss further injury, but also disabling the reverse switch.

"Once again we see the dangers of our workplace," I lecture as the boss thrashes around trying to free himself. "Even a shredder can be dangerous. Even this bulk eraser could cause problems especially if you weren't wearing an anti-magnetic watch like our head here."

BZZZZZZZZZZERT...

"Oh. Or if you were wearing one that said it was anti-magnetic, but wasn't, like the boss here. Thank you very much for demonstrating sir."

The CEO smiles, happy in the knowledge that the class has learned something. Situation restored to normal.

4.31 When the PFY shows compassion to a user, the BOFH suspects a Mid-Job Crisis and takes emergency action ...

It's a slow afternoon at Mission Control when the phone rings. It's an external call, which is more welcome than the internal variety.

As luck would have it, it's my slave- trader come to take me out for the twice-yearly drink-up, food-stuff and pep-talk to guarantee my custom in the years ahead. True, I could go back to contracting direct as I used to, but this way someone else has to foot the bill for a six-monthly night of excess. The PFY and I arrange to skive off early and meet him in a local drinking establishment. The night promises to be interesting...

Sure enough, the next day, the PFY and I are somewhat slow on the uptake. Whilst the idea of doing the Monopoly-Board Pub Crawl sounded like a good idea under the influence of lager at 10 past 5, at 10 past 10 in the morning, enthusiasm has tapered off somewhat.

So much so in fact that the presence of a user in our office provokes only a minor response.

The PFY reaches half-heartedly for the power stapler, only slightly modified with extra torque on the firing spring, a 'rapid fire' setting, and the removal of the safety guard.

"Hang on!" I cry, not wanting to endure several hundred CLACKs and miscellaneous screams in my current condition.

"Can I help you?" I ask the user.

"I'm after a UTP cable for my computer," the user asks, displaying an education in networking that's generally prohibited at user level. (For their own good of course.)

"How long would you like it?" I ask tiredly.

"Well, I'd like to keep it if it's all right with you," he adds, chuckling away at a joke that's so old Noah used it buying wood for the Ark.

"Sure, just grab one from the brown cardboard box in the corner."

The user contentedly wanders off with a cable and the PFY corners me.

"Are you all right?" the PFY asks in a strangely caring voice. "You helped a user?"

"By giving him one of the dud cables that we sell for copper scrap? I was just buying time till my hangover goes.

Mark my words, he'll be back."

"Oh," the PFY responds, realising that even on a bad day the old CPU's still ticking over. He pauses for a moment - something plainly on his mind.

"Don't you ever worry that we lie to users too much?"

A Mid-Job Crisis. I should have seen it coming. All the symptoms were there - the care for others, the slow-draw of the stapler.

"Don't be ridiculous!" I cry, wanting to nip the surge of conscience in the bud. "Users expect to be lied to, like Insurance companies and the Inland Revenue. It's your right - no your duty - to misinform in the interests of technological advancement."

"Well, I've been thinking - I don't know if I'm really cut out for this job."

It's worse than I thought. Before the PFY can go on, I ring the helpdesk and give them his number for 'problem calls'. Surprisingly enough, they start putting users through almost immediately.

"Hello?"

Two hours later the damage is done and the PFY's back to normal. The user who wanted to know why the 'follow-me' service wasn't working on her phone was probably the straw that broke the camel's back. It took a while for the PFY to realise she was carrying her desk phone around the building with her, but as a veteran hand at these things I expected no less.

He's back on form by the time my amateur networker returns to the office.

"That cable you gave me is broken!" he cries in a distressed manner.

"I don't think so," the PFY says calmly. "We ran a cable check on all of them."

"That's true," I respond. "Except of course we didn't do the humidity differential test because our multimeter's broken."

"Of course," the PFY gasps.

"That'll be it," our user cries, feigning knowledge.

"Tell you what," I say to our ardent amateur. "You grab one end of the cable and go into the comms corridor and just hold the plug in your mouth. You'll feel a slight tingle if the humidity differential's OK and nothing if the cable's broken."

Seconds later the silence of the comms corridor is punctuated by a scream and a series of thuds.

"Whoops," the PFY blurts. "Plugged

it into the 90V AC Phone-Bell test

transformer by mistake."

The thuds next door stop, which can only mean our user's managed to bite through the cable to disconnect himself.

"Good to have you back," I say as the PFY unplugs the evidence. I mean cable.

"Good to be back."

Isn't it funny how things work out for the best?

4.32 It looks as though the Bastard has overreached himself, but the PFY comes to the rescue with a cunning plan ...

If I hear the words virtual boardroom one more time, I'm going to hurt someone.

The bloody boss, stepping out of character, has rekindled the CEO's interest in videoconferencing. Normally this would have me smiling at the thought of spending more company dosh, but we don't have the bandwidth to support the system company-wide.

"Why?" the PFY asks, smelling a rodent-like creature.

"Ah. Well, I'd been meaning to tell you about that..."

"You've sold our bandwidth to a third party haven't you?"

"Not exactly, no."

"You've cranked up the company's ISP service?"

"No, I sold that off ages ago."

"You sold it off!"

"Yup, cashed in the client base and ISP domain name to another supplier. Very lucrative."

"And didn't pay me off?"

"Nope. I didn't even pay me off."

"So what did you do with the dosh?"

"What did I do with the 'venture capital' you mean?"

"Come again?"

"Suffice to say that we are the sole partners in InterTelecom Internationale, supplier of cheap telephone calls to the world..."

"Uh?"

"And our latest client is a company with offices all over the world. One of which you are standing in."

"You're selling our bandwidth back to the company? Why the hell did they buy it?"

"Well, if you remember the time of the big falling out of beancounters and networks..."

"Which one?"

"The one where the head of accounts said that our overheads for providing international calls were too high and that we'd be better off going through a public supplier."

"Ah yes, but I thought you'd engineered that because you had some master plan..."

"So I did. And you'll be pleased to know that InterTelecom Internationale outbid all the other companies by virtue of its low operating overheads."

"Meaning we're stealing bandwidth from the company!"

"Stealing's such an ugly word. We're simply maintaining one hundred per cent usage of the existing links - something the company should be rewarding us for. And they are, every time we collect our bonuses through InterTelecom Internationale."

"Sneaky," the PFY grudgingly admits. "So what's the problem?"

"If we whack in this conferencing stuff we're bound to get congestion problems."

"True, but we know it's a toy and not going to be used all that often after the first time."

"I expect so," I reply.

"Then I have a plan..."

A week later some very expensive kit is brought into the company under the boss's vigilant eye. The PFY has gone to our US office for the testing, and a part-time contractor is to do the same in Rome.

The testing is completed just as the CEO wanders down and electronically greets the PFY and part-timer. Response is good, and the boss and CEO seem fairly pleased with themselves.

"Now I'd like to speak to the rest of the offices please," he says.

Over in the comms room, the telephone exchange suddenly pops a circuit breaker and goes down.

The offices concerned are switched into the picture - and very grainily if I say so myself. The assembled staff listen as the CEO gives a short speech about the wonders of technology. A few comments pass back and forth before the CEO 'rings off'.

"What did you think sir?" the boss asks.

"Well, the testing bit was OK, but the office response wasn't so good."

"Yes," I admit "it's a problem with Heisenberg's certainty principle of video compression."

"You what?" the boss gags.

"Heisenberg's certainty principle of video compression. It's a famous quantum physics experiment which videoed cats in boxes. The more cats, the more certainty that you'll get quantum disturbance in video compression."

"That rings a bell for some reason," the boss blunders.

"How do we fix it?"

"The only way is to eliminate the compression, which would require larger telecomms links..."

"Make it so," the CEO says, having watched far too much Star Trek during office hours.

The boss signs a couple of orders there and then and shuffles the CEO out.

I go next door and show the PFY and part-timer the orders while I reset the breaker on the exchange.

"Shall I call the telecomms providers now?" the PFY asks.

"Yes, and tell them InterTelecom Internationale wishes to expand..."

Fish. Barrel. Shotgun.

What could be easier...

4.33 The scent of restructuring is in the air, as the BOFH advises a little CD scratching to remove viruses ...

If I had five quid for every time the head of IT thought he'd disguise managerial incompetence with a 'departmental restructure', I'd be a rich man. It's not like he's being tricky about it. In fact, I'm sure the board only ever complains to him when they want to see an arrangement of staff they haven't seen before.

This weeks masterpiece is a set of Client-Solution Buddypersons - that is, everyone in the department gets a group within the department to help.

And being a spiteful and vindictive bastard, the head of IT gives me the distributed consultants group - people with the technical competence of tree tomatoes and social skills to match.

The PFY gets off lightly with the DBA group, who already know that you only call us if you enjoy third degree burns.

The calls start rolling in - something like "The user's printer isn't working so the network must be down," and step through fault resolution only to find the paper tray is empty. At lunch my personal cellphone rings with a consultant problem and I realise the head of IT has been giving out, my private number. I make a mental note to avenge this indiscretion.

Meantime I have a consultant to deal with.

"The application I'm trying to install for a user just comes up with a write error," he moans. "Do you think their system's run out of disk space?"

"Hmmm," I respond thoughtfully, "What have you installed?"

"Office, voice dictation software, 3D design and the Online Encyclopedia. Is that too much?"

"Hell no!" I cry, "That's just a smidgen of the space that must be available on the user's 386. No, I think it's a little worse than that."

"Worse?" they ask, worried that this could be outside their technical expertise (hitting return and floppy insertion).

"Yeah, it sounds like we've got another one," I say ominously. "Another backward masked CD-ROM."

"What happens?"

"Well, it slowly but surely makes the software on the system only operate with software made by the same manufacturer. Attempts to install other manufacturers' stuff results in errors. All the big companies do it these days - it's a marketing tactic."

"Wow! What can I do?"

"Well, what CD-ROMs have you got?"

"Loads. All our software's on CD."

"Hmmm, it's probably worse than I thought. It surprises me you haven't had problems before now."

"Well, now you come to mention it, the encyclopedia was slow to install. Do you think that was related?"

"Undoubtedly. It's obviously the anti-installation virus at work."

"What should I do?"

"Well, I don't know - are you familiar with what happens to computer tapes when we want to remove data from them?"

"You scratch them?"

"Exactly. And that's what you do with CDs, except you want to keep the data but not the anti-install virus so you only scratch a tiny bit of the data, the bit that indicates which programs the software won't work with."

"How?"

"Well, do you have a micro-surgical ceramic scalpel on you?"

Dummy mode on.

"No?"

"Oh well just use the blade from a pair of scissors. You want to put two scratches, as close to each other as possible, running around the disk in what we call the 'index band' of the CD. That way the software can't look up the stuff that it won't work with."

"Really?"

"Sure," I respond, pinocchioing for all I'm worth, "Trust me."

"Should I do all the disks then?"

"Every disk you can find."

"But there are hundreds in the media store."

"Do it after hours and you could be up for a night's worth of overtime," I suggest, going for the greed jugular.

"Yeah," he gushes, mentally counting pound notes.

"But remember," I add, "If you tell anyone, they're all going to want a piece of the action. But if you were to surprise

the head of IT with it tomorrow morning...”

”Mum’s the word then,” he cries.

”And while you’re at it...” I mention

”Yes?”

”The head of department has been having problems with his personal audio CDs as well - you might see if you can fit them in if you’ve got the time.”

The rest, of course, is history. The wailing, the gnashing of teeth, the impromptu dismissals - not to mention the destruction of several collector’s edition boxed sets of live jazz.

I smell a reorganisation on the horizon.

4.34 A run-in with the company cafeteria leaves the BOFH porcelain bound and the boss regretting an onion bhaji ...

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. And unfortunately, the company cafeteria served it up to me as lunch. I’m not a well man.

It would appear that the friendly ’jousting’ between myself and the fifth floor cafeteria has been brought to a head by my chance remark to the PFY (within their hearing, unfortunately) that their new motto, like the airborne military, was ”Death from Above”.

Admittedly, the menu du jour is no worse than one would expect on death row, but perhaps I shouldn’t have modified their ’Healthy Eating’ intranet Web menu page to main courses of Hungarian Gluelash and Chicken Tikka Diarrhoea. Some people have no sense of humour.

The boss is loving it of course, knowing that any self-respecting contractor would be at death’s door ringing for service way before they’d ever call in sick. Legitimately, that is.

No, if I’m going to be spending all day on the porcelain peripheral, I’m going to be doing it on company time. His frequent visits leave me in no doubt that he’s gagging for a chance to cross a few hours off my time sheet. My attendance, though uncomfortable, continues.

The only thing I don’t understand is how they got the lethal dose to me. Normally quite cautious with my food (prime directive - avoid fish, chicken and pork), the method of my dispatch escapes me.

The smug glances and sincere concern for my health by the cafeteria staff confirm my doubts as I head straight for the bread counter for a low-fibre lunch. A battle plan is called for. And hatched.

As soon as the boss has vacated the area after his usual four buckets of everything, I put phase one into action. ”Well I don’t really know...” I mouth, as one of the cafe staff passes, seemingly unnoticed, ”...but apparently the boss reckons it’s this place that did it to me. He said there’s better hygiene in a Soho alley.”

”Really?” the PFY asks, playing Dr Watson to the full.

”Well, I dunno,” I reply noticing an attentive ear in the background, ”...but the boss hates the place. Reckons the staff would be lucky to get a job cleaning the toilets of a kebab house.”

The next day, whilst nature is calling me for the 11th time, the PFY cranks up the CCTV kit, today’s source being the ’thermostat sensor’ beside the cafeteria servery.

The boss stops by to see if anyone’s up for lunch, but the PFY tells him, without a word of a lie, that I’m supervising some emergency downloads.

I get back in time to see the boss in the cafeteria, negotiating his tray around the obstacle course that is the servery area. ”All normal so far,” the PFY comments.

”Yes, nothing out of the ord...” I mutter, as something catches my eye.

Under the guise of replacing a bucket of wallpaper paste and beef stock (labelled 'gravy') one of the caff staff has palmed an extra onion bhaji onto the boss's plate. Oblivious to it all, the boss powerlifts his tray to a table and straps on the old nosebag.

"Should we tell him?" the PFY asks.

A cynical glance answers his question.

Culprit Identified, Phase One Complete.

The next day is one of the few that makes this job worthwhile. The boss has called in sick. Word on the street has it that he made it to the tube station before bringing up his breakfast.

The cafeteria staff meantime, are busy with an impromptu Health and Safety check (after an apparently anonymous tip-off), which discovered, amongst other violations, that the ratatouille had real rat in it.

A week later I'm almost back to my usual self, though still food-shy, whilst the boss appears to have made a miraculous recovery after his time away. He gloats for a while about the benefits of the company health plan, sick pay, the benefits of not coming to work, etc., etc.

At lunch he gloats some more as he packs his plate, waxing lyrical about the health entitlements of being a salary-earning company man.

His entitlements don't stop there though, as the PFY helps him bag his quota of onion bhajis.

That afternoon, the PFY talks to him some more through the jammed doors of one of the company lifts. In my hurry to release him, I've accidentally snapped the door release lever off in the keyway, so we've had to call out the lift repairman.

"How much longer are they going to be?" the boss whines. "Shouldn't be much longer," I cry, signalling to the PFY to make the service guy another coffee whilst I take the last entry in the lift-violation sweepstakes.

I give him 10 minutes max...

4.35 The boss has been 'encouraged' to relocate to Tonga, but his replacement is a nightmare. It's time to get serious ...

"What'd you do?" The PFY blurts, after arriving to work to find the boss packing his bags...

"Me?" I ask innocently, "Nothing!"

The PFY's waits in silence until I come across with the truth.

"Well, I think I might have worried him slightly..."

"How 'slightly' do you mean?"

I detect a smidgen of annoyance in the PFY's tone which I guess I'll have to deal with later. True, the boss had reached the malleability of fresh putty, however one must always bear in mind that change is good.

"Well, I might have mentioned that living in Tonga would be a better long-term prospect than the UK."

"Come again?"

"Well, it all started when the boss wanted to know the status of our year 2000 project. I think he's suspected the truth - that it's a foolproof plan of locking yourself in your office for five months then coming out at the end with a smile, the words "everything is OK now", and bushels of consultancy fees."

"And?" the PFY asks

"And so I happened to mention that there really wasn't any point in worrying about it anyway."

"Why was that?"

"Because I told him that the world had the Year 2000 virus. That it would all be over in 1999, just like Nostradamus and multitudes of religious groups predicted."

"And he believed you?"

"Well you know how likely he is to believe me straight off..."

"You mean since you suggested he take the toaster into the shower with him to save time on making breakfast in the morning?"

"That and using a magnetic strip as a floppy holder, yes. Anyway, so I directed his attention to the fact that some of the oldest Cold War nuclear defence systems are computer controlled, including the ones that are primed to initiate launch if they lose connection to the Pentagon."

"And?"

"And it would be quite likely that shortly after 11.59pm on 31 December 1999 the time since last successful contact value will go, via date arithmetic, from one minute to thousands of negative minutes..."

"Integer wrap-around, and launch!" the PFY finishes.

"You got it!"

"And he believed you?"

"Well, I happened to notice, after cruising the Web cache logs, that he was a frequent viewer of certain Web pages."

"You mean the Lycra Lovers home page?"

"Amongst other things, yes, but more importantly he was a frequent visitor to the 'Nostradamus Says' and 'Nuclear Danger Awareness' pages. Armed with this information, it was a simple matter to play upon his fears."

"So now he's moving to Tonga?"

"That, or some other absolutely non-strategic target which is unlikely to receive a circa 1960s warhead around 10 past midnight on 1 January 2000."

"But you don't really think it'll happen do you?"

"It might. But who cares? I'll be drunk as a skunk at a New Years party - besides, my consultancy goodwill will be right down the tubes thanks to my well-financed answer of 'it's all OK now.'"

"So you are working on our millennium project then?"

"Full time since this morning."

"And what have you come up with?"

"I'll let you know in just under five months..."

A week later, things are much worse. The old adage 'the devil you know is better than a kick in the groin on a cold morning' holds true. The boss's replacement is far worse than he ever was, and has canned my year 2000 project out of hand, preferring to go back to our software and hardware suppliers. It's enough to make you weep...

...If you didn't have the root password, control of the telephone exchange and an almost psychopathic hatred of management.

In a matter of days, the new boss seems a little peaky. Apparently some power spike or other set half the dialback numbers on the modem pool to his home phone number and the other half to his cell phone.

If that wasn't bad enough, his phone was already running hot after his paragraph in the weekly IT bulletin Web page about the 'Version Control Server' was misspelled as 'Virgin Control Server' - apparently a lot of the younger beancounters were concerned about what form of control he was talking about...

The PFY and I pass the time by setting the clocks of equipment forward to 31 December 1999 to see what happens.

After the trouble we caused with the e-mail server I feel we should be in with a chance for the tender for the resurrected seven month Y2K project...

Change really is good.

4.36 The new boss discovers that sometimes learning can be painful, especially when the BOFH is your teacher ...

Normally the appointment of someone to middle management is accompanied by all the pomp and ceremony you'd expect from the changing of a vacuum cleaner bag, but today things are different. This new boss is supposedly a cut above the rest because unlike those before him he has a university degree in management. So now we have a lean, keen and completely green boss on our hands.

His first green and keen move is to organise a meeting between himself and some global network providers to obtain a better bandwidth pricing system - a group of individuals who'd sell their own grandmothers for five quid. The boss is so far out of his depth he needs a diving bell.

To save him from the feeding frenzy (and the company from bankruptcy) I force my way onto the negotiation team. Judging by the voicemail I receive from the various players this isn't a popular move.

"Call me Alan," the new boss gushes as he meets with the various potential suppliers for the first time. He's obviously been on his share of huggy-feely team building weekends and believes that the informal approach will enhance negotiations.

If I had my way, we'd enhance negotiations by locking the suppliers in a room with several half bricks and only deal with the last one standing - a policy that's served me well in the past.

"The proposals all seem to be a little on the steep side," is the boss's opening gambit. He doesn't realise they're about 50 per cent more than we're paying now - what suppliers call the 'initial-shaft' position.

"Well that is with increased bandwidth potential," one responds.

"You mean it's exactly what we've got now, except it has more potential?" I reinterpret for the boss's benefit.

"Potential for growth without extra carrier installation, yes."

"And as we already have over-spec carriers installed it means we'd be paying 50 per cent more for no reason?"

"Potential does cost money," another supplier chips in. "And I believe that our plan provides the maximum potential."

"While still actually delivering nothing extra..." I add.

The meeting goes on like this for a while with the boss doing his horse-trader act, fooling no-one. Eventually he manages to think up the final offer masterstroke.

"Well what can we get for this?" The boss asks, being sneaky and writing down a figure which is about 40 per cent of our networking budget.

"I'll give my grandmother a call," one of the supplier responds, reaching for his cellphone.

From then on it goes downhill. At the end of a couple of hours of negotiation the boss is a broken man and liable to replace our current bandwidth with a bank of 300 baud modems via some BT-call boxes.

Strategically, I call for a lunchbreak, and get the boss out of harm's way as quickly as possible.

"It's all quite technical isn't it?" He blurts once we're out of earshot.

"It's a snowjob!" I reply and proceed to educate him on the ins and outs of price fixing - apparently a topic that isn't covered under the Bachelor of Parochial Management Degree. I bring him back to the comms room so the PFY can back me up.

Our comments fall on deaf ears.

"But I'm sure they know what they're talking about," he mumbles naively. "After all, they've been in the business for a long time."

"Because they take advantage of managers," I respond. "Honestly, you can't believe anything anyone tells you in this business."

"That's a terribly cynical attitude," he responds, as expected.

Looks like it's time for Plan B.

"Well it'll cost a fortune to upgrade the potential of our comms risers."

"Why?"

"I think it's best if the PFY shows you the problem we're talking about."

Ten minutes, a scream, and a plummet of one floor later, I'm flying solo in the negotiation processes as yet another boss fails to check that the grating is securely in place on the 'floor' of the comms riser.

Oh dear.

"Gentlemen," I begin upon returning to the boardroom. "Due to a workplace accident Alan is unable to be with us for the rest of the negotiations, which puts me in the position of having to make a decision about our next sole global-network provider. I feel it is best that you come to an agreement among yourselves as to who that sole provider will be while I wait outside for your decision. Oh, you'll find the bricks at your feet under the table."

Sometimes you've got to pay a little extra for customer satisfaction.

4.37 Several months of beer swigging has left the Bastard feeling a tad run-down, so he takes a trip out of town ...

I decide to take a couple of weeks off to get a well-deserved break from the stresses of work (ie alcohol poisoning) with a trip to the seaside.

Being the cautious type I leave instructions with the PFY to e-mail me daily on the events that have occurred. Sadly, my laptop is currently pending upgrade replacement (signed by the Boss in one of his more lax moments) so my only form of contact with the civilised world is via an Internet Cafe.

Like 90 per cent of the cultured e-mailing world, I prefer to read personal communications in the privacy of my office or home without the distraction of Quake playing in the background. There's plenty of time for that during chargeable hours. I'm also not a big fan of waiting for a condescending ponytail-type to log me into the slowest PC on the face of the earth, with so little memory that it has to page just to let you enter your password.

I mention that I'd like to use my favourite e-mail package, only to get a smarmy response.

"First time is it?" ponytail chuckles smugly. "No-one uses that program any more."

I could beg to differ, but what the hell.

"Well, yes it is," I answer, anxiously. "What do you recommend?"

He bumbles on about some Alpha release of GeekySoftwareCorp's latest bugpack, and types in the password ('connect', I happen to notice) to enable the desktop machine. He then begins a well-practised 'there's nothing to be nervous about when you've been using computers as long as me' monologue. I restrain my impatience. Eventually he finishes, turns back to the machine and discovers that all is not as it should be, perhaps because I pushed most of his applications into the recycle bin while his attention was diverted.

Couldn't help myself - old habits die hard.

"That's funny," he comments.

"Oh, it's not working is it?" I whine in a manner so familiar to me from my helldesk days. "Computers never work

for me.”

Convinced that I’m a first time loser, he, as expected, logs into the file server with his own user ID, depending on his ‘lightning-fast’ typing speed for password security (‘girlbait’ - tasteless and wildly inaccurate).

While he’s performing the reinstall, I shell out 20 and get myself a debit account for access time from another greasy ponytail at the watered-down espresso counter. This one logs me into a desktop and advises me to ‘browse a bit’ to get the hang of the system. When he’s gone and no-one is looking I change out of loser-mode and download my e-mail from work.

Yet another ponytail comes by and chuckles as he monitors my incoming e-mail over my shoulder as it surges in at about 2,400 baud, thanks to a school party watching some real-time video behind me.

A quick scan of my e-mail tells me the Boss is still causing trouble by appointing a temporary senior network analyst in my absence. Definitely something I’ll have to get him to keep an eye on.

In the meantime I have smaller fish to fry as one of the ponytails spills an espresso down my back as he waddles past to some unsuspecting customer.

I login to the fileserver as ponytail1 and peruse its contents. To pass the time I find the desktop login script and make a couple of modifications.

While I’m at it I decide the cafe’s homepage could do with a bit of jazzing up.

A shocked gasp from behind me moments later informs me that someone’s got the new improved version complete with recently uploaded non-real-time video clip.

A little taste of Sweden never hurt anyone - especially not when a quick glance tells me the gasp comes from the teacher of the school group who’s trying to drag her students from the display. Methinks that the page was a far cry from the Dangermouse TV homepage they expected.

I tickle the keyboard a moment longer, adjusting my account information then wander over to catch the tail-end of the educational experience that the youngsters have been exposed to.

”That’s disgusting,” I cry, horrified.

By now a generic ponytail is in situ making profuse apologies. ”It’s true what they say about the Internet,” I mention to the young tutor. ”Full of perverts.”

”It’s just a tool,” ponytail responds defensively to the teacher.

”Yes, I saw that,” she responds.

It’s funny how you can warm to people you hardly know.

A quick cellphone call to the local media later and I’m helping the alluring young teacher and her charges through a bunch of cameramen and reporters. My only stops are to collect a refund of the 200 account balance, and to make an appointment for dinner later that night with the young educator.

Holidays? They’re nothing but work, work, work...

4.38 While the Bastard’s away, his replacement sees a career opportunity - forcing the PFY to deploy shock tactics ...

It’s a dull day on holiday. My newly befriended educational contact is working, so I duck back to the city for my daily intake of e-mail, (seaside Internet cafes are a little difficult to get into at the moment - what with concerned parents picketing them).

Logging-in from home I notice the latest correspondence from the PFY appears to be a long one, so I crank up my espresso machine and set it on stun. I open the PFY’s dispatches. It’s an epic document depicting the struggle of the competent network engineer in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

Apparently the boss's temporary network supervisor moved quickly from the 'humble and unassuming' persona to 'sneaking and conniving' persona in a few short days. True, this is pretty much par for the course and expected of the position, but he could have waited until I'd been fired.

The PFY realised quickly that the new boy's networking and Unix server knowledge was second to none - even nearer than that in fact - none whatsoever.

The PFY's well-tuned nasal instincts detected hint-of-rodent so he slipped a call monitor on the boss's phone. His instincts proved correct - his new supervisor and the boss were mates from way back when electricity was invented.

Further investigation revealed startling similarities between his CV and my own - word for word apparently.

Almost like the boss had e-mailed it to him. Having identified a position worth coveting, my stand-in invested every working hour brown-nosing support and managerial staff, playing up his role to the detriment of my memory. From the PFY's observations, he was either after my job, a Nobel Prize, or both.

Operations resumed with the new me wanting to distinguish himself by discovering evidence of negligence on my part, leading up to a stirring half-hour that will long be remembered. I have to rely on the PFY's version of events...

"Something strange has happened on the mail server machine," he blurted to the PFY, smelling glory, "There's a process running the pop program coming from outside the company. I think we've got a break in."

"Where's it coming from?" the PFY enquired, already suspecting the answer.

"A machine called bofh.DieGeekDie.com."

The PFY, recognising my domain name and penchant for keeping abreast of e-mail, knew it was best to defuse the situation before it got out of hand.

"Yep, it's a hacker all right," he confirms.

"What should we do?" the temp boss gagged, already thinking about the book rights for his Internet crime detection novel.

"Should we disable logins on our machines?"

"Hmm no" the PFY advised. "That'd just annoy them. Best run a disinfectant across the network."

"How?"

"With the spray command. Use spray: HOSTNAME minus c one million minus l two thousand, AMPERSAND. Do it for all hosts in the hosts file. That should disinfect the network while I get a coffee."

The PFY returned to anguished cries. "The bloody network's down."

"No, no" the PFY commented "It's still up and running, just very slow, for some reason."

From then on, it was all downhill. Convincing him that configuring all the 10/100Mb Ethernet switch ports to 100 non-switched, "for improved performance reasons", was a masterstroke - although the 10 per cent of 100Meg capable users were quite pleased with the performance that a 90 per cent network outage provided.

In an effort to win back some client goodwill, he proactively upgraded the router firmware with some new-release software clearly unaware of the firmware golden rule: never trust an unpatched release of anything.

That accounted for another hefty outage when some obscure bug caused the slip lines to have the highest priority path to the network. Which came as a surprise to the PFY as he hadn't had time to login to the routers to do it manually.

I'm just about to disconnect when a late-breaking news report comes in. Apparently, there's been a nasty workplace accident involving my phone. It appears the receiver cable had been rubbing up against a power cable and had worn through the insulation on both causing my replacement's professional looking headset to become a boost not only to his ego.

Luckily, it's always been networking operations' policy to have earth leakage detectors on desktop mains, but unluckily one of the PFY's extremely heavy manuals was inadvertently leaning on the reset switch at the time.

The ambulance crew eventually managed to coax him from underneath the desk with a couple of chocolate biscuits and a warm blanket, but it looks like I'm going to be called back early. No rest for the wicked. Or their supervisors.

4.39 The failings of a clever new purchasing system brings out the Bastard's hitherto repressed vindictive side ...

The systems guys are really getting on my tits. Not satisfied with having the run of the machine room in almost the same manner as the PFY and I reign the comms room, the pricks have now stuffed up our purchasing system as well. Now, instead of identifying a piece of equipment that's smoked its last and shoving a well-stacked replacement purchase order under the boss's nose for his 'X' of approval, we have to e-mail all purchase requests for any computing products to the systems purchases software for the systems geeks to peruse, approve and source a competitively priced alternative to...

I'm fit to be tied. The PFY is chainable. Perhaps it's because we received a 'Crisco' brand switch instead of the 'Crisco' one we ordered - straight from Silicon Back-Alley in Venezuela. Judging by its face value the country should have stopped exports at the Miss World Competitor mark. I blame myself for the personal note to our product-of-choice sales rep of "plus all the fruit for 100base-T x20" which appears to have been interpreted literally. At least the cafeteria won't be short of bananas for a year or two.

I confront the boss as soon as possible.

"We can't accept delivery of that," I cry. "The voltage supply settings only have two options: 12 and 24."

"It's obviously a switch printing error," he says. "They left the zero off the end."

As I confront one of the purchasing system's operators with the smoking remains of the aforementioned piece of crap, the boss says defensively: "Well, we can't send it back now! After all, the switch did say 12v and 24v... We'll have to get it fixed! And anyway, you didn't specify that you wanted a 240 volt AC device when you sent your order through to the purchasing system.

"They're not mind-readers you know."

"No, but then I didn't say 'avoid buying thinwire cabling with it' either, did I?"

"Oh, the thinwire cabling's still in the basement," the purchasing geek interrupts, "Actually, we made a killing on Crisco's winter special - 'thickwire-for-thin'."

"See?" the boss says "We're saving money already."

"You bought 4,000 metres of thickwire cabling for office wiring?"

"Yep, and it was dirt cheap," he beams.

In an extraordinary change of character, I take a sick day because I really am feeling ill. The next day, when I tell the PFY, he does too. The following day, we're back at work and determined to make a go of it. I show the boss some thickwire, cabling duct and a large diameter masonry drill.

"Where do we start?" I ask.

"Umm," the boss mumbles, knowing his popularity will be inversely proportional to the noise of the drill slowly whining from one side of the building to the other. "Perhaps we should send the cable back then."

"Perhaps we should," I reply.

"Can't do it," the purchasing geek says. "We have to pay a restocking fee and the system's not set up for that."

Right. It's war.

I write a script to order 20 floppy disks, one at a time. I also set my e-mail return address to the in-mail address of the Purchasing System.

Five minutes later, when the system runs out of memory, the PFY and I have an impromptu meeting with the boss and systems geeks.

"He ran our server out of memory and crashed it!" the combined geeks whine.

"Ran it out of memory?" Clickety-click. "There, I've ordered you some more... uh-oh, looks like it's crashed again. You must be really low. Tell you what, as soon as it comes up I'll re-order some more, just to be safe..."

"Don't!" the boss snaps.

"But we have to put it through the purchasing system," I say.

"OK," the boss sighs. "Put it through in writing to the systems people and they'll enter it into the system themselves."

The PFY chirps up: "But they'll just miss out or abbreviate bits they think are irrelevant and we'll end up with another non-brand piece of crap!"

"No. They will enter it word for word as you request," the boss decrees. "Is that understood?"

The systems geeks nod, and the PFY and I grudgingly concur.

As soon as they're gone I get the PFY to write out a new switch order.

"What should I put, 240 Volt AC 20 port UTP Switch...?"

"Put whatever you like, just make sure it goes past 256 characters because that's the limit of their description field."

"That's a little childish."

"Not as childish as writing, 'A dickhead is typing this in', in the description field of an order."

"You wouldn't!"

"Did. Will do again, and planning on documenting it for the rest of the department. Any questions?"

"None whatsoever."

"Right, then get scribbling. And make it as illegible as possible."

4.40 As far as the BOFH's concerned, the season of goodwill doesn't run to the systems men. Quite the opposite in fact ...

It's Christmas time and brown-nosing is at record levels as tomorrow the Xmas bonuses are announced and everyone is seizing the opportunity of enhancing their standing in the head of IT's eyes. Of course they're completely forgetting last year's bonuses, where electronic calculations of customer satisfaction to bonus size produced only two, extremely large, bonus cheques. I must admit that they came as a bit of a surprise to the PFY and me, but as we all know, computers never lie.

Worse still, the head is himself brown-nosing for a Christmas party bonus from one of the mail room women by offering her a technical position in the department. Far more technical than the one he'll be offering her if he manages to drag her to the photocopier room mid-party.

As I'm stalking past the helpdesk to avoid the throng outside the head's office, a phone rings. So, full of Xmas cheer, I answer it.

"Hi, it's Bryce from marketing. Someone's worked out the administrator password for the company Web site and has been modifying our Web pages. I'd like to secure it so that it's safe from hackers during the break."

"Really?" I ask, remembering how easy it was to replace the inline product graphics with ones guaranteed to excite the customers' enthusiasm. "Well you should change the password then."

"What to? Should I make it just a string of characters and punctuation marks?"

"No, don't be silly, make it something no-one will need to write down. The company name for example. I'm sure

that'll be secure."

"Really? Because one of the systems bods is saying that we should make it as complex as possible."

"They would do," I remark, remembering all too well the system purchasing nightmare of recent weeks. "They love it when you have to ring up because you've forgotten it."

"Yes, they do don't they," he blurts, remembering the shame all too well.

I swing by and check how the PFY is coming along with the 'customer satisfaction survey' results. A bit of data massage never hurt anyone.

All that remains is for me to cover up a particularly nasty bit of fiddling that the Boss might catch wind of. I arm myself with the IT operational balance spreadsheet, corner him, then regale him with bizarre terms like accounts payable, inwards and outwards goods, trial balances and the like until his eyes glaze over, then point him to the creative bookkeeping in question.

"And that's where I converted our holdings into standard European monetary units, as we'll be required to do in 1999. I thought it best to trial the software as soon as possible to see if there were any bugs - so that we could get them fixed well in advance of the changeover."

"Yes of course," the boss responds. "Good idea, and what's this?"

"That's where I converted it back from EMUs to pounds as it all went well and we're not actually trading in EMUs yet."

"But the start and end figures are different by about ten thousand quid."

"Yes, well, with the exchange rate, commission, stamp duty, poll tax and Inland Revenue all taking their cut."

"Oh dear," the boss cries. "Hopefully you won't be running too many of these tests in the future then."

"Well I can't be too sure. I know that there's one more due just before I take my Easter break next year, but apart from that it's anybody's guess - who knows how many tests the auditors might require us to do."

"Hmmm, well, in the interests of the company perhaps we should put a hold on auditing our accounts until the changeover - you can't see any problem with that can you?"

"None springs to mind immediately." I respond.

"Good. But what's this?" he asks, looking at the only figure on the spreadhseet in red.

"That?" I ask, "Oh, that's the money in the systems budget that no-one seems to have accounted for. It seems to have been allocated out in two lump sums which just happen to coincide with the holidays of the two systems guys."

"Oh," says the boss, having cached my excuse for monetary discrepancies and brought it back into memory.

"Funny how it seems to have disappeared just prior to their holidays," I say, clearing his mental cache.

"You mean they've been stealing?" the boss asks as the sun of knowledge comes up over his mental horizon.

"I afraid that's what the facts lead me to believe," I sigh, sadly.

"Shall I call the police?"

"With what evidence?" I ask. "This is just a precis of the accounts. To prosecute someone you'd need a complete audit, with auditors' fees, possible EMU translations, poll tax, compound exchange rates and commission, concession allowance."

"Concession allowance?"

"Auditing overtime concession," I ad-lib "For working over the Christmas break. You're probably looking at about 15K, and there's no guarantee they'll be prosecuted."

"So I'll fire them," he cries.

"And without prosecution, be liable for an unfair dismissal action."

"Well something's got to be done."

"True," I comment, "and before the next birthday, which is second week in January if I'm not mistaken."

"What can I do?"

"Well, you could just pay them an end-of-contract bonus and not renew as of 1st January," I suggest.

"Excellent. But ..."

"But?" I ask.

"Who'll look after the systems?"

"Well, there's not that much to it. I mean hell, we could probably handle it if we took on another trainee. We'd probably be up to speed by mid-January."

"Really?"

"Of course you'd be looking at a new contracting rate."

"Oh..."

"Which would be much less than you stand to lose on the 10th of January given the current situation."

"All right then," The boss cries, and waddles off to make it so.

I let the PFY in on the latest developments at the booze-up while the systems guys help themselves to a punch - the new security blokes are like that when you refuse to leave the building. Ex-army chaps apparently.

"More bloody work?" he blurts.

"With pay rise attached."

"So?"

"And you get a new trainee."

"So bloody what."

"Of your choice."

"And?"

"And isn't it time you started 'interviewing' applicants from the DP pool? Once the head of department finishes his 'photocopying' of course."

"Eh?" The PFY cries, getting a little dose of enlightenment UV himself.

"Ah well, just call me a sentimental old Santa type..."

Chapter 5

1998

Space, the final frontier. Well some say it's the sea, some say it's the centre of the earth, and some say "Is it dinner time yet?". These are the voyages of the Bastard Operator from Hell, his 1998 mission - to seek out boldish type people with a penchant for salt air and the company of sailors, and report them to the Widow's Pension Fund. Why? We may never know. Certainly the Widow's Pension Fund has no idea, which is what makes it all that more exciting. Go on, reach for the phone - talk to someone you haven't spoken to for years - a parent, a sibling, that guy from the video parlour who STILL works there after 20 years when the only video game they had was that shitty tennis thing with the bats and balls. Meantime...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apparently, events unfolded in the following order:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How lazy is he?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

bonus, so to speak.

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

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

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

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

"New car please," I cry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's about my password," he says

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"DOS format?"

"Yes."

"That's easy. Go into DOS."

"Uh-Huh." ζ clickety click "And use the FORMAT command."

"Oh, of course."

Another barrel shoot successfully completed.

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

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

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

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

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

"I..."

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

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

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

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

"Why, yes I did," he replied.

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

"Now you come to mention it..."

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

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

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

"Uh-oh, another one down."

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

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

"As a matter of fact they did."

"Just as I suspected."

"What?" the uniformed gentleman asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The guard's pocket."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your special snuff Holmes?"

"Yes, the stuff I keep for guests."

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

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

"You bastard Holmes!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boss is on the job in record time.

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

"And why is that?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

"Uh... Not exactly."

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

"Ahhhh... No, not really."

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

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

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

"No."

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

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

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

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

BASTARD!!

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

Let the carnage commence!

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

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

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

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

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

"You mean you've thought of it?"

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

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

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

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

"Never heard of him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's he like?"

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

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

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

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

Bugger.

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

"Should be done by tomorrow..."

"And we're still keeping up appearances?"

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

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

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

With a little extra effort, all suspicions are avoided.

Which leaves us with the problem of Roger Amchip...

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

”No pulse,” I cry.

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

”I’ll get an ambulance.”

”No point, he’s stone cold - feel his leg.”

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

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

”We’ll have to call the police.”

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

”What?”

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

”Manslaughter!”

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

”Do you think she’d accept money?”

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

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

"Who should I make it out to?"

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

"How do you spell Schizophrenics?"

"Oh, just put the initials."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And you don't fancy the overtime?"

"I'm sick of bloody overtime."

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

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

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

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

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

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

When I looked again the doorway was free of shadow.

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

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

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

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

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

"See you in the morning."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Filthy. Although..."

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

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

"What are you going to do?"

"Buy the boss a drink or two."

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

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

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

"Guess."

"You watered his electric blanket?"

"No."

"Livened up his toilet seat?"

"No, but much warmer"

"How much warmer?"

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

"You bastard. Will he turn up?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about this 29-inch Sony TV?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well what are they?"

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

"And they are?"

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

"Lovely, I'm sure."

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

"Uh-huh."

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

"Yes..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"True - but I have a plan..."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

"Yes, how did you know?"

"A lucky guess," the PFY shouts.

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

"Well that's the funny thing."

"Yes?"

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

"Really?"

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

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

"You can't be serious."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not the gun?" he asks fearfully.

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

"But they'll blame me."

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

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

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

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

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

"Annoying?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes?" I murmur.

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

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

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

I switch to dummy mode.

"Is it fast?"

"Oh yes."

"How much will it cost?"

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

"Digging equipment."

"Yes, to make the tunnel to Asia."

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

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

"Oh thank goodness."

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

"Four or five grand."

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

"Where will we get a project manager?"

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

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

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

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

Bored, bored, bored. The building is all but deserted as the company hosts its 'New Initiative W3' day for the workers - a disgusting event where the heads of the various departments report on the three wheres of existence - where we came from, where we are, and where we're going.

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

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

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

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

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

"We should give Dr Robb a ring."

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

"Hello?"

"Hi Doctor Robb."

"Ah... hello Simon."

"How's the PC?"

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean, another dose?"

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

"No!" the PFY is almost hysterical.

The rest of the afternoon is spent in sad contemplation.

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

"Hello," I say, grabbing the phone.

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

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

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

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

Dummy mode on.

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

"/dev/null"

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

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

"OK, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

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

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

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

"Whoops," says the PFY.

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

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

True, it's a hot, cramped and pointless job, but it does give him a broader view of the world of networking. And helps him remember that when I say "Don't play with my laptop," I mean it.

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

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

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

Everything but deliver the bloody message that is.

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

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

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

"What're you doing?"

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

"How?"

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

"How?"

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

"Which messages?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I interrupt with a hands-free phone call.

"Hello?" the boss answers.

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

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

"Of course. Thank you."

I ring off.

"Point made?" I ask.

"I still don't think..."

"Hello?" the Boss answers.

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

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

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

"But..." the PFY adds.

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

Sigh.

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

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

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

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

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

rampant mermaid engraved into it - a gift from loyal staff.

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

Some people just don't understand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I only just bloody found out!"

"Best start packing," I shout.

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

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

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

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

"Me too," the PFY concurs.

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

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

"But..."

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

"Twenty pints," the PFY cries.

"You can't be serious!"

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

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

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

"You mean it's that secret?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

button on their phones.

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

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

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

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

"Guess what I've managed to wangle?"

"Yes?" I respond, without enthusiasm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not really."

"What about the petanque game?"

"The petanque game?"

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

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

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

"It was only a bit of fun."

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

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

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

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

"Confusion...yes," Justin hissed.

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

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

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

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

"Yes we did," the PFY cried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, no"

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

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

"THE BLOODY JAPS!" the boss cries.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luckily, our parent company actually does a bit of wheeling and dealing in the field and manages to spring us from

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How unfortunate," I sigh meaningfully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The PFY wanders over after logging a hardware fault on an old RAID cabinet that's near the end of its serviceable life. Noticing my disdain, the PFY can't stop himself: "You don't like engineers very much do you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So the disk is faulty?" I ask.

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

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

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

"Oh... great."

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

"So I guess you'll replace that?"

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

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

fice.

"Have you got a bigger hammer?"

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

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

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

"Pardon?"

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

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

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

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

"Pardon?"

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

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

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

DUMMY MODE ON.

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

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

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

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

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

DUMMY MODE IRREVOCABLY ON.

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

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

He wanders off happily.

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

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

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

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

Call me Mr Kind-hearted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it?" he asks.

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

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

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

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

"Smut?" I ask approvingly.

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

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

"No I'm not!" he cries.

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

"No..."

"Don't lie to me!"

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

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

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

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

"Uh...no." he gulps.

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

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

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

"When's that?" he asks.

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

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

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

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

"See what I mean?" I ask.

"What should I do?"

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

"Is there a specialist there?"

"No, but the traffic on Euston Road is murder. Literally. If they shunt the afflicted into it...It's the only way to be sure I'm afraid..."

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

"Well, there is cold turkey."

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

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

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

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

"Yeah!"

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

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

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

"Yeah."

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

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

"Swapped it for a stereo system."

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

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

"Ah."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Worst luck.

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

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

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

Sigh.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Systems and Networks."

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

Hmm, what would Lassie do now?

"Somewhere near the fan outlet?"

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

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

¿CATHUNK "Sure does!"

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

"Yeah," I chuckle, "I'm sure he did. It's the oldest cop-out in the book. We've been having a couple of problems like that this week, due to..." ¿flipflip DUMMY MODE ON!

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

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

"Uh. What's that?"

"You know what your memory chips look like?"

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

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

"Duh-huh..."

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

"Duh-huh..."

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

"Duh...OK."

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

"Duh...OK, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

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

"Hello?"

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

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

To get the PFY back into operations mode, I chuck five double-expressos his way, then whip him downstairs and prime him with a couple of pints and a kebab.

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

"Hello?" He responds to his first call.

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

"Yes," the PFY responds, "we were out all morning dealing with the effects of..." ¿flipflip Sounds like a full recovery to me!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The same core tasks, yes."

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

"Sort of like that, yes."

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

Sigh.

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

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

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

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

"Oh."

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

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

Oh, such innocence...

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

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

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

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

"OK," the PFY accepts the challenge.

"I think we need some redundant switches."

The PFY dutifully writes redundant switches on the board.

"You forgot rule two," I point out.

The PFY amends it to randy swatches.

"Which we could dynamically route to..."

dynamo root.

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

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

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

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

"Sounds reasonable to me."

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

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

Vindicated, I smile at the PFY.

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

"What was it for again?"

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

REBOOT*

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

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

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

REBOOT*

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

The boss has a faraway look in his eyes.

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

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

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

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

"I couldn't!" The PFY cries.

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

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

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

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

Blankness...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's this for, then?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now it's a waiting game. The data storage facility van pulls up outside the building right on time, no doubt with

a box of back-up tapes recalled by our computing professional to deal with the unfortunate head-crash on the finance database machine. What a coincidence that three disks in a RAID array all failed at the same time! The odds on that must be phenomenal - not that the local bookie's stupid enough to take that bet, of course.

The data tapes, written by some untrusting person in Beancounter Central (which was lucky, as ours appear to have been lost by our data storage facility), are passed through security and rushed up the stairwell.

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

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

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

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

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

"What're you doing here?"

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

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

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

Laterthatsameweek...

"UURGGLE MURG HURGRLE," I gasp.

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

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

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

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

"And here's where you'll be situated," the boss bumbles as he enters the office with a programming contractor, press-ganged in from an agency at short notice to write the program that the boss lied about already having. Feeling slightly

magnanimous towards the poor blighter (after all, he has had a half-hour exposure to the boss's BO during his introduction to the wonders of the photocopying machine - a dose of which is usually fatal) the PFY and I don't put up the expected arguments to the boss's encroachment on our territory.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meantime, he's busy partitioning his whiteboard.

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

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

He's so green he needs mowing...

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

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

"But no real life experience?"

"I..."

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

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

"So what is your answer?"

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

"But there's bound to be feedback."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How did it go?" the PFY asks.

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

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

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

"Of course he did. And different fonts?"

"Yeah."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"David?"

"Your boss."

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

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

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

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

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

Bugger!

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

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

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

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

"That would have been done when the items were delivered," I've already sussed the boss's plan. Lacking the bottle to find out if the PFY and I have been stealing the equipment we've ordered, he's put some new blood on to it - someone who doesn't know what happened to those who've gone before. Mind you, she could probably visit a couple of them when she goes to see the boss.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So there are no records?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So you kept the dosh?"

"No, no - that would just draw attention to ourselves. No, I got two lots of kit and used the second lot to update all the machines in the data pool."

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

"Might be..."

"With the invite to birthday drinkies?"

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

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

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

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

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

I just love happy endings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boss is on the job even faster.

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course! And the prostitution?"

"There's no bloody prostitution!!"

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

The boss gives up and resumes his tack...

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Uh...not exactly."

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

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

"Never?"

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

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

"Uh...no..."

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

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

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

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

BASTARD!

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

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

I ring the users and tell them, to give them as much of a chance as you can get using the server copy of the game which only lets you pick up a handgun with one round of

ammo. Still, a beancounter can get good at pistol shooting when two hours of spreadsheet work is at stake and you have to win a game in order to ungrey the SAVE button (another little patch).

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

Oh, and 327 kills...

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

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

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

"You mean you've thought of it?"

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

Sigh. Once more into the fray...

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

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

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

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

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

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

A) With the "rm-rf" command, except that the operating system of the era (before RSI [or the fear of dying of

old age before you'd got to the end of a command] was a worry) this translates to: "DELETE/ERASE/NO CONFIRM [...]*.*,*" or, my personal preference:

B) With an axe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I just can't help myself.

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

This can only mean one thing...

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

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

About halfway through his pint I realise my fatal mistake.

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

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

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

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

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

"Number ones?" the PFY asks

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

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

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

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

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

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

How bloody thoughtful of her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the boss does know best.

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

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

"SOP for a boss," I respond. "If you want something, get it for someone else 'for technical reasons' then it looks that much more legitimate if you get yourself one. Cellphones, laptops, you name it!"

"What are we going to do when we get there?"

"I plan to drink tequila at a beachside bar."

"I don't think there are beaches in Ohio."

"Ohio?" I cry, "We're not going to Ohio. Not after the hijack anyway."

"You're going to hijack the plane?" the PFY hisses. "You're not serious?"

"Deadly."

"But..."

"Oh don't worry, there's no gunplay. Just track one of this CD," I murmur calmly, holding up my portable CD player.

"It's a CD player!"

"Ostensibly yes, but also... a mini GPS transmitter."

"You're screwing with the plane's guidance system?"

"I prefer the term 'having a meaningful encounter'. This little baby will shortly start pumping out some low-wattage GPS information - information the plane will use to get its flight path. And, over the course of the journey, the information will deviate slightly - because if I do it all at once the pilot might notice."

"You'll never get away with it," the PFY whispers discouragingly.

"Of course I will. Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Uh, last week when you told me the power was off when I was replacing the fuse in that rack. The week before when you told me that all the ducting has door handles on the inside, so it would be all right to shut the door."

"I let you bloody out, didn't I?"

"After you'd drunk all the lager I'd found in the boss's locker."

And so it is that I'm sitting in a South American bar, drinking tequilas while the boss tries to get us a return flight to civilisation. Thanks to the super-spadework I put in when we almost ran out of fuel because of the extra miles, Sharon is my new best mate.

5.25 To escape the boredom of routine, the BOFH volunteers to man the Helldesk. But does he still have his special touch with the users?

It's a quiet afternoon when the boss slips in unobtrusively and shuffles over to my desk.

"Just want you to know that I sorted out that little Helpdesk roster mix-up," he mentions quietly.

"What little Helpdesk mix-up?" I ask.

"Oh, some practical joker had written your name in the roster to cover the Helpdesk during their team building week."

"Yes, that was me. Tomorrow from midday till five wasn't it? I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Ah!" the boss cries, no doubt ducking off to press the speed-dial button for the company's insurance broker.

The Pimple-Faced Youth is obviously confused about this - there's nothing in the Helldesk area left to steal because we did all that the last time security had its CCTV system repaired. The truth of the matter is that I'm bored. Bored, bored, bored.

Heeding the advice that a change is as good as a rest, I've signed up for a tour of duty at Idiot Central. Besides, I want to know if I still have what it takes to deal with users on a routine basis.

The next day dawns and after lunch I head directly to the Helldesk to do my best to, I mean for, the users. To be honest, it's not half as bad as I'd expected - things are pretty quiet.

In the end I put the phones back on the hook, and three lines light up immediately. I pick one at random and answer it.

"Hi, look, my machine's smoking a little, and there's a burning smell. It was really noisy this morning when I turned it on, so should I turn it off?"

"No. No need to worry - we had a little bit of equipment fail in the comms room this morning, so it's probably just the smoke and the smell coming down the lines."

"Is there anything I should do?"

"Not really, I'd just shut your office door and go to afternoon tea early until the smoke clears - it'll probably take an hour or so."

"Hey, hang on, why isn't it affecting the other machines?"

"Because you're on the hot back-up server for your department, the one that got too hot, as it happened."

"Oh, of course I am!" he gushes, gasping thanks and ducking off for an early break.

Now that I'm on limited time (till the fire alarm and sprinklers cut in) I take the last two calls as quick as I can).

"Hi," a secretary from PR chirps, "every time I try to send e-mail my program comes back and says something about a DNS thingy."

"Was it something like 'DNS look-up error'?"

"Yeah...I think so..." she mumbles.

"Oh dear." I sigh. "I'm really sorry."

"What is it?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"No, what?"

"Well DNS stands for Database of Names and Salaries."

"I don't understand."

"Well, if it can't look you up to send your e-mail, it must mean you've...been fired. Or you're about to be."

"But I've only been here a couple of months!"

"Yes, and I bet you turned down your boss when he asked you out to lunch too, didn't you?" I ask, playing a hunch based solely on the fact that the guy concerned wears babe-magnet labelled clothes and drives a convertible. And he's a loud-mouthed flashy git at staff functions. Not that I'm jealous...

"But I couldn't make it because I had to arrange my bank payments!" she snuffles, falling for it hook, line and sinker.

"Well," I respond kindly, "for what it's worth it was good working with you...unless of course..."

"Unless what?" "Well, you could go and see the complaints officer in personnel and say that he threatened your job unless you...you know."

"Unless I what?"

"Checked out his firmware, so to speak."

"What!"

"Well it's up to you. If you wait till you're fired they'll just think you're making excuses. But if you pre-empt it, and mention nothing about the DNS stuff they'll think your accusations are true."

"Do you think it would work?"

"I would think so. It's happened before. You were just one of the lucky ones..."

"I suppose you're right. OK, I'll do it. Thank you very much for your advice."

"Don't mention it." I respond, moving on to caller three while gesturing to the PFY so he can record the head of PR's "resignation" later in the afternoon.

"Hi, my Linux box won't seem to mount a CD in it. It says that it must be mounted read-only. What's the parameter to tell it to mount read-only?"

"Ah Linux relies on hardware write locking. You have to write lock the disk itself."

"Huh? I've never heard of that before!"

"Most operating systems do it in software. It's because Linux has cache-based hardware architecture open compliance," I say, calling up as many buzzwords as possible to foil the Unix geek.

Dummy mode on.*

"So what do I do?"

"Just make a 3mm hole - no larger - in the CD, right in the middle of the label, that's where it expects write protect. And make sure it's 3mm and exactly in the middle, or you might hit the Read Protect hole too."

"Oh...OK..."

He rings off without asking why the hell anyone would have read-protected disks, obviating the need for me to explain WORN technology to him (Write Once, Read Never - just like the floppies).

As the fire alarm goes, I total up the day: off work early because of fire, one less git at social functions, and one foiled geek.

Yep, I've still got what it takes!

5.26 Will the BOFH use Roboboss again in this year's gladiatorial clash with the R&D boys? Or will the Mutant Floor Polisher win the demo-derby?

So it's all on! Networks and Systems versus R&D. No, not some trivial contest like 'guess who can get the most laxative into the other team's water cooler without being noticed' - although that's fun too, especially when you have a contact put it in at the factory. This is a game of champions - Robowars!

The Pimple-faced Youth and I are competing against Research and Development in an annual contest of skill and technology. The rules are simple: both teams enter one or more robots into the competition - robots which must find their way out of a fairly simple maze constructed of passages and rooms in the sub-basement of the building.

The PFY is particularly excited as this is his first time in the competition.

"So this is a yearly event?" he asks, helping me put together our mechanical entrant.

"Since last year, yes."

"I don't remember it."

"No, I think you were in Mr Happy mode at the time."

"What?"

"On a jolly."

"Oh. How did we do?"

"Well, as far as I was concerned, we'd won fair and square - none of R&D's seven robots were left, however, there was a bit of a protest lodged about my robot."

"Why?"

"Aaaaahhhh, because it was basically the boss with a car aerial strapped to his back, blundering around in the basement trying to find his new laptop."

"And he won?"

"Yeah, there wasn't a laptop and when his enthusiasm waned I switched the lights off and the fire alarm on, and he picked up speed dramatically."

"And what was their protest?"

"Well, there were two actually - the first being that the boss running blindly around caused the destruction of most of the competition (which, incidentally, helped us win the demo-derby event by default) - and the second being that the boss wasn't a robot."

"So what happened?"

"Well, I showed them that, to all intents and purposes, he was a robot - he had a limited and very simple instruction set; you have to punch information into him and without it he can't think for himself..."

"I see. So why don't we enter him this year?"

"Ah. Well, the restrictions are somewhat tighter now. The robot has to be based on the processor board that R&D designed for those automatic floor polishers."

"The ones that are supposed to drift randomly around the building at night?"

"The very same."

"So what's all this crap for?" he asks, pointing at enough hardware to start my own hardware company.

"Well, part of the event is the demolition derby where the surviving robot takes line honours. My thinking is that the bigger the robot, the more chance it has of still being mobile at the end."

"So you're using a machine rack laid on wheels?"

"Yes: a) It won't attract much undue attention in the basement before the competition, and b) The rules say it has to be battery-powered, and I need quite a lot of power to keep the circular saw blades spinning, and c) It's a four foot-long steel chassis. It's going to make it through the demo-derby - especially considering the largest of the opposition robots comes to just over axle height on it."

"Where are you going to get all the batteries to run it?"

"Oh, I whipped those out of the UPS last night."

"Didn't anyone notice?"

"No, I chucked it into bypass mode - not even a glitch. Anyway, all that remains now is for me to install the polisher board with its bastardised maze-solving program, add the batteries and chuck in a little ballast..."

"Magic!"

Three nights later, the R&D boys are down in the basement setting up their robots while the PFY and I sit around on ours. Smart money seems to be centred on a small robot nicknamed "Reggie" because of its rapid cornering ability.

"Actually, I think they've got a point," the PFY mumbles, seeing a warm-up demonstration. "It's much quicker to corner than this thing will be."

¡P¡ "Au contraire!" I respond. "You're forgetting two things I didn't tell you about; one: with the 20 UPS batteries and the four-wheel, rare-earth-element-magnet motors on this baby..."

"five..." the starter counts down.

"...it's got phenomenal acceleration itself..."

"four..."

"But it's still going to be a pain to corner!"

"three..."

"That was point two: with all the weight inside that solid steel chassis..."

"two..."

"Yes?"

"one..."

"It would be a waste of time cornering in the first place..."

"Go!"

Ten minutes later the PFY and I are at the pub. Admittedly, the plan of driving straight through walls wasn't one of the more orthodox ways of solving mazes, but it proved successful nonetheless.

"Who'd have thought the robot would run amok in demo-derby mode and circular saw through the mains cable?" I ask the PFY.

"Who indeed?" the PFY asks, fingering the prize money that the R&D blokes were too busy to collect in their panic... "It could have chased R&D around the building..."

"Got to save some surprises for next year..."

5.27 While the PFY's holding a torch for Carole, someone is putting a torch to the Welsh office. But nothing compares with the Master Plan...

It's early morning when the Boss rips into the office in a foul mood.

"All right, which of you bastards told the consultant in the Welsh office that you can't recover a hot database back-up from a cold tape?"

"I beg your pardon?" I ask in all innocence, knowing full well that my conscience is clear. (In other words, it was the Pimply-faced Youth.)

"Which of you told the Welsh IT consultant he'd have to heat the 8mm tapes up in a toaster before he could recover their billing database from it?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" I cry, furthering my claim of innocence without implicating the PFY in any way.

"Don't give me that crap! You almost set the office on fire last night after you told him to put a ream of printer paper on top and tape the toaster lever down!"

"I did no such thing!" I shout, mentally toasting the PFY's ingenuity.

Ten minutes later and the PFY and I are left to our own devices.

"Well done," I tell the PFY, once I'm sure we're not being observed.

"What do you mean? I was just about to congratulate YOU!" the PFY burbles.

"So you're saying it wasn't you?"

"No!" the PFY blurts.

"Then who the hell was it?" I wonder out loud.

"There's no way to tell?"

"Don't be silly. Grab the voice recorder tapes from yesterday while I crank up the phone logs."

"What phone logs? I thought we only recorded the trading lines."

"As far as anyone else is concerned, we don't keep phone logs - it's not possible."

"And as far as we're concerned?"

"Every call, duration, and destination plus its position in the voice recorder tapes. And as for the tapes - liberal use of the muting functions makes it appear that we're only recording the traders."

"And in actual fact?"

"All but one line is potentially recorded..."

"All but one?"

"The one in the comms cupboard labelled "Faxmodem" that we use for our international personal calls."

A mere quarter hour later we've tracked the offending incoming call from Wales. A quick earful of the conversation identifies the offender as the latest recruit to the helpdesk - one who, apparently, had all the hallmarks of a servile practitioner of computing aid at her interview.

I place a call through to the helpdesk operator concerned, introduce myself and play back the recording to her.

A non-committal silence greets my revelations while the PFY scans the access-card database to put a face to the name.

"Ah, I'll take this one if you like," he blurts, tilting the screen away from me so I can't see the results of his look-up.

This would have worked had I not installed PC-Anywhere with a permanent window to his screen. A glance is more than enough to determine the source of the PFY's new-found liaison-based altruism.

"I s'pose I can go and fix Carole's screen while you're doing it," I respond.

"There's nothing wrong with Carole's screen!" the PFY cries, well aware that my exposure to Carole, his long-term love interest, at this juncture, could prove extremely painful to him. Especially if I were to drop the phrase "debriefing the new helpdesk stunner" in response to her enquiries on his whereabouts...

"No, but better safe than sorry. Off you go, I'll handle it."

"You bastard," he mutters in defeat.

"In the flesh, in your home directory, and rifling through your e-mail!" I cry, starting my victory walk to the helpdesk area.

A quick interview with the woman concerned reveals a kindred spirit - a config geek, who only took the helpdesk role because it paid the bills...

"So you're not too pleased with the users?"

"Just the Welsh ones. They've got no tech support and all their equipment still has luggage labels from the ark."

"Yeah, it's the filter-down approach. All our old stuff goes to the Scotland office, all their old stuff goes to Wales."

"It's a pain in the arse and having a consultant who can't tell one end of a power cable from the other is too."

"But there is a way forward." I respond, outlining a plan that's forming in my head...

Two days later the PFY is browsing the boss's outgoing e-mail when...

"Bloody hell!" he blurts. "That helpdesk woman's been transferred to tech support Wales! They must have found out about the phone calls. That's cruel."

"No," I respond. "She wanted to go. She's worked out that once she gets the place shipshape and puts some new kit in, she can telecommute from London..."

Our conversation is interrupted by the entry of the boss.

"Just thought I'd come in and apologise. It seems I was a bit hasty the other day in accusing you of sabotaging the Welsh office."

"Oh yes?" I respond.

"Yes, it appears that the technical consultant in Wales was a pyromaniac - security caught him last night spraying lighter fluid in the back of their apps server. His excuse was that someone from the helpdesk had called and said the CPU heatsink was getting too cold."

"Terrible."

"I know. Anyway, just thought I'd fill you in," he sighs, leaving the room...

"Onward VBGN!" I cry.

"VBGN?!"

"Virtual Bastard Global Network. My Master Plan!"

"Uh-Ohhh..."

5.28 The BOFH and PFY attend a 'bored' meeting, everyone gets bladdered and the boss gets to 'chair' an assembly of overheated shareholders...

So the PFY and I have been roped into going to a shareholders' meeting as technical standby in case someone asks the boss a difficult question that he can't manage (like, "where's the space bar?").

There's a stuffy half-time wine and nibbles event to ensure a cheery mood and that the shareholders' views match those of current management.

"Mmm, an '89 Cab. Sav. if I'm not much mistaken," a distinguished gent to my left burbles to a fellow member of the Old School Tie classes.

"I think you'll find it's actually a '90 Cab. Sav.," his counterpart chuckles knowingly.

"Really?" the Pimpily-faced Youth blurts. "I thought it was an '88 Ford Grenada - the Ghia version with the leather seats and the wood panelling!"

You have to forgive him - he always gets a little boisterous after being locked in a meeting for over an hour. I'm a little fidgety myself...

I drag him away from civilised company while simultaneously tampering with the airconditioning (courtesy of an RF transmitter hanging out of the back of my personnel disorganiser). Within 10 minutes the place is heating up and dehumidifying nicely and all attempts at resetting the airconditioning meet with failure. (Which is the price you pay for leaving the unit's remote PIN number at the factory default.) After some whispered conversation with the catering staff, the CEO okays anything that'll stop the parched shareholders getting nasty.

And wouldn't you know it - there's 12 cases of lager packed in the boardroom's catering chiller, awaiting the company yacht club's victory celebration...

Twelve cases of ice-cold beer later, the meeting is coming along nicely. Feeling magnanimous, the shareholders have demanded that management approve an across-the-board pay rise for all salary, wage and contract workers - effective immediately. Striking while the iron is hot, I get them to get management sign-off on 100 "urgent desktop upgrades" of machines with "all the fruit". The boss, who would normally head this off at the pass - also known for his lack of tolerance to even mild amounts of alcohol, is circulating hot-off-the-press photocopies of his backside - still thankfully encased in boxer shorts.

Security moves in gently about halfway through the "long jump" event (an occupied wheelie chair pushed full tilt up a ramp made by breaking the legs off one end of the boardroom table).

Apparently a participant 'abandoned chair' before lift-off resulting in two broken windows - one in the boardroom, and one in a black cab parked below.

The next day rumours are rife - the word has got around the building about who's to thank for a projected pay increase.

Feeling like the modern equivalents of Robin Hood, the PFY and I accept thanks humbly. Lao Tsu would be proud of

us.

Our fame is to be shortlived, however, as there's an emergency shareholder meeting to put right the excesses of the previous night.

It's bad. The annulments are coming in fast, and we arrive just in time to hear our upgrade plan sink beneath the waters of a corporate cover-up.

"Ah," I interject, as the motion is put, "would this be a bad time to mention that I've already ordered the approved equipment last night?"

"Well un-order it then!" a voice advises.

"Then we'd have to pay a restocking penalty of 10 per cent..."

Ten per cent being a better loss than 100 per cent, the motion is passed and the PFY and I take off to cancel the order.

"But you didn't put in an order!" the PFY blurts, knowing that the only real work I did last night was negotiate the revolving door to get to a cab.

"No, no, but when I order 10 machines, to be charged to us as 'Restocking Fee', delivered to the Welsh office..."

"Oh!" The PFY cries. "The Virtual Bastard Global Network is one step nearer!"

"What Virtual Bastard Global Network?" the boss asks, stepping into the office.

"Virtual Bastard Global Network?" I ask innocently.

"Yes...what you were talking about just then."

"Oh, you mean the Virtual Bartercard Global Network?" I ask, clutching at the first straw "For...electronic transactions?"

"No, I think I got it right the first time. You engineered all this for new machines for some Global Network of your own design. I think the shareholders might like to hear this."

I'm shocked. The boss, who normally couldn't put two and two together and get a number less than 22, has hit the nail on the head. He knows too much.

While I'm twiddling with my personnel disorganiser, the boss tells the PFY to extract himself from the security console and join him and me in the boardroom.

Pleading claustrophobia in lifts, I take the stairs.

Ten minutes and three floors later, the boss wheezes to a halt outside the boardroom, having lost his asthma inhaler down the stairwell when the PFY accidentally bumped into him. We open the door and enter.

"Thank God you got the door open!" someone gasps as the wave of heat hits us. "The door's locked from the inside and the aircon's on the blink again. Don't close it!"

Twelve replacement cases of beer later, we're still locked in, surveying the hole in the window that the boss left

when winning the "long jump" event. True, it might have looked as if he didn't want to be strapped into the chair, but I can assure you that he was excited enough to be whispering "Wheeeee" the whole time...

And he got a cab ride home out of it too...

5.29 When the building is repainted in the lurid colour scheme of 'Teletubby Land', there is only one way to restore it to its former grey glory...

I'm coming into the office in time for morning tea when I glimpse a sight on the ground floor that I have to share with the PFY.

I am rapid-dialling my mobile phone before I'm halfway across the foyer.

"Hello, Nigerian Embassy," the PFY answers, using this week's wrong-number diversion scheme.

"You'll never guess what they're doing on the ground floor!" I chuckle.

"Painting the walls radiation orange?" he asks.

"Oh. Of course, you've got CCTV, what was I thinking?"

"Yes, and not just that!"

"What?"

"Well, do you want the good news or the bad news?" the PFY asks, in a playful manner.

"The good news..." I respond, taking the lift for a change.

"The good news is that there's only one bit of bad news."

"I see, and the bad news is?"

"The painters started on the fourth floor last night."

"How bad is it?" I ask as the lift doors open, answering my question.

I am now staring at an office that looks like the inside of a heat lamp.

The boss strolls over, smiling benevolently - or is that malevolently?

"Awful, isn't it?" he asks pastily.

Ah! What I'd mistaken for a smile of benevolence was in fact a wince of distress. Easy mistake to make with the boss only recently back from sick leave.

"Who did it?" I ask.

"The building owners," the boss responds. "Apparently in response to the request of senior management. But that's not the worst. Stores just rang to say our purple carpet's arrived."

I choke down my gag reflex and manage to utter, "Why?"

"Because this study," the PFY cries, holding up a management rag, "says that certain colours are more conducive to an energetic workplace."

"I thought that was pale blues and pinks?"

"No," the PFY responds, recalling from memory sections of the article. "Pale blues and pinks are conducive to a calm atmosphere - which, incidentally, are the colours of our office."

"You're bloody joking!"

"No. Oh, and I lied about there only being one bit of bad news."

I rip down to my office to investigate.

"Yes, yes, I see what you mean," I say, relaxing into my chair. "It is a little calmer than the harsh metallic white of before. It's almost soothing in a way."

"It's not good to stay in here," the PFY comments. "It's dangerous - remember the negative ion generators...?"

How could I forget a former management plan to pump negative ions into our building in an attempt to make the PFY and I consider customer relations more.

"The computer room!" I cry.

The PFY, the boss and I head to the clinical safety of the computer room's harsh greyish walls.

"Much better!"

Through the viewing window in the fire escape door I see the IT workers going through their routines, unaware of the harmful effects of the wall colour.

"Poor bastards!" the PFY cries.

"It's too late for them! We've got to think of ourselves!" the boss blurts, echoing my exact thoughts.

(Which is a worry. Come to think of it, the boss's room has always been a bluish pinky colour...)

"What to do..." I murmur, looking to see the boss's level of commitment, "what to do..."

This goes on for another couple of minutes until the grey affects the boss's mind and an idea pops out.

"A fire!" he cries, as I make a mental note to give future bosses an hour a week of computer room therapy..."No! It'd never work - the extinguishers would cut in immediately."

"True!" I respond, "and all that water on the semi-cured paint..."

"It'd never wash it all off!" the PFY blurts.

"It doesn't have to wash it off! It just has to make it patchy!"

"...requiring a repaint!" the PFY finishes.

While the PFY and the boss complete their Laurel and Hardy act, I set to work removing a panel from high on the wall.

"What are you doing?" the boss asks in confusion.

"A small fire, while bloody dangerous, is not the answer, nor..." I add, silencing the PFY's next sentence, "is a big fire. We need a small fire, in the right place."

"And where's that?"

"In..." I cry, ripping off the plate to reveal a blocked-off galvanised iron duct, "the air-conditioning system."

"It'll blow the smoke all over the building!" The PFY cries, enlightened once more.

"Friends, countrymen," I cry, "lend me your jackets and shoes!"

"Will we get them back?" The boss asks, stupidly.

I pry open the ducting, stuff in the jackets, shoes, some tape listings, some tapes, a gallon of tape head cleaner and, what the hell, the boss's wallet (old habits die hard).

"Halon!" I cry.

The PFY dashes over and switches the fire alarm on.

"What the hell are you doing?!" the boss cries in terror.

Nothing happens.

"There's a wiring 'fault'," the PFY says. "The fire alarm switch holds off the Halon, while the Halon-hold-off switch turns it on."

"One of yours?" the boss asks.

"You're too kind," I smirk, chucking the lit matches into the ducting and closing the panel.

Quicker than you can say "Is that the fire alarm?" the fire sensor board is lighting up like a Christmas tree and the sound of alarms echo from all corners.

"To the new colour scheme!" I cry, lifting one of the raised-floor tiles and pulling out three lagers chilled to a crisp 17 degrees...

"Cheers!" the boss and PFY cry in unison.

And they say that orange inspires teamwork...

5.30 Does the BOFH know anything about the disappearance of the telecomms manager, his lawnmower and the wife he's 'grass-widowed'?

It's been a quiet morning for me.

A cynic might suggest this is because I patched the helpdesk calls through to the marketing manager who cut up rough last week when we were slow to upgrade his PC. He just didn't seem to understand that Doom does normally take precedence over RAM upgrades, although 71 callers all claiming that the network was running slow might have forced some wisdom into his brain.

Even though we've put them back on-line, the users are still restless and somewhat puzzled at the 'teething troubles' with the new coffee machines. You see, as part of the rather sudden refit the offices have undergone (if somewhat abortive, in colour terms), the powers that be decided to replace the tired old coffee machines with snazzy new ones.

This choice came as a pleasant surprise down here in Networks & Systems. When the previous drinks machines were installed, the PFY and I tried the usual procedure of reprogramming the 'tea' button to deliver vegetable soup, and the 'vegetable soup' button to deliver boiled Hoover-bag contents. Sadly, this approach made the end product rather more attractive than the real thing, so we admitted defeat and put everything back to its default settings.

Now we have these new machines, however, the users can actually tell that what they're getting isn't what they were asking for, thus making the whole reprogramming concept worthwhile. And the hedgehog broth is receiving some favourable reviews, not to mention a degree of mirth from those who are convinced the labels are only a bit of fun, and it's really just beef soup.

The phone rings and I answer it. This is partly because we're bored and partly because the the PFY has clocked the CLI and decided that the caller is good-looking enough to warrant attention - I only wait until the 18th ring.

"I need e-mail installed on my notebook," the monitor speaker of the call recorder proclaims, rather too confidently if you ask me.

The PFY checks the asset register and confirms that the user is as chained to the desk as they come, and hence has only the regulation issue 8MB 386 desktop running NT Workstation. "What notebook might that be?"

"The one I'm using to write my dissertation."

"Dissertation?"

"Yes, I'm doing a psychology course on day-release."

"So it's not exactly a company machine, then?"

"Well, no, it's my boyfriend's, but the dissertation is relevant to my job, and the company's paying my college fees."

"Sorry, but if it's not a company machine, we can't connect it to the network."

"That's okay, I connected it to the network already. It just needs the e-mail package installed."

"Oh, how kind of you to save us the trouble."

The PFY realises why I have been pointing for some time to a previously unidentified blob on the management console, which I have identified via SNMP as a top-end, not-released-till-December pre-Alpha beast of a notebook.

Rumour has it there are only a dozen in the country so she must have been doing some serious extra-curricular work to blag it. Tentatively, I start to explore the machine over the LAN.

"Hey," the PFY exclaims in mock excitement into the mouthpiece, "you're the one I've heard about - there are only 11 of those in the country, aren't there?"

"Well, yes, 12 in fact."

A muffled bang from the speaker indicates that it is indeed the model that is reputed to suffer from a rather explosive Desktop Management Interface (DMI) - otherwise known as the Detonate Machine Interrupt-problem.

"Nope. Definitely 11," chuckles the PFY as he replaces the receiver basking in the warm glow of a job well done.

At this point, the boss casually strolls in (we've obviously been too friendly, as he's lost that cautious look, the nervous tic and the tendency to look under his car before opening the doors - though he still wears rubber gloves when handling doorknobs). He's looking for the telecomms manager, who has apparently gone AWOL.

"It's very sad that he's gone missing, I'm sure," I assure the boss, "but what with all this voice-data convergence and stuff, does it really matter?"

"That's not the point!" fumes the boss, in his this-is-really-important-honest voice. "He hasn't been seen for some time and his wife is complaining the grass is getting long!"

I flick open the Yellow Pages at 'Psychiatric Clinics' and hand it to the boss.

He looks quizzically at me.

"It's amazing isn't it?" I start thinking aloud. "There are some strange people who think that PBXs will always be so difficult as to warrant an in-house expert all of their own. Who think that phones on desks are a right, not a privilege. Who think network operators are the scum of the earth because they have scheduled downtimes. Who don't realise that you can deliver 30,000 volts to the voice-comms frame without even dropping a cell on the fibre LAN running past it."

By now, the boss knows not to waste his breath on expressions like "I knew you were up to something last week!" or "Is he all right?", concentrating intently instead for several seconds on the volume in his hand. He snaps it shut, drops it back in the drawer, and smiles decisively.

"So he won't be needing his lawnmower back for a bit, then?"

5.31 The BOFH steps in to help with a staff identity crisis, and the PFY drives a wedge between systems maintenance and the boss

So I'm in early to do some systems maintenance.

Well, when I say early, I mean 9:15am - just when everyone's established their connections to the database and applications server.

My console beeps to indicate that the required 200 interactive sessions have been reached and I start my programme to ensure the reinstatement of overtime rates...

I echo "Axeme" to /dev/kmem and the system goes down faster than a Clinton intern.

As expected, the boss hurtles out of his office like a beige tornado, only to be repelled with a resounding 'thud' by the wedge I'd kicked under the door earlier, in response to the new "Fire and Safety" policy of electronically unlocking certain swipe-card controlled doors during working hours "for ease of access". Unfortunately this means that every half-wit from PR thinks it's an open invitation to come up and talk about someone "hacking their username".

Talk of the devil; a PR geek slips in.

"Told you we should have got a bigger wedge," the PFY murmurs.

"Hi," the PR bod cries. "I think my username has been hacked!"

"No it hasn't," I respond without looking up.

"It has! It's been happening all through our department for a couple of weeks now!"

"Ever since you got that ID camera that takes digitised photos which you're printing on self-adhesive photo labels?"

"I suppose so, but I don't see what that's got to do with it?!"

"So you're saying you don't have a photo of your wife, pet, car or sly love interest stuck on your keyboard in that wasted space where the "Caps Lock" light was?"

"Uh..." he mutters, failing to think quickly.

"Take my advice - cut out the eyeholes on the picture and hit the Caps Lock key every time your wife or pet looks possessed..."

Our visitor backs out of the office in an embarrassed silence as the PFY looks up.

"Self adhesive photos?"

"Yeah," I respond "for this year's renewal of photo-id cards."

"I thought security did those?"

"They did, but the head of PR is the CEO's new blue-eyed boy, and you know what goes with blue eyes..."

"Brown nose?"

"Correct. So the head of PR is snaffling a lot of jobs that fall into the grey area of demarcation."

"Why?"

"More jobs, more workers. More responsibility..."

"More dosh!"

"Correct again. A thinly disguised plan to grab more quiddage."

"I hardly think that's true!" the boss comments, entering the room now his sense of balance is restored. "It just

cuts down on photographic double-handling.”

”How’s that?” the PFY asks.

”Because the PR department keeps an electronic archive of photographs of staff members which they give to the press.”

”Yes,” I comment, ”like when one of the beancounters wins Profit-and-Loss Adjuster of the Year Award...”

”I...” the boss starts, ”...anyway, that’s not why I’m in here. Why’s the Apps server down?”

”Apps Server...” I mutter looking at the maintenance whiteboard.”Yes, it’s got routine maintenance scheduled - see,”

I point to the lettering thereon.

”You’re supposed to schedule that sort of thing out of hours!”

”Well, I’d like to, but you asked us to watch the overtime.”

”Yes, but I didn’t mean for maintenance on crucial machines!”

”You did!” I cry, reminding him of events recently past. ”You started this after a weekend’s overtime on maintenance of a crucial server!”

”The bloody espresso machine is not a crucial server!”

”Speak for yourself,” the PFY quips, baying for blood.

”It’s not! Now get that server up!”

”But...” I start.

”No buts, get it up!”

Pseudo-reluctantly, I remote-boot the server.

Which only leaves the problem of the recent influx of PR types.

A quick scan of the PR network finds the right PC and, thanks to lax group administrator security and default passwords, within a minute I’m browsing the profile of the attached photo-label printer.

And back me up on read-protected media if the printer doesn’t have several uploadable photo overlays to choose from, including the words ”security”, ”contractor”, ”cleaner”, ”board member” etc.

The next day a resounding thud announces the boss’s arrival. After a minute, a second thud confirms the PFY’s theory that a larger wedge has done the trick...

On release from the sick bay with mild bruising, the boss returns and knocks patiently on the door. The PFY lets him in.

”What’s behind this?” he asks.

"It's a photo-id of an accountant," I respond.

"Why is the word Beancounter printed over his photo?"

"Because it's his job?" I ask.

"If that's the case, how many Wankers are employed in the building?"

"I wouldn't like to speculate on that one..."

"Seventy three apparently. Twenty-seven Beancounters, 35 Tossers and one Bumbag. Which I resent! Oh, and two Good Bastards - but you know that..."

"Someone's hacked a PR username!" the PFY comments.

"Yeah, but I can't believe that PR didn't check the photos before they sent them to security for printing!" I reply. "I suppose they'll have to be reprinted."

"They can't!" the boss cries "Security has run out of blanks and can't get new stock for a fortnight..."

The next day there's some upset when security gives the new cards to the great unwashed. Funny. Even with an updated photo they're still not happy...

5.32 When does saying less mean making more? When the boss suggests adding needless desktop capacity and you're renting out any going spare.

"...which is why I propose that we standardise on full-height disks to effectively make use of all the spare space we have in our desktop machines..."

Something startles me and I wake to find myself in the middle of an IT discussion group meeting - one of the boss's great ideas to bring the minds of the department together.

Sadly, there's no IQ barrier, the entrance criterion being the ability to find your way to the meeting.

I comfort myself with the thought that if we go overtime I'll be able to hear what the cleaning staff have to say, which is bound to bring a bit of sanity to the conversation.

"Ah, I don't think full-height drives is a good option in the new low-profile ca...aagh!" the PFY comments, as he gets cut short by an under-table blow.

It's too late, of course, now that opposition has been raised to an idea. By Incompetent Meeting Law, there now has to be a discussion of the relative merits of the idea being opposed. It's a discussion that is bound to bring us half an hour closer to the end of the day, but half an hour further away from a technical resolution.

We break for a mid-morning coffee, at which time I corner the PFY and ask him, as politely as possible, what the hell he was trying to do in there.

"But he was recommending full-height drives for all desktop machines!"

"Some of our machines don't even stand that high!" he blurts.

"That's irrelevant. You know they're only taunting you so that you argue and string the meeting out, and then they don't have to do any work today."

"But it's our job to offer sound advice, isn't it?"

"Don't be ridiculous! It's our job to interpret what they decide and use it to our advantage."

"So the full-height drives would be...?"

"Hmm...half-height 7200 RPM 18 gig jobbies."

"But desktops don't need that sort of space!"

"No, but if we get enough of them out there we can use it as a wide area multiple mirrored RAID-5 system!" "Huh?"

"OK, your average user's desktop machine has what on it?"

"Their operating system?"

"Yes, yes, but the rest."

"?"

Sigh. After all this time he's still an amateur at heart.

"Their e-mail folders, personal work, the pirated copy of Leisure Suit Larry - the smutty pictures in the windows directory hidden under the name YENROH1.DLL etc."

"Oh! Yeah?"

"Well, all that, what does it take up? A Gig, max. Which means there's 17 Gig free on them for really deserving projects!"

"Like?"

"Our personal work, games, and all those smutty pictures we have on the tapes 'System Snapshot' 1 thru 200."

"So we use their hard drives?"

"Sort of. But you know what users are like - couldn't find the space bar if their stomach didn't roll into it. So we need mirrored copies."

"But why RAID-5 it as well?"

"Just in case one of the workers goes postal and brings a bomb into the building. Wouldn't want to interrupt the smutty picture slideshow just because Bean-counter Central's halfway across the high street."

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"Almost. But bear in mind what sheep departments are - all stopping for lunch together and powering down their machines."

"No. I don't think you're telling me the full story."

Bugger.

"All right, so I've contracted half a terabyte out to a couple of companies as on-line HSM disk."

"Hierarchical storage management?"

"Yeah. Our users don't use the stuff, so I use them as a network archival device."

"You're selling the company's desktop space!?"

"Yeah, to a couple of oil companies that want off-site back-ups."

"I can't believe it!" the PFY cries, shocked to the core.

"What, the Machiavellian megalomania of it all?" I ask.

"No, that you didn't cut me in!"

"Well, it's funny you should mention that. The next time Dave suggests full-height drives, I'd like you to keep your gob shut. The same goes for when he suggests monochrome monitors to cut down on sick time because of eye strain. We've got a buyer who wants a job lot of SVGAs."

"But that's just ridic...Dave's working for you, isn't he?" the PFY cries, the penny finally dropping.

"Not for - with."

"But he's completely thick!"

"Oh, that's just a cover story. He pumps out stupid suggestions at top speed to prevent other managers from getting their own in there."

There's a knock at the door.

"Speak of the devil."

"Uh, I think I've forgotten my password," Dave mumbles.

"It's OK, he knows," I respond.

"Oh. Right. Well, I've just heard rumours that your boss is going to propose that all management get a laptop conversion kit for their cars - complete with 12 volt LCD monitor, cellphone hook-up etc."

"Bloody hell," the PFY gasps. "That'll be our whole equipment budget for a couple of quarters! What are we going to do?"

"Well," Dave comments, "for a start I'd cut the monitor deal, bring in Dvorak keyboards to prevent repetitive strain injury, RS232 networking to reduce Ethernet collisions, and, when that fails, dial-up networking between floors."

Unfortunately, two days later the flaw in the plan becomes apparent when 18 ultra high-speed modems arrive in

the office - courtesy of the boss who was so swayed by the inter-floor dial-up networking argument that he cashed in our budget on them.

So it is true then: you can't win 'em all...

Sigh.

5.33 Hypochondria in the office is all the rage. In fact, rage is all the rage. But when a psychiatrist is called in it's only a means to an end...

So I'm destined by fate to have a run-in with the boss. I know it, he knows it, and everything else is just window dressing.

It's his fault. He recently took on a secretary who suffers from XXXX disease, i.e. the inability to do anything she doesn't want to on medical grounds. If it isn't RSI it's some version of the 'flu hitherto unknown to medical science.

Finally I've had a gutful, so I corner the boss to see what he's going to do about it. The assistant head of personnel is there, purely coincidentally of course.

"Well, I'd like to do something about it," he responds, "but the company has fairly strict guidelines on dismissing employees due to medical conditions..."

"So she's here to stay?"

"Unless there's some disciplinary issue that you'd like to raise?" personnel replies.

"Other than she's crap?"

"She is not crap. She has simply discovered some medical conditions that are exacerbated by her work here. So we're going to lighten her workload accordingly to allow her a chance to recover."

"Lighten her workload?! She doesn't do anything!"

"She's made a good job of organising my meetings," the boss chimes.

"That's because her hands hurt too much to take down the details! You haven't met anyone since she's been here."

"I'm meeting you aren't I?" the boss counters smugly.

Then it becomes clear to me. It's the boss's sneaky plan to insulate himself from the workers by having an obstructive secretary...

Sure enough, as I leave the office I notice a similar self-contented expression on the part of the employee in question.

"Two can play at that game!"

I blurt as I re-enter the office, gesture the PFY aside and force a reboot of every switch and router in the building.

The boss storms in seconds later, with his personnel partner-in-grime in tow.

"What's going on?"

"Routers have all gone down. I typed 'all reboot' instead of 'all status'. I must be typing dyslexic!"

"Well get them up!" the boss blurts, concentrating his attention on the lynching that will occur at the next systems liaison meeting...

"Well I'd like to, but I'm also suffering from attention defici... Oh! Look, a green cellphone! Is that new?"

The boss goes straight to the PFY and demands that he restart the equipment.

As the great unwashed beat a path to the door of mission control and the networking equipment finishes its booting, the PFY accedes to the boss's demands at full speed, with a cry of "Bastards!" and queues a 60- minute UPS disconnect test for five minutes from now - 60 being 23 more minutes than the rated capacity of our system.

"Oh no!" I cry. "Keyboard rage!"

"What are you talking about?!" the boss shouts.

"Keyboard rage! It's like road rage, only worse! It's not his fault, it's a psychological condition he's been getting counselling for! He was diagnosed by the same doctor who diagnosed my attent...Wow! This gas operated chair's really got a smooth descent! Look at this!"

"I want that UPS test stopped!" the boss shouts.

"Please don't shout," I sniffle. "My dyslexia gets worse under pressure. Bugger, I've just set the fire alarm test off by accident!"

The PFY, meantime, is beating his keyboard senseless in a very convincing manner while our two visitors make for the door.

"Be careful!" I cry, "I can't remember whether I locked out the lift system or not, and if I did - Ooooh, is that an Armani suit?!"

The next day the PFY and I meet with the head of personnel, the boss, and the head of dept.

A calm knock on the door announces the arrival of our personal psychiatric advisor.

"I don't believe you've met our psychiatric advisor, Doctor Brian Analpeeper - Phd in Abnormal Psychology from the Bognor Regis Polytechnic."

"Good morning gentlemen," Brian starts. "I have here the diagnoses of my patients' conditions which, I must say, appear to have been aggravated by the inability of their superegos to express their thoughts about current management decisions..."

Brian goes on to explain that yesterday's unfortunate power and systems outage etc. is all a result of our inability to get to the boss because of the new secretary.

"They're just a couple of freeloading layabouts who are milking the company dry," the boss snaps angrily.

"I feel at this juncture I must ask for some time alone with my clients to discern any mental harm that your comments have caused them."

"What the hell?!"

"My clients are sensitive people. Who knows what your comments may have done to their delicate psyches. This meeting may accelerate a whole new set of problems, uncovering repressed memories of employee abuse."

"What?!" the boss cries, dangerously close to blowing a major blood vessel.

"Wait," the head of personnel interjects, recognising an escalating situation when he's in one. "We'll transfer her."

"To stamp-licking in the mail room?" I ask evilly.

"We have a franking machine," the boss comments dryly.

"Not for much longer," the PFY comments. "I think I feel a bout of frank rage coming on."

"Interesting manifestation of trauma," Brian comments. "Well, I see no need for my remaining here."

"You bastard!" the boss snarls before yelping as Brian's briefcase crushes his hand.

"Sorry," Brian explains. "I'm a recovering briefcase rage sufferer."

Amazing what a psychiatrist can find out, if you pay him enough...

5.34 The BOFH is fazed by the remote working boom - but not for long. He and the PFY find more devious ways to keep the Operations beer fund topped up.

There are times when I believe that the PFY and I are the only ones who actually spend any time in the office these days.

There is a distinct tendency toward home working, which is bad news indeed.

Bad news in a number of ways. First, there are fewer people in the office to admire the support 'efforts' of the PFY and myself; this, in itself, implies a reduction in the level of available victims.

Second, for every user on the remote access server, we lose 64Kbps (before compression) of our PRI Quake connection to the US arm of the company.

Finally, and most importantly, remote access equals more user moans.

You see, remote access is hard to use. It involves not only using Windows NT's user interface, but also a modem and a phone line. It also involves calling the right number in order to gain access to the company network.

Difficult, you may think. Except the reason we run NT Workstation is because we can lock everything down tighter than...well, just think of the anatomy of waterfowl. And the modem is internal to the PC, so they can't get the wires wrong when they connect it up.

And the phone line is Araldited into the modem card, so they can't put the wrong end in the wrong hole. And

the other end has a big green label saying "Plug this end into a telephone socket". Made of steel. And the dial-up number is hard-coded into the modem software. And it's even the right number on ten per cent of the machines.

So what exactly is it that these people find so hard? These are people who, by and large, can figure out which way round to sit on a toilet. Who - with the exception of the senior purchasing controller - know which end of a biro goes on to the paper. Who somehow passed a test and are legally allowed to drive a big heavy car with a big engine and sharp edges to work but still can't figure out how to plug a power cord into the only socket it'll fit into in the back of a computer.

For example, a call the PFY answered by mistake the other day:

"I can't dial into the network."

"Really? Is the modem plugged in?"

"Yes, that was the problem last time, so I made sure it was okay today."

"Have you been able to connect at all?"

"Well, I got in yesterday."

"Have you changed anything?"

"No."

"Really?"

"NO!"

"Try it again now."

"Okay...hang on...it says 'no dialtone'."

"How many phone lines do you have in your house?"

"Just one. Why?"

¡CLICK

But it's not all bad. Remote access users do have their uses, of course. You see, a while ago the beancounters decided to ban people from charging their home phone bills to expenses.

They figured that if people couldn't be bothered to come into the office, they weren't about to pay. Therefore, we in IT decided to be very friendly to the poor little cherubs who were too delicate to face a daily commute and give them an 0800 number to dial into.

Sadly, something appears to have gone wrong with the local cable franchise's phone billing system. Somehow

I don't seem to be getting the bill for all these allegedly freefone remote access calls. Yet I've heard rumours of relationship rockiness becoming rife among our remote access friends. Something to do with wives finding 800-per-quarter phone bills full of itemised, premium rate numbers with suspicious-sounding names...whatever the case, the Operations beer fund appears to be ticking up nicely at a rate of 44p per minute (35p off-peak).

Not only this, but the management are starting to catch on to the fact that there might be something in the remote-user thing after all. Something called hot-desking, I'm told.

Manager theory goes along the lines of: if someone isn't there, I'm getting charged for their bit of the office, so let's put someone else in there and save money. It is, of course, perfectly logical to take on extra people on thirty grand a year in order to fully utilise eighty quid's worth of square footage.

Anyhow, as the PFY and I gaze out of the window we can see a whole load of big vans and men carting into the building what look suspiciously like cubicle partitions. A suspicion looms...

I wonder...

¡P¡ Three o'clock comes, and it's time for the PFY and I to adjourn to the cosy meeting room on the corner that has a full-sized pool table and serves such a nice pint of Stella.

As we battle our way across the yard, weaving a path through the head-butting and the fist-fights, we find ourselves musing about how ironic it all is that one of the junior programmers should have discovered the old cubicle-allocation application I wrote five years ago for the previous management (most of whom have now, sadly, passed on or checked into rehab units).

For some reason hot-desking didn't work then, either.

5.35 The Operations room is lit up like a set of traffic lights when the head bean-counter asks the BOFH and the PFY to account for their time...

An edict has come down from on high that we have to account for our time. It's all about accountability, internal recharging and all that jazz. Seems the boss has been getting grief for having such a big cost centre, so he's decided to make us into a profit centre by making people pay for our services. The financial director fell for the idea and appears to be writing us some terms, conditions and SLA clauses.

"We pay how much per hour?"

The PFY is startled by my exclamation, though realisation dawns as he looks at my screen-scrape of the financial director's Word window. It seems that our department loses money should my humble assistant or I be late fixing someone's machine. To the tune of a grand an hour, give or take a few pennies.

True, it's nice to labour under the misapprehension that they think we're worth that much, but in reality I suspect they're just trying to induce urgency. They also think we care how much the boss's budget loses, but that's another issue entirely.

"Quick, change it while it's in the print queue," the PFY shouts, seeing the 'Print' dialog appearing. He dives for his keyboard, but stops himself as he notices my smug grin.

Sure enough, a few days later the boss walks in, with the financial director in tow, to see how we're doing. Just so he can be kept happy we've installed a big 'job status' screen (103" TFT displays don't come cheap, but it had to be flat to be wall-mounted) which is showing lots of healthy 'green' jobs.

Allow me to explain. A 'red' job is a call on which we have missed our deadline. A 'green' job, on the other hand, is a call which has been logged but not yet attended to, but whose deadline is still in the future. We persuaded

the management that we didn't need to record completed calls, as they were largely irrelevant to progress. True, the fact that there weren't any made it even more pointless, but we didn't exactly press that issue.

"Good show, chaps," the financial director booms in his clipped retired-Army-lieutenant-who-still-calls-himself-colonel tones. (Note at this point the derivation of the word 'colonel', as in COLON-el). "Keeping ahead of things, I see!"

"Oh yes, sir, we make a point of hitting our targets." Yeah, but I'm not telling you what with.

The phone rings, and the PFY flinches at the intensity of the boss's "answer it or die" look.

He's certainly learning.

"Operations, PFY speaking."

The boss manages to shepherd the financial director out of the office while he's still happy, leaving the PFY to look after his 'customer'.

"Yes, I realise we haven't managed to get round to you yet, but we're very busy, and we're still within the permitted fix time - yes, I know you called on September 8th - yes, I know it's the 30th today. What's that? Sure, I'll just look it up - ah, here it is. 14 April 2003 seems to be the deadline. Tell you what, I'll call you on the 13th just to make sure you still work here, just so I don't waste my time coming up to your office only to find you've fallen out of a window. No, that's not a threat, just a vision of the future. Bye now."

The days pass and we while away the time as our part-time assistant (drafted in for two hours a week to cope with the vast demand being placed on our human resources) knocks off the odd job here and there just so the board isn't too full.

Meanwhile, unrest is growing among the users, who don't seem to realise just how hard it is to keep that board full of green call reports. It's a full fortnight before the boss catches on to what we're up to. It took him a while, but his training is coming along nicely and every so often he spots what's happening.

"Tell me," he prompts, "just how many calls actually get as far as being closed?"

"Depends how you mean 'closed'," I reply.

"Like, problems getting solved."

¡P¡ "Depends what you mean by 'solved'."

"AAAAAGGGGHHHHH!!!"

"Okay, let me explain. We set deadlines to give ourselves enough time to do the job properly. Right?"

"Riiiggghhhhttt..."

"We have two alternatives. First, we can go and fix the problem. This takes time and draws us away from our real job."

"And I'm not even going to ask what you think that is. What's the other option?"

"We sit in the pub doing essential network maintenance and, by the time the many-months-off deadline arrives, the problem, or preferably the user, has gone away. The deadline generator is tied into the HR staff turnover measurement system."

A twinkle in the boss's eye tells me he's plotting. And he knows better than to come up with anything that isn't grossly beneficial to my spotty colleague and myself.

He strides off purposefully, returning half an hour later looking triumphant.

"I persuaded the financial director that stuff might get done a little bit before deadline if there was some incentive to our department for finishing jobs before deadline."

"How much?"

"Don't ask. Enough."

Within a day and a half the call-board is darker than a gorilla's groin, and the Operations beer-fund, which is index-linked to the boss's budget, is looking healthier than ever. I could grow to like the idea of accountability.

5.36 One wager and a lager frenzy later, the BOFH is feeling somewhat worse for wear after messing with the teatime continuum

I'm not a well man.

In fact, I'd go so far as to say I'm feeling poorly.

But having used up my sick leave entitlement during the World Cup and considering a bomb threat too drastic, I struggle into work. After all, if you're going to be crook, you may as well do it on company time. It always makes me feel a little better anyway. The source of my illness was plain to see once I'd emerged from the bed to focus on the congealed remains of a half-eaten kebab solidified on the top of the TV set and half a pot of cold coffee sitting on the table.

A vague memory crosses my mind, collides with a patchy recollection and goes down...I seem to remember a lager frenzy starting at the pub just down from the office following the outcome of some wager that ended in my favour. As they do.

A wager that must have undoubtedly involved the boss in some way, shape or form, following his imperial command just a few days ago with regard to morning and afternoon tea. Apparently we're only supposed to take one of each a day, and they're only supposed to be 15 minutes long. And they're to be measured by the company's clocks and not by any personal equipment. Talk about cruel and unusual punishment.

Of course no one expected him to enforce the ruling, so it came as a little bit of a surprise when the unauthorised timesheet prunings were brought to light by a less-than-expected payment cheque.

I manage to drag myself to work, although I have to admit to feeling very seedy by the time I get to the relative security of my office. A rest is called for.

I redirect my phone to the voicemail of the networks and systems group of the company, three buildings over, then catch up with some well-deserved sleep.

An hour later I'm woken by the entry of the PFY into the room. Well, more accurately, the sound of the PFY falling through the door to Mission Control.

His condition is no better than my own, but I'm hoping that his memory of events will tide me over.

A hope that fades quickly when he informs me that the last thing he remembers was when we pulled the toner cartridge out of the fax machine and shorted out the 'toner low' and 'cartridge-removed' sensors.

Further questioning is pointless once the PFY reveals that the next thing he remembers is waking up in the telecomms access duct at the rear of the building.

Curiouser and curiouser...

I can only assume that some major form of celebration occurred, the likes of which is not often seen in computing circles (i.e. as rare as a bug-free Microsoft release).

CCTV is no help, revealing only that we left the building at approximately 5:22pm, considerably the worse for wear, in the company of half the secretarial pool, who also looked like they had a bad case of bottle fatigue.

Being a troubleshooting professional of long standing, I apply the first rule of problem solving by asking the question "what has changed?". Observation: there aren't many healthy-looking staff at their desks.

I apply the second rule of problem-solving by tracking the problem backwards - 5:22 is far too late for me to be working, so

I must have been propping up the bar at the company anti-social club.

I put in a call to one of the more human company lawyers, who's rostered on to bar duty this week to see if he remembered us.

I eventually track him down to his cellphone.

"Yes, you called me to open up the bar rather early..."

"When was that then?" I ask.

"About 10:30am."

Missing time and memory accounted for, more important questioning must follow.

"Spend much?" I ask, with a due sense of trepidation.

"As it happened, no," he said. "Not after you pointed out that your boss's memo distinctly states that the company shall provide beverages, at its own expense, for all staff between the hours of 10am and 11am."

"So what happened at 11?" the PFY blurts over my shoulder.

"That's not come around as yet. It's only about 10:49am at the moment. I'm not sure, but the clock appears to be running incredibly slowly. Mine is not to reason why though.."

Yet another penny drops and I vaguely remember tweaking the calibration knob on the pulse-advance unit of the company's timekeeping system to buy us a longer tea-break. Perhaps a hammer wasn't the best tool for the tweak job.

"You mean it's been between 10:30 and 11 for a day?" the PFY gasps.

"Ah...two days I think you'll find."

A quick squint at the unfeasibly small numbers on my wristwatch confirms his story.

"Bloody hell. What's management doing about it then?"

"Well when your boss left here about 16 hou...I mean about six minutes ago, he said he'd be back in five minutes. The whole of legal's here still, because they were on the late morning tea shift, and the DP pool are taking their morning tea in one-minute instalments."

About 43 hours [11 minutes] later, the PFY, myself and some hardcore legal and DP drinkers are helped out of the building.

By the police.

If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times: "AGG AAARRICC GUBB IN FARLIN GOT!" And you can quote me on that.

5.37 A bluff report may fool auditors that the company is running smoothly but try telling a hospitalised boss why safety procedures have been ignored

Something feels wrong. I know it immediately. It's a seventh sense among seasoned support professionals.

The PFY confirms it when he gets back from morning tea - at the pub - and looks around as if to check everything is as it should be.

It's like a funny-coloured smell.

The boss must be up to something. We could be over-sensitive, but I think he's a bit upset about me telling the helpdesk staff the grey powder on their furniture might be asbestos dust. That was two days ago, but the mass walkout and hypochondria is yet to end, despite proof that the dust concerned was in fact talcum powder dyed grey.

Some form of retaliation is expected and the waiting game ends fairly shortly when we see the boss waddling in our direction.

"I think it's about time you did some documentation," he blurts, after exhausting his list of social niceties ("How are you?", "How are things going?" and "Isn't that memory the stuff that's missing from my desktop machine?").

"Documentation?"

"Yes, a site guide, configuration standards, network and systems topologies, installed software, site customisations," he bumbles, reeling off the sentence he's obviously spent half the morning committing to memory at great personal risk to the other contents of his brain (where he lives, what his name is, when it's appropriate to unzip his fly etc.).

"But we've got all that already - in the fireproof filing cabinet over there," I respond, pointing at a dull grey monster in the corner that I've only ever opened once.

"Well, let's have a look at it."

"Well, I'd like to, but apparently my assistant locked the key in it the last time he was updating the information!" I cry, using the PFY as a scapegoat for this particular excuse (as previously arranged, of course).

"Then get a locksmith in!" the boss yells, not one to be put off by small details.

Three hours and one fire alarm later the 'documentation' is a mass of ashen remains in the now open cabinet. The fact that they were a mass of ashen remains when I put them in is beside the point.

"I can't think why the PFY would have put that large jar of tapehead cleaner right next to where the locksmith would have to gas-axe the lock open. What an oversight!" I wail, stifling a snigger as the boss gingerly applies some burn cream to his hands.

"It's irrelevant now. I want some documentation to show the auditors."

"The auditors?" I protest. "What do glorified beancounters want documentation for?"

"Not monetary auditors, company auditors. Since the company sold itself to that US combine we have to have our every move audited to ensure the place is a smooth-running machine."

"My money's on a '73 Ford Escort running on three cylinders with water in the fuel tank, but I take your point."

"So I'll expect reprints of your documentation first thing tomorrow," the boss says, leaving.

"Auditors?" the PFY asks. "I haven't heard anything about them."

"First thing you'd better do is OCR scan some random manual pages - the older the better - into a word processor to add a bit of bulk to our documentation. I'll dump the network topology mapper output into another document in 24 point, which should use up about 100 pages by itself. Then push the DNS through a perl filter to add some fancy field information to it. Then I'll work on some table of contents pages, etc.," I reply.

"But won't they know it's crap?" the PFY asks.

"Nah, there'll be so much of it they'll look at the table of contents, check the first few pages, then randomly open the documents at certain pages. Which reminds me. Anything that's reasonably legit should be printed on heavier paper than the rest of the document so that anyone flipping through will stop there.

"You sound like you've done this before."

"One of the tricks of the contracting trade. There's always a run on 100gsm paper at company report time."

Three hours later, we have a document that would fool the average beginner. However, bearing in mind that the auditors have probably seen a few of these in their time, I'm going to have to insert some believable stuff into the procedures area.

An hour later, I've whipped out ten good pages of bumph on "Hot Swap," "Disaster recovery," "Host configuration and naming," "Router configuration standards", etc.

I also chuck in some roughly accurate palaver about cabling, trunking and patch panel locations, as well as a brief outline of emergency service and security configuration information. I slap it all together into an appropriately named folder, then subject it to the ageing process (meaning I jump up and down on it, kick it around until some of the pages fall out, then spill some food and ink on it) to make it look like it's heavily referred to.

The document gets submitted, and, judging by the lack of evidence to the contrary, the auditors must be happy.

And so it was that the next day the PFY and I were standing beside the network monitor when it started emitting the telltale signs of a router not talking to anything any more.

”That’ll be the boss turning on router redundant takeover.”

”How can you be sure?”

”The old ROMS don’t support it - it causes a memory leak. Of course, I forgot to document that. Actually, come to think of it, I also forgot to document...”

A large crash from the floor above interrupts me.

”The emergency duct access retracting ladder isn’t screwed into the roof yet.”

Five minutes later the boss is on his way to hospital and the documentation is on its way to the incinerator.

5.38 A bogus computer range may con the propeller heads in polyester but not the clever BOFH who has a nasty sabotage surprise waiting in his pocket

So I’m at this presentation where a manufacturer’s showing its new range of mini-computers.

As expected, it’s wall-to-wall propeller heads with 100 per cent polyester appearing to be the clothing order of the day.

And, also as expected, the vendor wheels out the new hardware while simultaneously reassuring the assembled clientele that this is not a REPLACEMENT of the kit that they bought a few months ago, just a parallel product.

The fact that last quarter’s machines have been removed from the hardware catalogue (along with the support from the maintenance catalogue) is purely coincidental...As is the fact that the serial number on the new kit implies that it was actually manufactured SIX months ago. No, no, it wasn’t a product-dumping exercise at all. Just coincidence.

Oh, and a complete change of architecture...

So we see the new model, with a new bus (which means that stockpile of peripheral cards you bought are about as in demand as XT thin-wire cards), 20 per cent increase in processor speed, 80 per cent increase in cost, 200 per cent increase in size and ugliness of logo, and immediately the braindead among the audience start drooling.

”As you’ll see,” our presenter says with a coat-hanger grin, ”the SpecWPIOP Int figures for our machine are much higher than for any other manufacturer’s machine of comparable price...”

”Ah,” I interject, suppressing with great effort my sense of annoyance at their transparency, ”could that be because you just made up the SpecWPIOP Int standard to take advantage of your new kit’s design?”

”Certainly not,” our presenter hotly denies, ”the SpecWPIOP Int is an open industry standard!”

”And who,” I ask, knowing full well the answer, ”developed and opened this standard?”

”Well I have to admit, somewhat proudly, that our company has excelled in developing a standard which truly reflects the loads on an active system of varying users more accurately than something which performs simple integer test cases.”

"In other words, you made it up?"

"No No! Bookmarking figures have, for some time, not taken into account the true loads on a system which may have users of varying types, from development, to database, to data entry. The SpecWPIOP takes into account all these things to produce a figure that is fully representative of the 'whole-system', or 'holistic-interoperative' approach, as we like to call it."

I look around me and notice that the guy's got about 60 per cent of the customers sold, with their proverbial pants already at half mast.

"So SpecWPIOP, what does that stand for?" I ask.

"Specifications When Pmmmmmdmd Idndn Ouidud Pddnls," he mumbles. "Pardon?"

"Specifications When Plugged Into Our Peripherals," he murmurs slyly.

"Oh! So what you're saying is that when you plug one of your SCSI disks, say, into another manufacturer's hardware, the processor is so busy dealing with the errors generated by your non-standard interface that it works much slower."

"That's not it at all," he gasps, incredulous. "Why, just looking at the system in action would convince anyone otherwise!!!"

He proceeds to power the thing up and it whirrs into life with an impressive start-up sound.

Worth at least half of the purchase price alone, when combined with the new full-colour start-up graphic!!!

"And if I could get a volunteer from the aud..."

I almost pop a hamstring in my hurry to be first out the gate and up to the podium. I can tell that I wasn't the volunteer that he was looking for - probably having primed some Infomercial dropout with questions to ask and 'Gosh, look at that!' responses to give.

"Ah," he murmurs, not wishing to let me near his kit, but not really having much choice in the matter. "How about you start up the Graphical User Interface by clicking on the little screen icon then?"

I do so and am actually very impressed with the speed of the start-up. As is the rest of the flock, who crowd in closer to get a good look...

Obscuring my hand briefly... quicker than you can say: "What is that, aluminium foil cuttings? Chocolate wrapper bits? Iron filings?" I've surreptitiously flicked a small handful of aluminium foil underneath the machine...into the thirsty holes of the cooling-inlet.

The subsequent short-circuiting, smoke and minor explosion rounded off the entertainment for the afternoon - ruining the new business prospects for the manufacturer and sending the presenter home with a 'shocking' new hairstyle - after he regained consciousness. Suffice to say that the rest is history - the model isn't being pulled from the market per se - another demonstration is being organised in a month from now when they iron out the "power supply problems", but at least it's restored, temporarily at least, the resale price of my peripherals to give me a chance to offload them on some poor, unsuspecting alternate customer of our vendor.

Ah well, you know what they say - all's fair in love and hardware acquisition...

5.39 You won't believe what's been going on the Boss's credit card...and it's not just the BOFH who thinks that'll do nicely - he's got a new flexible friend...

I'm scanning through the swathes of my early morning e-mail, culling out all the spam messages about credit cards, free home loans, career opportunities and new, improved sex sites.

Propagating our Web cache with smut apparently destined for the Boss is a sure-fire way to get immunity from a bollocking if you're caught browsing at it yourself during work time, and it solves the hassle of having to wait for the stuff to load over the smut site's crappy Ethernet connection.

True, loading the Boss's corporate credit card details into the robot was a little on the nose, but it all boils down to what you're willing to pay for a good cache service.

And the Boss sure is paying - I've had to have his credit card limit extended twice this month just to keep up with the volume of incoming material the patient and inquisitive robot has found.

If he didn't want to buy anything with his credit card, he wouldn't have got one in the first place. Nor would he have left it carelessly lying around in a sealed envelope, locked in his briefcase, secured inside that filing cabinet drawer marked 'IT94 conference proceedings', in the cleaners' cupboard at the far end of the building. He was just asking for it to be used.

However, I'm pleased to say that the cache is responding well to the challenge now that I've whacked those two new nine gig drives into the server. In other words, it's a happy ending - or beginning...

"I've got a problem with these machine usage stats," the Boss blurts, entering the office in such a hurry I have to terminate my 'cache-occupancy hit stats survey' by switching my monitor off.

"What problem is that?" I ask.

"Well, according to this, my machine does a hell of a lot of traffic in off-peak hours."

"Really?" I respond, upset that my little smut-acquiring goldmine looks like meeting its end.

"Oh that'll just be DHCP mapping playing up again," the PFY jumps in. "It's just because our DNS isn't dynamic, so it's charged against your machine, but really is some other machine using the IP address you were using when the IP usage stats program was run!"

"Duh - really?" the Boss responds, so far out of his technical depth he's looking for a life raft and water wings.

"Yeah, it's nothing to worry about."

"Oh," the Boss says, happy in the knowledge that his desktop is faithful to him only. "So who is generating the IP traffic then?"

"Ah...that'll probably be our site's Web server," I jump in.

¡P¿ "But I thought you told me last week that servers weren't going to use DHCP?" the Boss quips, annoying me with an unexpected attack of accurate recall.

"No, no, I said that surfers don't use DHCP - because...ah...most of them don't even have PCs...and those who do don't take them to the beach anyway..."

"What have surfers got to do with our company?" the Boss blurts, even more confused than normally...

"Nothing that I know of," I respond.

"So why did you tell me about it?"

"Just passing the time of day..."

Our conversation is interrupted by the arrival of a beancounter wearing a worried expression, which can only mean that the credit card eagle has landed. Crash landed by the sour look on his face.

"It's about your company credit card," he mumbles anxiously.

"What about it?"

"It's 23,000 in the red!"

I'm a bit shocked at this figure, as I only cranked the card limit up to 10k, but put it down to a credit card company keen to generate revenue...

"That's preposterous," the Boss blurts.

"It's all here in black and white - but mostly red," the beancounter says, handing over some papers.

"What's this www.spank-spank.org...and too-tight-lederhosen.com? And who the hell is the Progressive Press in Amsterdam?"

A warning bell rings in my head as I don't recall any Web-site by that name. I grab the papers from the beancounter and find that Web traffic accounts for only about 10 per cent of the charges therein, the rest appearing to be for merchandise shipped into the UK...

"I have no idea," the beancounter responds. "But it's all above board on your card..."

"It can't be, my card's locked away safely, in a drawer in a cabling cupboard."

"A cleaning cupboard, I think you'll find," I mention, cheerfully.

"And in a filing cabinet," the PFY adds.

"Sealed in an envelope, in a briefcase," the beancounter finishes smugly, much to the surprise of the PFY and I.

So it seems there's a new player in the game - a beancounter gone bad. Excellent.

The Boss bumbles some crap about us not getting away with it, and rushes off to get his card cancelled.

"The horse has bolted on that one," the beancounter chirps happily. "Besides, I used his old card as leverage for a new one with a different bank."

"And...?" I ask, preparing for war.

"I sent the Boss's details in e-mail. Not encrypted with his public key of course, yours in fact - what an oversight!"

”So what you’re saying is the Boss has an e-mail message he can’t read...”

”That anyone with your private key intercepting that e-mail could...”

It’s a wet and windy afternoon when the crack security force of the building break into the Boss’s office and drag him up to the board for a good spanking. Apparently his claims of innocence fell upon deaf ears when enquiries revealed that the shipping address for the ‘progressive’ media was the Boss’s summer house...

One down, too many more to go.

But at least we have an ally in the enemy camp...

5.40 The eye on the wall has seen all, so it’s time for desperate measures to cover up the half measures of sherry left in the boardroom decanters...

Sooner or later, it was bound to happen. We know it, we prepare for it, but it still comes as a proverbial kick in the goolies.

Security wants its systems back. Well, actually not Security at all - we have a great working relationship - but its new manager - an ex-military type who takes the job far too seriously. He (outrageously) believes CCTV security systems should be Security’s responsibility, and that Network and Systems Operations types shouldn’t have unrestricted swipe card access to the building ”to enable rapid support”.

In other words, he’s trying to make us join the great unwashed.

Our new boss is no bloody help. With the spine of a jellyfish, he backed down in record time.

I don’t like it.

The PFY doesn’t like it.

Something’s got to give.

And give it does. The final straw comes when the new boss pops into the office and asks what we were doing in the boardroom last night at 6.35pm.

Obviously the answer ”Drinking ourselves senseless with a couple of members of the secretarial pool” - is out of the question.

So it looks like I’m going to have to ad-lib. And we’re not talking sound cards here.

”Ahh...checking the connectivity of the individual ISDN desktop ports,” I blurt quickly.

”Really? It doesn’t look like that!” he cries, brandishing a frame-grabbed image from CCTV showing the PFY topping up a half-full sherry decanter with a reconstituted version of the original.

”That’s disgusting!” I cry heatedly.

”Yes it is,” the boss concurs, saddling up his high horse for the 11.30 hurdles. ”As is this,” he continues, flashing

another image - of me this time - making up the PFY's shortfall (he's just young).

"And what do you have to say about that?" he challenges.

"Well, obviously I need to reduce my vitamin B intake," I cry.

"What?"

"I'm only joking. It's obviously a fake."

"Well, if it's a fake," he responds smugly, holding up a strangely familiar vessel, "you won't mind taking a quick swig of this."

"Not at all," I respond, pouring myself a healthy dram, or 57, and downing it in record time. "As I said, it's a fake - a plan by security to discredit us with misinformation.

"Obviously a video edit. Look at the pixellation around the thing. It's been digitised and re-enhanced."

"I...uh..." the boss mumbles, inquisition in ashes.

After he's slouched out in despair (not having the bottle, or even a decanter) to face up to the head of Security, the PFY comes over.

"Can't believe you bloody drank that," he gasps disgustedly.

"Ah, don't be silly - I put the full one at the back and swapped the seal with that one. The board's stupid, but not stupid enough to mistake that for sherry. Not until they've had a couple of priming decanters anyway."

A swivel from the camera behind the computer room viewing window alerts me to a potential problem.

"Reckon he can read lips?" I ask the PFY from behind my coffee cup.

"It's possible," the PFY comments, apparently yawning.

"Right. Emergency action is called for!"

The PFY and I race up the staircase to the boardroom to dispose of the evidence. But we are too late. The head of Security is already in the room and has hurled glassware everywhere in his haste to find the decanter at the back.

With any luck...but no - the sole surviving decanter is much, much clearer than the one I drank from.

"We're stuffed," the PFY whispers.

"Not quite," I blurt, remembering the access card system's configuration parameters. I swipe my card through the reader, then punch in an incorrect PIN number. And again. And again.

The fourth attempt triggers an alarm, and the Security boss rushes over to the door to swipe the door release from his side...but too late. The ten-minute lockout has occurred.

Quick as a flash the PFY pulls the phone and network connections from the room, then manually locks the access corridor to the boardroom.

"Hang on, he'll break the emergency release glass," the PFY cries.

"He would. If I hadn't replaced it with the bulletproof stuff years ago."

We pull a couple of chairs up and wait for the inevitable, swiping the door invalidly every nine minutes or so to keep the lockout in force.

To his credit, the head of Security held out well - the military influence no doubt. It takes nearly ten hours for thirst to set in. And a full two more before he unstoppers the bottle.

"I'd have tipped it on the ground," the PFY says quietly, at the pub a day later. "That would have solved it."

"Yeah, there's no understanding the military mind," I sigh, as I contemplate the names he's going to be called by his troops, who were too busy making video dubs of the proceedings to come to his aid - even if they'd wanted to.

Different horses for different courses...

5.41 A fellow bastard in Wales who doesn't have cable TV turns out to be the ideal excuse for procuring some extra bandwidth

I'm tunnelling a few episodes of an extra-terrestrial TV drama series down the Internet because a good-bastard acquaintance of mine in Wales (OK, a poor-bastard acquaintance as well) hasn't seen them all and wants to get up to speed before he rents the movie.

As a result of the (albeit compressed) video and audio stream, our connection to the rest of the world isn't performing up to what we laughingly refer to as scratch.

And there's NO POINT in getting into a discussion with the new boss about bandwidth requirements, as he's been trawling through the notes of his various predecessors (including the ones in crayon from the loony academy saying "THEY'RE OUT TO GET ME!") and has already informed me that there IS no upgrade path...

However, this doesn't solve the perceivable lack of response of transmission, but with any luck it'll pick up once I patch the video onto a live redundant bearer that our network carrier company ran to our building but neglected to configure as 'down'.

I mean, that's just GAGGING for it, as all of their competitors wouldn't have left a spare NTU in the building in the first place.

Of course, I justify the temporary unofficial upgrade by telling myself how much the carrier company is screwing us for. Who says I'm not the sentimental type?

I liven up the link and run a test. Sure enough, it's even on an active router port! I route the video through it, thanking the gods for a provider with more ports and money than sense...

It's just a matter of time of course, so I make sure that external caller-ID and subscriber look-up are configured into the phone. Sure enough, in a couple of hours, I get a call from our network carrier's customer rep.

"Hello, Belgian Steak and Waffle House...do you need a reservation?" I say carefully, in an accent somewhere between eastern Europe and East London.

"Sorry, wrong number," the caller mutters, then rings off. Two seconds later, he's back. "Belgian Steak and Waffle House...do you need a reservation?"

Now he's confused. He verifies the number he has in front of him against mine, then asks if we have computers on the premises.

"I theenk you mean the peepill upstairs," I say. "Day haf many computers."

He verifies that the company name is right, then asks how I'm on their phone number.

"Oh, that ees a long story," I say. "There was a beeg accident into the building, and now all the phones, they don't go so good seence dee man came to feex it..."

Realising that my accent is rapidly heading towards Mexican, I make my break. "So sorry, I haf some customer - can you call back afder lonch?"

So now I'm on limited time. I know that they're not going to disconnect me in case the problem's a result of work that THEY have done - or worse still, the connection is supposed to be in place but no one's told them about it - but I also know they're not going to let me have free bandwidth for long.

A sneaky plan is called for.

I call our customer rep (after disabling caller-ID look-up) and ask him what the hell is going on with our link speed.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Something's using all the inbound traffic!" I blurt. "Just after one of your guys came and fixed the link for us and screwed up our phones at the same time."

"But we don't supply your phones!" he blurts.

"I know you don't!" I cry, "but now they're all mixed up with the other companies in the building and no one's able to do anything!"

"But we never had a service call for you!" he wails. "Have you got a job reference?"

I switch my phone line to modem and flick it into manual connect so he gets an earful of garbage, then switch it back and forth so it sounds like a dalek reaching puberty.

"You haven't got a service call?" I ask.

"No," he blurts, while I check the CCTV to see if the boss's company car is still in the basement.

"But it was just recen..." I blurt, then switch in the modem for the rest of the call and slip off to the basement.

A quick spray of matt-black on the security camera lens later, I've got the boss's bonnet open and a pair of vice grips on his wide-open accelerator cable. Now all that remains is to slip the vehicle into reverse and disconnect the start-in-park-only switch.

Barely half an hour later, the boss's car rips into the telecomms room at about 30mph, more than sufficient to terminate all network and phone connections.

I rip down to the basement and help the boss from the car to a point where he won't see me retrieving Systems and Networks tools from the vehicle.

While he's in shock I add a couple of finishing touches to the NTUs with one of the few remaining fire axes the US company owners supplied as part of their corporate safety plan.

"It just ran away on me!" the boss cries. "Well, the whole building's out!" I say.

"Can't you get it live again?"

"Yeah, but it'll take all night at least and we'll have to enable the redundant link just to get the throughput. Besides which, both NTUs are destroyed, and they only make faster models now and..."

A day later, I'm watching the video of the aforementioned TV series as it comes to me from Wales. Link speed perfect.

"How long will we need that redundant link?" asks the boss.

"Phew," I mumble, "I don't know - how long is the complete Star Trek series?"

"Why?"

"No reason."

5.42 When the BOFH signs up for company therapy sessions, he wants to freely associate about problems. But whose? Blackmail's in the air..

I get in one morning and find posters around the coffee machine to the effect that the US owners of the company, under the expanding umbrella of their Health and Welfare scheme 'for all workers' (which eliminates half the staff for a start), are offering free therapy sessions to anyone who feels they need them.

"It's crazy!" I blurt to the PFY, as soon as he rolls in, holding one of the aforementioned posters.

"Why?" he asks, with the air of someone seriously contemplating taking up the offer.

"Oh, puhleeze. Who would turn down the opportunity of spending an hour of paid time whining to someone about how their mother didn't love them and their deep-seated problems concerning trains and tunnels?"

"Sorry?" the PFY asks, obviously a little short on his Freud appreciation.

"Look, half the staff already whine to each other about how hard they have it. This just legitimises the whole process!"

"You really have a problem with this don't you?" the PFY quips. "Perhaps you should seek some help with your feelings of..."

(One very long high-pitched scream later): "So do you get what I'm trying to impart?" I ask, opening the drawer that contains the PFY's testicles.

"Yes, yes," the PFY gasps, on his way to the ground. "But..."

"But?" I cry, opening the drawer for round two.

"But don't you think that management knows the staff spend lots of time whingeing..."

"And are trying to reduce it by making the whole process 'street-legal' so to speak?" I finish.

"Yeah. If they get real help, instead of a chance to grumble..."

"...they might become more productive?"

"Yes!"

"I see your point, but I don't think that management knows how much the staff like to complain. Still, this warrants keeping an eye on..."

And so it was that, two days later, I was getting first-hand experience of the therapy 'thang'.

"...and so what we use is a therapy called 'RET' - Rational Emotive Therapy, where we ask you to face your problems as problems that you, and you alone, have to deal with, challenging their reason for being there in the first place."

"Ah yes," I interrupt, to avoid lapsing into a boredom coma. "I've done a lot of therapy in the past, mainly 'TPC', but it doesn't seem to work - my problems are back by the next therapy session."

"TPC? I'm not familiar with that."

"TPC? Ten Pints and a Curry. Every Friday, down at the local boozier and then down the local Ruby."

"Yes, very droll," he comments, lounging back in his comfy chair. "Now perhaps we can talk about what brings you here?"

"Of course! I'm actually here to find out all the dirt you've amassed on our staff!"

"I'm sorry?"

"You know, the dirt - who's a bedwetter, who has a predilection for the company of furry rodents, that sort of thing."

"All the information I gather is confiden..."

"Like the boss being impotent?" I ask.

"How did you...?"

"All in your notes," I murmur.

"I don't keep them on computer!"

"But you do keep them on a pad in full view of the elevator CCTV cameras..."

"But they're in modified shorthand!"

"That abbreviated Pitmans?! It took eight minutes of processor time to decode on a machine with a technical vocab, phrase analysis and variance..."

"But..."

"Face it - I'm going to say you told me anyway, so why not cut out the middleman?"

"I can't. I swore an oath."

"The one about not dobbing in nutters?"

"We don't use terms like 'nutter'."

"Or like 'professional misconduct'?"

"What do you really want?"

"Dirt!"

"Oh, all right!" he shouts angrily.

"Your boss has an irrational fear of power staplers."

"That's not irrational. Almost everyone I know does! The PFY has nightmares about them. And drawers now, too, I shouldn't wonder..."

"And one of your telephonists feels she may be a nymphomaniac."

"Which one!?" blurts the PFY, bursting in from behind the door.

Honestly, that boy should eat less red meat...

"Small potatoes," I complain. "I'm after the real stuff no-one should know about..."

"There isn't any!"

"Breach of professional confidentiality means personal damages proceedings now, doesn't it?" I ask the PFY in an off-hand manner.

"Oh yes," he chirps, grinning evilly.

"All right," my personal therapist moans, throwing in the towel...

I really did feel better at the end of the session. So good, in fact, that I booked myself in every week...

"...for about two weeks, until word gets out that secrets aren't so secret," I mention to the PFY, as I start my TPC therapy early Friday afternoon.

"That won't be for a while will it?" the PFY queries.

"I dunno, ask me after six pints when the 'workers' arrive. I feel a 'cathartic' experience coming on in my therapy..."

"Sounds nasty..."

"Bound to be. Your turn to pay for therapy I believe?" I mumble, handing over my medicinal vessel.

That's the thing with therapy - you've got to want to get better.

5.43 When you need a few spares, why not depth-charge your boss' Minesweeper game and use the replacement parts to leave him shell-shocked

The boss is screwed. After I'd installed the software on his brand spanking new laptop, I slapped a "Warranty void if seal broken" sticker across the front of it.

The beads of sweat on his brow and twitching fingers - as he contemplates getting his hands on the thing - speak volumes about his state of mind. He's obviously in Minesweeper withdrawal - even though I replaced the version on his old laptop with one that always explodes a bomb in the first move.

I leave him to his personal trauma.

Sure enough, he's cracked under the pressure, and enters my office 15 minutes later.

"That bloody laptop doesn't work!" he bellows.

It's not surprising considering the PFY and I gutted all but the keyboard, power supply and screen to provide the heart and soul for our latest and greatest project, the IT cleaning droid - which is infinitely more intelligent than the floor polishing droids they release into the corridors at night. I wrote the code myself, even the image recognition and seek-and-destroy - I mean seek-and-clean - code. It's a work of art.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Well, I opened it up an..."

"You opened it up?!"

"Yes."

"And voided the warranty?!"

"I couldn't use it 'til I'd opened it up, could I? The keyboard's inside when it's closed."

"Oh, I see what you mean. I thought you'd broken one of those warranty void seals!" I cry, faking the kind of relief some people pay large sums of money for.

"Ah, well, there was one seal I had to break, but that was the one over the 'open' latch."

"You mean you didn't get an engineer to install it?!" I gasp.

"You installed it!"

"No, I only put the software on it via Target-Mode SCSI upload. You need an engineer to provide the inherent firmware personality modes." (Dummy mode on.)

"But it's a bloody laptop, not a mainframe," he snuffles.

"Yes, but the engineer has to set the localisation on the machine for you, and personalise the unit, passwords and stuff."

"I see. Well, you'd best do it."

"You're joking aren't you? They're not going to touch it with a broken warranty void sticker."

"Why not?"

"Because you could have set the localisation to Peru, or something. That'll all have been stored in permanent non-volatile, doubly redundant, device-specific, static RAM." (Dummy mode cranked up.)

"What does that mean?"

"It means all the components have stored the fact that your machine is installed in Peru, Antarctica, or wherever it configured itself for. If that location conflicts with what the GPS tracker says..."

"My laptop's got a GPS inside it!" he cries excitedly.

"Yes, but if the hardware conflicts with what it says, well, it may as well be a machine with no motherboard, memory, floppy or CD-ROM - it won't ever go."

True, Ray Charles could have seen that coming, but who gives a toss - it worked.

"W...w...what should I do?" he burbles, contemplating the full horror of a whole day without his favourite game.

"Well, we could buy in the parts and replace them, and I could perform the engineer install. But it'd never be under warranty."

Quicker than you can whisper "executive decision" down a scrambled phone line, the boss has agreed to purchase the aforementioned items.

I, of course, slap all the old stuff back into the boss's machine - being sure to leave a couple of scratches on the casing and have a couple of screws left over so that it looks like a real engineer worked on it - then kick it into life (literally) and hand it back to the boss.

So everyone's happy. The boss has his new laptop, and the droid has brand spanking new hardware. I fire up the droid and get the PFY on the remote console to give my code a good, hard seeing-to. I've offered him a pint for every error he can detect.

"It won't go near walls," the PFY murmurs, without looking up from the console.

Dedication is his middle name. At AA meetings, anyway.

"No, it has an object back-up of a foot so people don't walk into it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it backs up a foot from any object."

"I see," he says, "and what about moving objects?"

"It keeps a foot away from them," I respond, anticipating his plan. "So you're not going to run it into a wall at top speed, nor is it going to let you run up to it and 'physically reboot' it the old-fashioned way."

"The thought never entered my head," the PFY replies, offended. "I was just wondering what it would do in this situation," he says, pointing at the video monitor showing the boss entering the lift with his new laptop.

"So you've not heard of a lag to prevent hysteresis?" the PFY burbles smugly (and drunkenly) at the pub later that evening.

"Uh-huh," I mumble, "where are we up to now?"

"Ah, I think we're up to where the droid backed up from the lift wall and into the boss, then backed up from the boss, over his laptop and into the lift wall. For the...11th time."

Ah...my job beats playing Minesweeper anyway.

5.44 After complaints about his 'comforting bass line', the bastard makes sure the boss gets the message...very loud and clear

The boss comes in with a pasty look on his face which can only mean one thing - he's got to do something he doesn't want to.

"Er, I've had a complaint about you," he mumbles unhappily.

"Really?" I respond politely, while reaching under the table for the 2-wood golf club which I keep for special occasions.

"Yes, yes, but I'm not sure it's valid," he blurts, trying to hide himself deep in the rough.

"Really?" I ask, foregoing the 2-wood for a 6-iron, considering the lie of the conversation.

"Errm, no. You see, he's complained about your music."

"What music?" the PFY asks. "That music," he replies, indicating the surrounding air.

"That music?" I ask, waving a hand around in a similar manner while reconsidering my options.

"Yes, he's complaining that it's too loud."

"Too loud?" the PFY counters disgustedly. "But we can hardly hear it."

"I use it for relaxation," I murmur. "It keeps me calm in the face of adversity."

Now that the implied threat is on the table, there's nothing left for the boss to do but back down. Or risk life and limb in the pursuit of an unattainable goal.

"I know that you can hardly hear it, but the same doesn't go for the people downstairs. Anyway, I can't believe that it's relaxing."

So it's life and limb on the line then.

"Offspring is a very relaxing band," I say. "Yeah, it's the comforting bass line," the PFY chirps. "Besides," I add, "it's at a low level."

"NOT IN THE BLOODY COMPUTER ROOM IT ISN'T!" the boss shouts, losing patience.

"Well, no, but if we turned it down we wouldn't be able to hear it through the soundproof wall." "The people on the floor below bloody well can, though! Why don't you put your stereo in here?"

"We tried that, but it kept popping the circuit breaker when we turned the volume past 3."

"THEN GET A NORMAL STEREO!"

"It IS a normal stereo," I gasp.

"NORMAL?"

"Yes, Notting Hill Carnival normal."

"Well it's not good enough.

I want it TURNED DOWN!"

This just won't do. The PFY and I are relying on the 'comforting bass line' to work its magic on a rack of disks that should have been retired, but for the stupidity of management who want both zero downtime and reliable service.

So it's back to the drawing board again. I slap a set of airport-issue ear protectors on, having learnt from the PFY's mistakes (the poor bastard set off the water leak detector circuits when he wet his pants after pressing the 'play' button with the volume set at 6).

Entering the computer room, I notice the error of his ways - he'd left the volume at 6 when he stepped in his own by-products AND he hadn't switched the bass expand circuits on.

I note that the amp's power supply is 'running a little hot', as we in the trade say. Not good. I break off the volume knob (now pointing at the infamous '11' setting, then slip back into the control room, just in time to see a wild-eyed boss burst through the door.

"I TOLD YOU TO TURN IT DOWN, NOT UP!"

"I tried to turn it down," I blurt, "but the knob broke off!"

"Why didn't you turn it off then?!"

"Because the amp was so warm I thought it might trigger the heat sensors and release the halon."

So, of course, he is screwed. He KNOWS this is a 'tragic workplace accident' with his name scribbled all over it, and he's not going to bite.

"Well can't you switch the power off from the breakers outside?" he asks.

What a wimp. "We can try!" I cry, rushing to the breaker cupboard. "All the ceiling outlets in the front are on red phase, so it's got to be one of these."

30 seconds later..."Red?"

I thought they were blue," the PFY chips in.

A further 30 seconds later..."So, it's yellow then," the boss cries, in the face of a cacophony of outage alarms.

"Worth a crack!" I cry, flipping a switch.

"No, that's the old disk rack," the PFY cries from the observation window.

CLACK! "Disk rack again!"

"My mistake!" I blurt, innocently, then flip the next switch.

"Right, let's see what the damage is," the boss cries, pushing past me to the computer room.

"I wouldn't..." I cry, but too late.

"You see the problem with kit like that," I explain to the PFY at the window, "is that turning off the power also shuts off the cooling fan, whereas switching it off at its power switch will leave the fan on until the unit has finished cooling."

"So the kit gets hotter?"

"Let's see what the judges have to say," I respond, nodding at one of the heat sensors.

A couple of short, and fairly muffled 'whoop-whoops' later...

"Is the halon hold-off button still broken?" the PFY asks.

"Well, the judges' decision on that one is...final, by the looks of things. Still time for a quick wave though," I cry.

Of course, we let him out... eventually. After all, he's only new.

5.45 Someone has lifted some kit from under the BOFH's nose. Is it the boss? Is it the beancounters? No. There's a new Bastard in town.

I was mystified. The boss was giving me grief for missing kit, which was nothing unusual but this time I hadn't prepared my story. The simple reason was that it wasn't me who'd taken it. And this time it was a serious amount of kit that had gone.

Naturally, it's taken as read that a certain amount of spillage finds its way to BOFH Enterprises but very little actually disappears - the value tends to appear as miscellaneous lines in a beancounter's spreadsheet and besides, not much of this Unattributed Cost (as I believe the technical term is) finds its way into my pocket - mainly because it generally goes towards paying for a small holiday in Acapulco or somewhere equally humble.

"It's strange," I say to the PFY after we'd escaped from the boss's sanctum, our ears still ringing from the force of his invective. "It's strange that whoever is doing this has evaded all our carefully prepared traps (the electrified door handle and the strategically placed axe) and has managed to liberate some of our shiny new stock. He wasn't even put off by its careful labelling as 'defective'."

There were three possibilities: we'd had a break-in by a thief who knew exactly what he was looking for; the boss had woken up to the possibility that there was serious remuneration in 'defective' stock; or there was another Bastard somewhere on the premises.

I discounted the first possibility. Not only had none of our alarms gone off but an outside tea-leaf would surely have taken the colour TV (sorry, the High-Definition Multimedia Receiving Apparatus) that the PFY and I use during downtime or when the Test Match is on (which seem to coincide with remarkable regularity).

"Could it be the boss?" asks the PFY. "Do you think that the bollocking he's just given us was all for show?"

"Impossible. The boss is not just dim, he's 20 watt. I understand that he needs an A-Z to find his way home at night."

"And even then he gets lost," says the PFY, alluding to the night that the boss foolishly came for a drink with the boys, only to discover that extra-strength Polish white spirit is undetectable in strong lager (and after three of them so is shoe polish). "Still, it was only a 30 taxi ride from the wilds of east London."

That, incredible as it seemed, left only the possibility of one of my fellow workers, a breed for whom technical sophistication means changing the text colour in Office.

But which one? It was obviously no one in marketing - they scarcely had the intelligence to turn a door handle the right way. It was obviously not anyone in sales as they'd hardly be elsewhere while the pubs were open and not sober enough after they'd closed. The beancounters were a strong possibility - those Unattributed Costs were really getting under their skin - but they'd have chosen a more subtle revenge. It couldn't have been anyone from admin and building services...

Something clicked. There was a new guy there who a few weeks before had gone round asking questions, "just to test the security of the building". Naturally I hadn't given him the right answers but how could I have been so stupid...

Now I come to think about it, this guy seemed to be a cut above the rest but then so would an orang-utan. The only question was how to get the kit back, or, failing that, a contribution to the Bastard Holiday Fund.

Seeking inspiration, I idly flicked through the outgoing post log. One foreign-bound item caught my eye and I smiled.

The next day, I went down to building services and happened to overhear Kevin talking. By chance, he was dropping some big words like 'screen' and 'keyboard' so I knew we had our man. It was time for a phone call.

Back at mission control, I flicked on the intercom and heard Kevin's voice come over loud and clear, as a deep foreign voice said: "Mr Kevin?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Just call me Stefan. It's about this consignment of tights that you delivered to us."

"That's right, you got 'em?"

"We have, that's just the point. I was given to understand that...er, certain other goods were being delivered."

"But...but..."

"I hope you realise that the last person who double-crossed us is now part of a motorway infrastructure."

"But...but..."

"I'm sure you want to avoid any misunderstandings. So, if you return the sum we gave you plus, say, 500 for incidental expenses, we can avoid any unfortunate repercussions. Shall we say that you deposit the money behind the dustbin shed by 12pm today?"

There was a strangled "yes".

I switched the intercom off. "Your cousin's very good isn't he? I said to the PFY. "I'm sure he'll go a long way in drama college."

"Come on," he replied. "There's time for a quick game of Doom before we collect our winnings, er... Unattributed Costs."

It takes a bastard to catch a bastard.

5.46 When the BOFH bugged the boss's office he wasn't to know the kit he'd installed would double up as a vehicle to crack the head beancounter's nut

The PFY and I are in the office teasing users by toggling their switch ports whenever their pop-client opens a connection to the mail server when an urgent alarm starts ringing on the network monitor.

"BSD?" the PFY murmurs, "What the hell does BSD stand for?" Double-clicking on the icon concerned, he continues: "It's in the boss's office."

Sensing my suppressed panic, he returns to his original tack. "So what the hell's a BSD?"

"It's a new tailor-made piece of kit I conceived and installed," I reply.

"It's a network device, then?"

"Yes, in that it delivers an SNMP trap in response to certain predetermined criteria occurring."

"Criteria no doubt linked with its cryptic acronym?"

"Precisely."

"An acronym that stands for?" the PFY sighs, losing patience.

"Bullshit detection."

"Bullshit detection?"

"Yeah, bullshit detection. I've decided that I can't be arsed spending a couple of hours a day sifting through the Boss's office conversation tapes just to see if he's planning something, so I've developed a piece of hardware and software to do it for me."

"Which is?" the PFY asks, his curiosity peaking.

"Ah, a bit of voice recognition software that parses conversations for keywords used in close proximity to each other."

"Keywords, like what?"

"Purchase, 'buy' or 'invest in' - in conjunction with 'new technology', 'updated software' etc., plus lots of other little bits and pieces that can only mean trouble."

"You mean words like 'maintenance budget'?"

"The very same. There's no legitimate reason why the boss should be talking about that unless he's going to increase it, and that's unlikely to happen following my efforts yesterday to migrate those beancounters from that archaic tower subsystem they use for hot back-ups."

"Your efforts to migrate users ... Oh, you mean when you set the machine on fire and pushed it out of the third-floor window?"

"I most certainly did not set the machine on fire! That was spontaneous hardware combustion - just like the human kind the tabloids talk about. Besides, throwing it out the window was the safest thing to do given that there was no fire extinguisher at hand."

"There wasn't one three floors below either, was there?" the PFY asks snidely.

"I don't suppose there was, but I can't see what that..."

"When the chunky, burning machine plunged through the open sun-roof of the head beancounter's vehicle, which just happened to be parked there - setting it on fire."

"Coincidence, pure and simple."

"Coincidence?"

"Yes, and I resent ... actually, is there a point to all this?"

"No, no," the PFY counters innocently. "Just asking. So, this bullshit detection, what's it running on? Not a piece of kit that the boss is going to discover - or discover missing from where it should be?"

"Well, that's the beauty of it. Because he's got so many machines in his office, he had a ventilation fan installed, which just so happens to be the cooling that other tower machine users have already been migrated from."

"Not that monstrous chunk of iron from the sixth floor that you said was using parts from Chernobyl and expelling dangerous levels of radioactive waste?!"

"The very same."

"I never thought they'd buy that."

"Well, not at first," I sigh, "But once I'd taken that black marker to the chest X-rays in the med centre they couldn't wait to get rid of it"

"True," the PFY grudgingly admits. "So, how'd you get it into the ceiling?"

"Well, Janitor George gave me a hand lifting it into the roof as he wanted the real fan for his bathroom at home."

"A fair exchange," the PFY says. "So, what's the warning mean?"

"Well, it's a simple traffic threshold MIB: the more bullshit in the office, the more network traffic the machine reports. That way, no-one will give it a second thought."

"So what's it up to? What's the machine's owner name field say?"

"100 per cent, and Dave C.

"So, that means Dave C is in the boss's office talking up a storm about hardware that we should be buying, money that he should be spending etc.."

"He's a borderline DIY geek, isn't he?" the PFY asks warily.

"Correct. Rumour has it he installed his own keyboard once, but you know how users talk."

"But is it bad?"

"Oh, yes," I respond, leaning past him to point at the display. "See the 30-second average level? That's really the boss's level of disagreement."

"But it's at zero!"

"Meaning?"

"He's going to let Dave spend our budget."

We both break for the door at the same time to steer the boss away from the foolish.

But before we can get into place the God of Computing acts.

Later, the PFY and I piece together what had happened.

"So, apparently, Dave tried to fix the noisy aircon fan by prodding the roofing tile with the boss's umbrella, upsetting the BSD machine's delicate balance on the rafter and causing it to plummet through the roof and strike the DIY cowboy," the PFY finishes.

Now that's justice for you.

Web-only Episode: Christmas Eve, 1998; He was dead all right.

"You've gone too far this time" said the PFY breathlessly.

"Well, I guess I just under-estimated the amount of power going through the doorknob."

It was Christmas Eve and the seasonal prank had just gone slightly wrong. Honestly, Old Ebenezer Bastard had tried the old "electrified door handle for the computer room" trick a dozen times before and it had all been good seasonal fun. Still, this wasn't the first manager to die on him and it was sure not to be the last.

Ebenezer must have stayed a bit longer than usual in the pub that evening - this kind of event does tend to shock you a bit and he needed a few to steady the nerves. Of course, the fact that the young beancounter felt 'obliged' to buy him drinks all evening helped - and all because Ebenezer had happened to mention something about video footage from the office party. So corny, but so effective.

Anyway, the drink must have been sitting heavily on his stomach when he got back to his flat, as he could have sworn that the door knocker changed shape to look like the face of his old boss (before the scorch marks disfigured it, that is).

Putting the effects down to the ten extra pints of Brainfrazzle he'd had, he ignored the door knocker and went up the stairs. But there was a restlessness about him that night. In truth, it had been a long time since he'd enjoyed Christmas. He hated all the false bonhomie and the pleasant chit-chat from people with whom he hadn't anything in common; he hated the way that people spent vast sums on their kids when that money could have been quite easily diverted into the Bastard Holiday Fund. What was worse, some of his work colleagues expected him to buy drinks for them.

Even young Cratchit, his PFY, had been affected and was spending his days wistfully dreaming about Denise from the pool and a few quick snogs under the mistletoe. The young fool even wanted him to join him for a few drinks on Christmas Day. What did he have to celebrate, on his salary.

"Bah, humbug." Ebenezer said loudly to himself, as he heated up the instant dinner that would represent his one solid meal that day.

As he went to bed in that sparsely furnished, unheated room that he called home he saw something in the corner: this time there was no mistaking it. It was definitely the shape of his erstwhile Boss but there was a horrible, clanking noise that seemed to fill the room and make Ebenezer shrink with terror.

"Ebenezer Bastard" came the voice, and though it was recognisably his boss's there was a touch of the underworld about it.

"Ebenezer Bastard" repeated the voice. "I have been condemned to a terrible place, where men of unspeakable wickedness live out their days.

Ebenezer breathed a sigh of relief. "So you're not dead after all, you've just gone to work for Microsoft. I wonder..."

"Silence" thundered the apparition and the clanking got louder. "I speak of a place where you surely will be condemned for eternal torment."

"What do you want with me, spirit?" stammered Ebenezer, finding that the effect of ten pints of extra-strong lager was diminishing somewhat.

"This night you will be visited by three spirits: the Ghost of Tech Support Past; the Ghost of Tech Support Present; and the ghost of Tech Support Yet to Come. Listen to them - there is time yet to repent."

"Spirit," said Ebenezer. "What is that rattling sound I keep hearing?"

"You mean this?" said the shade, shaking what appeared to be long tail.

Ebenezer Bastard peered through the gloom. He could dimly perceive a chain but tied to it were all manner of devices that had made his life easier: there was the claw hammer that was such an excellent "reconfiguring" tool, there was the anvil that he'd enthusiastically "tested" PCs on, there were power staplers galore, there was every item under the sun that had made his life easier.

"I see you recognise some of them" said the apparition with a grimace. "I used all these tools when I was a young bastard. Now my crimes have caught up with me and I must drag my tools around with me for eternity. But be warned, this chain is long and the burden is onerous but the chain that is being forged for you is already twice the length and three times as heavy."

In emphasis he shook the chain until all the objects leaped up and down and the whole room seemed to rattle.

"I must depart now but remember, three spirits..." and with a low moan he disappeared.

Ebenezer's courage returned.

"Bah humbug, ghosts indeed. That beer must have been stronger than I thought".

And with that thought he staggered off to bed and fell asleep without undressing.

It was just after midnight when he awoke and peered into the gloom. What appeared to be a small child was hovering at the foot of the bed.

Suddenly, the moon moved from behind the clouds and Ebenezer could see that it was no child but an old man of child's shape, dressed in what appeared to be a white tunic. As his eyes got used to the gloom, he discerned that it was an old freebie T-shirt with CP/M emblazoned on the front. The apparition's legs and feet were bare but round his middle was tied some thin Ethernet cable.

"Are you the Ghost of Tech Support Past?" asked Ebenezer.

"I am," said the spirit.

"Long past?"

"No, your past."

The ghost waved his hand and suddenly the walls of the flat disappeared. Ebenezer and the spirit found themselves in a busy office, where a Christmas party was in full swing. The disco was booming out, sales people were chasing secretaries with bunches of mistletoe, the chief bean counter was slumped in a corner, the marketing manager was regaling the HR manager with the tales of the last campaign before last. The air was filled with the sound of laughter, shouting, chatter, breaking glass and a thumping disco beat: in short, a typical office party.

"It's fun isn't it," said the spirit, "but isn't there one person not joining in?"

"There is," said Ebenezer.

Down in the bowels of the building a solitary person was still in the computer room. Methodically working through the personnel records of the entire staff (the HR password having long been discovered), the young Ebenezer was ensuring that his Christmas overtime was not being wasted.

"Were you not invited to the party?" asked the spirit.

"No," said Ebenezer. "Not since the year when the fire alarm accidentally went and the sprinklers all came on. And of course, all the booze disappeared. For some reason they seemed to think it was my fault, just because I'd been seen with the alarm system technical manual that day. Miserable ingrates, after all I'd done for them."

Suddenly the vision vanished and Ebenezer found himself back in his flat again, his mind still filled with the wonder of what he'd seen.

He heard a noise from another room and peered round the corner. The room was filled with light and on a pile of PCs sat a jolly looking gentleman. His copious stomach seemed to fill half the room and his beard - for he appeared to be more beard than face - filled the other half.

"Are you the Ghost of Tech Support Present?" said Ebenezer.

The spirit laughed his assent.

"Take my hand," he said, "and let us look at the rest of the world this Christmas."

Suddenly, they were hovering over the City. Time and time again they appeared outside computer support rooms where teams of workers toiled diligently to solve problems as soon as they appeared. They worked with smiles on their faces, singing along to the boom boxes parked in the corner of their rooms.

At Megabank there was a particular tricky problem. "That's an easy one to solve," thought Ebenezer, "pull the mains switch and just say that there's a network outage. And because it's Christmas it can't be put right for a couple of days... and you still earn the Christmas bonus."

Instead he watched open-mouthed as his counterpart punched in the password and worked systematically trying to sort out the problem.

"Standards are slipping," he thought.

But suddenly, the scene changed. They were in a pub and his PFY was just buying a round of drinks.

"Here's to Christmas," he said to Denise, cheerfully raising his glass.

"And to us," she giggled.

"And to absent friends," said the PFY. "Here's to old Ebenezer."

"What, that old misery guts," said Denise. "I've never known someone hate the world so much. I wish he'd leave the company, why can't they get rid of him - no-one can stand him?"

"Well, he knows too much about what people have been up to. I certainly don't think the chairman wants all the details of his trip to Amsterdam coming out. Come on, where's your Christmas charity?"

Reluctantly, she returned the toast and the conversation turned to matters more interesting to young people.

In the distance, Ebenezer saw a shrouded figure approach. From the folds of his cape, a long, bony finger protruded and beckoned Ebenezer to him.

"Are you the Ghost of Tech Support Future that was promised to me?" he said.

The ghost nodded and again signalled Ebenezer to follow.

They trudged through the darkness until they found themselves outside a funeral directors' office.

Two undertakers were busily engaged in putting the finishing touches to a coffin.

"Good riddance to him I say," said one, with scarce regard for the sanctity of his profession.

"Though he'd never bleedin' die," said the other, with even less regard.

"When's the funeral?"

"Don't think it matters, there'll scarcely be anyone attending. Perhaps they'll just throw him in the ground and be done with it." They both cackled hysterically.

"Who are they talking about?" said Ebenezer.

The spirit pointed his finger and suddenly the coffin lid flew open. Aghast, the old misanthrope saw his own features.

He sat bolt upright in bed and saw the first glimmers of day coming through his curtains. It had all been a dream. And yet the events of the night had left him with a strange feeling.

He put on his shoes and dashed round to Cratchit, his PFY. He furiously banged on the door and demanded admittance.

It was a bleary-eyed PFY who let him in.

"Whassamatter?"

"I've just had the most amazing experience!"

"Don't tell me," chortled the PFY. "You've met three spirits like that bloke in the book and you're going to turn over a new leaf."

"Bollocks to that. In the long run, we're all dead anyway, might as well have some fun before we go. No, I've found out the admin password for the Megabank system, come let me show you how a real bastard behaves....."

Chapter 6

1999

6.1 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.

6.2 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.

6.3 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!

6.4 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...

6.5 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-breeds 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.

6.6 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 bumbles 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.

6.7 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! SKEEEEEeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrt!

"...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.../CENTER;

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.

6.8 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...

6.9 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 'migra-

tion' 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...

6.10 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 burbles. "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..

6.11 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.

6.12 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..."

¡CENTER¡;H2¡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...¡/H2¡¡/CENTER¡

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.

6.13 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.

6.14 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.

6.15 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...

6.16 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?"

6.17 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...

6.18 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!”

”Puleeeze!” 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'.

6.19 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 sickie?"

"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 bumbles 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..

6.20 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..."

6.21 '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!! ¡P! 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...

6.22 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.