

The rumour spread through the city like wildfire (which had quite often spread through Ankh-Morpork since its citizens had learned the words ‘fire insurance’).

The dwarfs can turn lead into gold . . .

It buzzed through the fetid air of the Alchemists’ quarter, where they had been trying to do the same thing for centuries without success but were certain that they’d manage it by tomorrow, or next Tuesday at least, or the end of the month for definite.

It caused speculation among the wizards at Unseen University, where they knew you *could* turn one element into another element, provided you didn’t mind it turning back again next day, and where was the good in that? Besides, most elements were happy where they were.

It seared into the scarred, puffy and sometimes totally missing ears of the Thieves’ Guild, where people put an edge on their crowbars. Who cared where the gold *came* from?

The dwarfs can turn lead into gold . . .

It reached the cold but incredibly acute ears of the Patrician, and it did that fairly quickly, because you did not stay ruler of Ankh-Morpork for long if you were second with the news. He sighed and

made a note of it, and added it to a lot of other notes.

The dwarfs can turn lead into gold . . .

It reached the pointy ears of the dwarfs.

‘Can we?’

‘Damned if I know. *I can’t.*’

‘Yeah, but if you could, you wouldn’t say. *I wouldn’t say, if I could.*’

‘Can you?’

‘No!’

‘Ah-*ha!*’

It came to the ears of the Night Watch of the city guard, as they did gate duty at ten o’clock on an icy night. Gate duty in Ankh-Morpork was not taxing. It consisted mainly of waving through anything that wanted to go through, although traffic was minimal in the dark and freezing fog.

They hunched in the shelter of the gate arch, sharing one damp cigarette.

‘You can’t turn something into something else,’ said Corporal Nobbs. ‘The Alchemists have been trying it for years.’

‘They can gen’rally turn a house into a hole in the ground,’ said Sergeant Colon.

‘That’s what I’m talking about,’ said Corporal Nobbs. ‘Can’t be done. It’s all to do with . . . elements. An alchemist told me. Everything’s made up of elements, right? Earth, Water, Air, Fire and . . . sunnink. Well-known fact. Everything’s got ’em all mixed up just right.’

He stamped his feet in an effort to get some warmth into them.

‘If it was possible to turn lead into gold, everyone’d be doing it,’ he said.

‘Wizards could do it,’ said Sergeant Colon.

‘Oh, well, *magic*,’ said Nobby dismissively.

A large cart rumbled out of the yellow clouds and entered the arch, splashing Colon as it wobbled through one of the puddles that were such a feature of Ankh-Morpork’s highways.

‘Bloody dwarfs,’ he said, as it continued on into the city. But he didn’t say it too loudly.

‘There were a lot of them pushing that cart,’ said Corporal Nobbs reflectively. It lurched slowly round a corner and was lost to view.

‘Prob’ly all that gold,’ said Colon.

‘Hah. Yeah. That’d be it, then.’

And the rumour came to the ears of William de Worde, and in a sense it stopped there, because he dutifully wrote it down.

It was his job. Lady Margolotta of Uberwald sent him five dollars a month to do it. The Dowager Duchess of Quirm also sent him five dollars. So did King Verence of Lancre, and a few other Ramtop notables. So did the Seriph of Al Khali, although in his case the payment was half a cartload of figs, twice a year.

All in all, he considered, he was on to a good thing. All he had to do was write one letter very carefully, trace it backwards on to a piece of boxwood provided for him by Mr Cripslock the engraver in the Street of Cunning Artificers, and then pay Mr Cripslock twenty dollars to carefully remove the wood that wasn’t

letters and make five impressions on sheets of paper.

Of course, it had to be done thoughtfully, with spaces left after ‘To my Noble Client the’, and so on, which he had to fill in later, but even deducting expenses it still left him the best part of thirty dollars for little more than one day’s work a month.

A young man without too many responsibilities could live modestly in Ankh-Morpork on thirty or forty dollars a month; he always sold the figs, because although it was possible to live on figs you soon wished you didn’t.

And there were always additional sums to be picked up here and there. The world of letters was a closed boo— mysterious papery object to many of Ankh-Morpork’s citizens, but if they ever *did* need to commit things to paper quite a few of them walked up the creaky stairs past the sign ‘William de Worde: Things Written Down’.

Dwarfs, for example. Dwarfs were always coming to seek work in the city, and the first thing they did was send a letter home saying how well they were doing. This was such a predictable occurrence, even if the dwarf in question was so far down on his luck that he’d been forced to eat his helmet, that William had Mr Cripslock produce several dozen stock letters which needed only a few spaces filled in to be perfectly acceptable.

Fond dwarf parents all over the mountains treasured letters which looked something like this:

Dear [Mume & Dad],

Well, I arrived here all right and I am staying,

at [109 Cockbill Street The Shades Ankh-Morpkh].
 Everythyng is fine. I have got a goode job work-
 ing for [Mr C.M.O.T. Dibbler, Merchant Venturer]
 and will be makeinge lots of money really soon
 now. I am rememberinge alle your gode advyce
 and am not drinkynge, in bars or mixsing with
 Trolls. Well thas about itte muft goe now, look-
 ing forwade to seing you and [Emelia] agane,
 your loving son,

[Tomas Brokenbrow]

. . . who was usually swaying while he dictated it. It was twenty pence easily made, and as an additional service William carefully tailored the spelling to the client and allowed them to choose their own punctuation.

On this particular evening, with the sleet gurgling in the downspouts outside his lodgings, William sat in the tiny office over the Guild of Conjurers and wrote carefully, half listening to the hopeless but painstaking catechism of the trainee conjurers at their evening class in the room below.

‘. . . pay attention. Are you ready? Right. Egg. Glass . . .’

‘*Egg. Glass,*’ the class droned listlessly.

‘. . . Glass. Egg . . .’

‘*Glass. Egg . . .*’

‘. . . Magic word . . .’

‘*Magic word . . .*’

‘Fazammm. Just like that. Ahahahahaha . . .’

‘*Faz-ammm. Just like that. Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha . . .*’

William pulled another sheet of paper towards him,

sharpened a fresh quill, stared at the wall for a moment and then wrote as follows:

And finally, on the lighter Side, it is being said that the Dwarfs can Turn Lead into Gold, though no one knows whence the rumour comes, and Dwarfs going about their lawful occasions in the City are hailed with cries such as, e.g., ‘Hollah, short stuff, let’s see you make some Gold then!’ although only Newcomers do this because all here know what happens if you call a Dwarf ‘short stuff’, viz., you are Dead.

Yr. obdt. servant, William de Worde

He always liked to finish his letters on a happy note.

He fetched a sheet of boxwood, lit another candle and laid the letter face down on the wood. A quick rub with the back of a spoon transferred the ink, and thirty dollars and enough figs to make you really ill were as good as in the bank.

He’d drop it in to Mr Cripslock tonight, pick up the copies after a leisurely lunch tomorrow, and with any luck should have them all away by the middle of the week.

William put on his coat, wrapped the wood block carefully in some waxed paper and stepped out into the freezing night.

The world is made up of four elements: Earth, Air, Fire and Water. This is a fact well known even to Corporal Nobbs. It’s also wrong. There’s a fifth element, and generally it’s called Surprise.

For example, the dwarfs found out how to turn lead into gold by doing it the hard way. The difference between that and the easy way is that the hard way works.

The dwarfs dwarfhandled their overloaded, creaking cart along the street, peering ahead in fog. Ice formed on the cart and hung from their beards.

All it needed was one frozen puddle.

Good old Dame Fortune. You can *depend* on her.

The fog closed in, making every light a dim glow and muffling all sounds. It was clear to Sergeant Colon and Corporal Nobbs that no barbarian horde would be including the invasion of Ankh-Morpork in their travel plans for this evening. The watchmen didn't blame them.

They closed the gates. This was not the ominous activity that it might appear, since the keys had been lost long ago and latecomers usually threw gravel at the windows of the houses built on top of the wall until they found a friend to lift the bar. It was assumed that foreign invaders wouldn't know which windows to throw gravel at.

Then the two watchmen trailed through the slush and muck to the Water Gate, by which the river Ankh had the good fortune to enter the city. The water was invisible in the dark, but the occasional ghostly shape of an ice floe drifted past below the parapet.

'Hang on,' said Nobby, as they laid hands on the windlass of the portcullis. 'There's someone down there.'

‘In the river?’ said Colon.

He listened. There was the creak of an oar, far below.

Sergeant Colon cupped his hands around his mouth and issued the traditional policeman’s cry of challenge.

‘Oi! You!’

For a moment there was no sound but the wind and the gurgling of the water. Then a voice said: ‘Yes?’

‘Are you invading the city or what?’

There was another pause. Then:

‘What?’

‘What what?’ said Colon, raising the stakes.

‘What were the other options?’

‘Don’t mess me about . . . Are *you*, down there in the boat, *invading* this *city*?’

‘No.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Colon, who on a night like this would happily take someone’s word for it. ‘Get a move on, then, ’cos we’re going to drop the gate.’

After a while the splash of the oars resumed and disappeared downriver.

‘You reckon that was enough, just *askin* ’em?’ said Nobby.

‘Well, they ought to know,’ said Colon.

‘Yeah, but—’

‘It was a tiny little rowin’ boat, Nobby. Of course, if you want to go all the way down to them nice icy steps on the jetty—’

‘No, Sarge.’

‘Then let’s get back to the Watch House, all right?’

* * *

William turned up his collar as he hurried towards Cripslock the engraver. The usually busy streets were deserted. Only those people with the most pressing business were out of doors. It was turning out to be a very nasty winter indeed, a gazzpacho of freezing fog, snow and Ankh-Morpork's ever-present, ever-rolling smog.

His eye was caught by a little pool of light by the Watchmakers' Guild. A small hunched figure was outlined in the glow.

He wandered over.

A hopeless sort of voice said, 'Hot sausages? Inna bun?'

'Mr Dibbler?' said William.

Cut-Me-Own-Throat Dibbler, Ankh-Morpork's most enterprisingly unsuccessful businessman, peered at William over the top of his portable sausage-cooking tray. Snowflakes hissed in the congealing fat.

William sighed. 'You're out late, Mr Dibbler,' he said politely.

'Ah, Mr Word. Times is hard in the hot sausage trade,' said Dibbler.

'Can't make both ends meat, eh?' said William. He couldn't have stopped himself for a hundred dollars and a shipload of figs.

'Definitely in a period of slump in the comestibles market,' said Dibbler, too sunk in gloom to notice. 'Don't seem to find anyone ready to buy a sausage in a bun these days.'

William looked down at the tray. If Cut-Me-Own-Throat Dibbler was selling hot sausages, it was a sure

sign that one of his more ambitious enterprises had gone wahoonie-shaped yet again. Selling hot sausages from a tray was by way of being the ground state of Dibbler's existence, from which he constantly sought to extricate himself and back to which he constantly returned when his latest venture went all runny. Which was a shame, because Dibbler was an extremely good hot sausage salesman. He had to be, given the nature of his sausages.

'I should have got a proper education like you,' said Dibbler despondently. 'A nice job indoors with no heavy lifting. I could have found my nitch, if'n I'd have got a good education.'

'Nitch?'

'One of the wizards told me about 'em,' said Dibbler. 'Everything's got a nitch. You know. Like: where they ought to be. What they was cut out for?'

William nodded. He was good with words. 'Niche?' he said.

'One of them things, yes.' Dibbler sighed. 'I missed out on the semaphore. Just didn't see it coming. Next thing you know, everyone's got a clacks company. Big money. Too rich for my blood. I could've done all right with the Fung Shooey, though. Sheer bloody bad luck there.'

'I've certainly felt better with my chair in a different position,' said William. That advice had cost him two dollars, along with an injunction to keep the lid down on the privy so that the Dragon of Unhappiness wouldn't fly up his bottom.

'You were my first customer and I thank you,' said Dibbler. 'I was all set up, I'd got the Dibbler

wind-chimes and the Dibbler mirrors, it was gravy all the way – I mean, everything was positioned for maximum harmony, and then . . . smack. Bad karma plops on me once more.’

‘It was a week before Mr Passmore was able to walk again, though,’ said William. The case of Dibbler’s *second* customer had been very useful for his news letter, which rather made up for the two dollars.

‘I wasn’t to know there really *is* a Dragon of Unhappiness,’ said Dibbler.

‘I don’t think there was until you convinced him that one exists,’ said William.

Dibbler brightened a little. ‘Ah, well, say what you like, I’ve always been good at selling ideas. Can I convince you of the idea that a sausage in a bun is what you desire at this time?’

‘Actually, I’ve really got to get this along to—’ William began, and then said, ‘Did you just hear someone shout?’

‘I’ve got some cold pork pies, too, somewhere,’ said Dibbler, ferreting in his tray. ‘I can give you a convincingly bargain price on—’

‘I’m sure I heard something,’ said William.

Dibbler cocked an ear. ‘Sort of like a rumbling?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

They stared into the slowly rolling clouds that filled Broad Way.

Which became, quite suddenly, a huge tarpaulin-covered cart, moving unstoppably and very fast . . .

And the last thing William remembered, before something flew out of the night and smacked him

between the eyes, was someone shouting, 'Stop the press!'

The rumour, having been pinned to the page by William's pen like a butterfly to a cork, didn't come to the ears of some people, because they had other, darker things on their mind.

Their rowboat slid through the hissing waters of the river Ankh, which closed behind it slowly.

Two men were bent over the oars. The third sat in the pointy end. Occasionally he spoke.

He said things like 'My nose itches.'

'You'll just have to wait till we get there,' said one of the rowers.

'You could let me out again. It really itches.'

'We let you out when we stopped for supper.'

'It didn't itch then.'

The other rower said, 'Shall I hit him up alongside the —ing head with the —ing oar again, Mr Pin?'

'Good idea, Mr Tulip.'

There was a dull thump in the darkness.

'Ow.'

'Now no more fuss, friend, otherwise Mr Tulip will lose his temper.'

'Too —ing right.' Then there was a sound like an industrial pump.

'Hey, go easy on that stuff, why don't you?'

'Ain't —ing killed me yet, Mr Pin.'

The boat oozed to a halt alongside a tiny, little-used landing stage. The tall figure who had so recently been the focus of Mr Pin's attention was bundled ashore and hustled down an alley.

A moment later there was the sound of a carriage rolling away into the night.

It would seem quite impossible, on such a mucky night, that there could have been anyone to witness this scene.

But there was. The universe requires everything to be observed, lest it cease to exist.

A figure shuffled out from the shadows of the alley, close by. There was a smaller shape wobbling uncertainly by its side.

Both of them watched the departing coach as it disappeared into the snow.

The smaller of the two figures said, 'Well, well, well. There's a fmg. Man all bundled up and hooded. An interesting fmg, eh?'

The taller figure nodded. It wore a huge old great-coat several sizes too big, and a felt hat that had been reshaped by time and weather into a soft cone that overhung the wearer's head.

'Scraplit,' it said. 'Thatch and trouser, a blewit the grawney man. I told 'im. I told 'im. Millennium hand and shrimp. Bugrit.'

After a pause it reached into its pocket and produced a sausage, which it broke into two pieces. One bit disappeared under the hat, and the other was tossed to the smaller figure, who was doing most of the talking or, at least, most of the coherent talking.

'Looks like a dirty deed to me,' said the smaller figure, which had four legs.

The sausage was consumed in silence. Then the pair set off into the night again.

In the same way that a pigeon can't walk without

bobbing its head, the taller figure appeared unable to move without a sort of low-key, random mumbling:

'I *told* 'em, I *told* 'em. Millennium hand and shrimp. I said, I said, I said. Oh, no. But they only run out, I *told* 'em. Sod 'em. Doorsteps. I said, I said, I said. Teeth. Wassa name of age, I said I *told* 'em, not my fault, matterofact, matterofact, stands to reason . . .'

The rumour did come to his ears later on, but by then he was part of it.

As for Mr Pin and Mr Tulip, all that need be known about them at this point is that they are the kind of people who call you 'friend'. People like that aren't friendly.

William opened his eyes. I've gone blind, he thought.

Then he moved the blanket.

And then the pain hit him.

It was a sharp and insistent sort of pain, centred right over the eyes. He reached up gingerly. There seemed to be some bruising and what felt like a dent in the flesh, if not the bone.

He sat up. He was in a sloping-ceilinged room. A bit of grubby snow crusted the bottom of a small window. Apart from the bed, which was just a mattress and blanket, the room was unfurnished.

A thump shook the building. Dust drifted down from the ceiling. He got up, clutching at his forehead, and staggered to the door. It opened into a much larger room or, more accurately, a workshop.

Another thump rattled his teeth.

William tried to focus.

The room was full of dwarfs, toiling over a couple of long benches. But at the far end several of them were clustered around something like a complex piece of weaving machinery.

It went thump again.

William rubbed his head. 'What's happening?' he said.

The nearest dwarf looked up at him and nudged a colleague urgently. The nudge passed itself along the rows, and the room was suddenly filled wall to wall with a cautious silence. A dozen solemn dwarf faces looked hard at William.

No one can look harder than a dwarf. Perhaps it's because there is only quite a small amount of face between the statutory round iron helmet and the beard. Dwarf expressions are more *concentrated*.

'Um,' he said. 'Hello?'

One of the dwarfs in front of the big machine was the first to unfreeze.

'Back to work, lads,' he said, and came and looked William sternly in the groin.

'You all right, your lordship?' he said.

William winced. 'Um . . . what happened?' he said. 'I, uh, remember seeing a cart, and then something hit . . .'

'It ran away from us,' said the dwarf. 'Load slipped, too. Sorry about that.'

'What happened to Mr Dibbler?'

The dwarf put his head on one side. 'The skinny man with the sausages?' he said.

'That's right. Was he hurt?'

'I don't think so,' said the dwarf carefully. 'He sold

young Thunderaxe a sausage in a bun, I do know that.'

William thought about this. Ankh-Morpork had many traps for the unwary newcomer.

'Well, then, is Mr *Thunderaxe* all right?' he said.

'Probably. He shouted under the door just now that he was feeling a lot better but would stay where he was for the time being,' said the dwarf. He reached under a bench and solemnly handed William a rectangle wrapped in grubby paper.

'Yours, I think.'

William unwrapped his wooden block. It was split right across where a wheel of the cart had run over it, and the writing had been smudged. He sighed.

'scuse me,' said the dwarf, 'but what was it meant to be?'

'It's a block prepared for a woodcut,' said William. He wondered how he could possibly explain the idea to a dwarf from outside the city. 'You know? Engraving? A . . . a sort of very nearly magical way of getting *lots* of copies of writing? I'm afraid I shall have to go and make another one now.'

The dwarf gave him an odd look, and then took the block from him and turned it over and over in his hands.

'You see,' said William, 'the engraver cuts away bits of—'

'Have you still got the original?' said the dwarf.

'Pardon?'

'The original,' said the dwarf patiently.

'Oh, yes.' William reached inside his jacket and produced it.

‘Can I borrow it for a moment?’

‘Well, all right, but I shall need it again to—’

The dwarf scanned the letter a while, and then turned and hit the nearest dwarf a resounding *boing* on the helmet.

‘Ten point across three,’ he said, handing him the paper. The struck dwarf nodded, and then its right hand moved quickly across the rack of little boxes, selecting things.

‘I ought to be getting back so I can—’ William began.

‘This won’t take long,’ said the head dwarf. ‘Just you step along this way, will you? This might be of interest to a man of letters such as yourself.’

William followed him along the avenue of busy dwarfs to the machine, which had been thumping away steadily.

‘Oh. It’s an engraving press,’ said William vaguely.

‘This one’s a bit different,’ said the dwarf. ‘We’ve . . . modified it.’ He took a large sheet of paper off a pile by the press and gave it to William, who read:

GUNILLA GOODMOUNTAIN & CO.

Respectfully Solicit

Work for their New

WORD SMITHY

A method of taking multiple impresfions
the like of which

Hath not hiterto been seen.

Rea/sonable rates.

At the Sign of The Bucket, Gleam Street,
off Treacle Mine Road, Ankh-Morpork.

‘What do you think?’ said the dwarf shyly.

‘Are you Gunilla Goodmountain?’

‘Yes. What do you think?’

‘We-ell . . . you’ve got the letters nice and regular, I must say,’ said William. ‘But I can’t see what’s so new about it. And you’ve spelled “hitherto” wrong. There should be another h after the first t. You’ll have to cut it all out again unless you want people to laugh at you.’

‘Really?’ said Goodmountain. He nudged one of his colleagues.

‘Just give me a ninety-six-point lower-case h, will you, Caslong? Thank you.’

Goodmountain bent over the press, picked up a spanner and busied himself somewhere in the mechanical gloom.

‘You must have a really steady hand to get the letters so neat,’ said William. He felt a bit sorry that he’d pointed out the mistake. Probably no one would have noticed in any case. Ankh-Morpork people considered that spelling was a sort of optional extra. They believed in it in the same way they believed in punctuation; it didn’t matter where you put it so long as it was there.

The dwarf finished whatever arcane activity he had been engaged in, dabbed with an inked pad at something inside the press, and got down.

‘I’m sure it won’t’ – *thump* – ‘matter about the spelling,’ said William.

Goodmountain opened the press again and wordlessly handed William a damp sheet of paper.

William read it.

The extra h was in place.

‘How—?’ he began.

‘This is a very nearly magical way of getting lots of copies quickly,’ said Goodmountain. Another dwarf appeared at his elbow, holding a big metal rectangle. It was full of little metal letters, back to front. Goodmountain took it and gave William a big grin.

‘Want to make any changes before we go to press?’ he said. ‘Just say the word. A couple of dozen prints be enough?’

‘Oh dear,’ said William. ‘This is *printing*, isn’t it . . .?’

The Bucket was a tavern, of sorts. There was no passing trade. The street was if not a dead end then seriously wounded by the area’s change in fortunes. Few businesses fronted on to it. It consisted mainly of the back ends of yards and warehouses. No one even remembered why it was called Gleam Street. There was nothing very sparkling about it.

Besides, calling a tavern the Bucket was not a decision destined to feature in Great Marketing Decisions of History. Its owner was Mr Cheese, who was thin, dry and only smiled when he heard news of some serious murder. Traditionally he had sold short measure but, to make up for it, had short-changed as well. However, the pub had been taken over by the City Watch as the unofficial policemen’s pub, because policemen like to drink in places where no one else goes and they don’t have to be reminded that they are policemen.

This had been a benefit in some ways. Not even

licensed thieves tried to rob the Bucket now. Policemen didn't like their drinking disturbed. On the other hand, Mr Cheese had never found a bigger bunch of petty criminals than those wearing the Watch uniform. He saw more dud dollars and strange pieces of foreign currency cross his bar in the first month than he'd found in ten years in the business. It made you depressed, it really did. But some of the murder descriptions were quite funny.

He made part of his living by renting out the rat's nest of old sheds and cellars that backed on to the pub. They tended to be occupied very temporarily by the kind of enthusiastic manufacturer who believed that what the world really, really needed today was an inflatable dartboard.

But there *was* a crowd outside the Bucket now, reading one of the slightly misprinted posters that Goodmountain had nailed up on the door. Goodmountain followed William out and nailed up the corrected version.

'Sorry about your head,' he said. 'Looks like we made a bit of an impression on you. Have this one on the house.'

William skulked home, keeping in the shadows in case he met Mr Cripslock. But he folded his printed sheets into their envelopes and took them down to the Hubward Gate and gave them to the messengers, reflecting as he did so that he was doing this several days before he had expected to.

The messengers gave him some very odd looks.

He went back to his lodgings and had a look at himself in the mirror over the washbasin. A large R,

printed in bruise colours, occupied a lot of his forehead.

He stuck a bandage over it.

And he still had eighteen more copies. As an afterthought, and feeling rather daring, he looked through his notes for the addresses of eighteen prominent citizens who could probably afford it, wrote a short covering letter to each one offering this service for . . . he thought for a while and then carefully wrote '\$5' . . . and folded the free sheets into eighteen envelopes. Of course, he could always have asked Mr Cripslock to do more copies as well, but it had never seemed *right*. After the old boy had spent all day chipping out the words, asking him to sully his craftsmanship by making dozens of duplicates seemed disrespectful. But you didn't have to respect lumps of metal and machines. Machines weren't alive.

That, really, was where the trouble was going to start. And there *was* going to be trouble. The dwarfs had seemed quite unconcerned when he'd told them how much of it there was going to be.

The coach arrived at a large house in the city. A door was opened. A door was shut. Another door was knocked on. It was opened. It shut. The carriage pulled away.

One ground-floor room was heavily curtained, and only the barest gleam of light filtered out. Only the faintest of noises filtered out, too, but any listener would have heard a murmur of conversation die down. Then a chair was knocked over and several people shouted, all at once.

'That *is* him!'

‘It’s a trick . . . isn’t it?’

‘I’ll be damned!’

‘If it *is* him, so are we all!’

The hubbub died away. And then, very calmly, someone began to talk.

‘Good. Good. Take him away, gentlemen. Make him comfortable in the cellar.’

There were footsteps. A door opened and closed.

A more querulous voice said, ‘We could simply replace—’

‘No, we could not. I understand that our guest is, fortunately, a man of rather low intelligence.’ There was this about the first speaker’s voice. It spoke as if disagreeing was not simply unthinkable but impossible. It was used to being in the company of listeners.

‘But he looks the spit and image—’

‘Yes. Astonishing, isn’t it? Let us not overcomplicate matters, though. We are a bodyguard of lies, gentlemen. We are all that stands between the city and oblivion, so let us make this one chance work. Vetinari may be quite willing to see humans become a minority in their greatest city, but frankly his death by assassination would be . . . unfortunate. It would cause turmoil, and turmoil is hard to steer. And we all know that there are people who take too much of an interest. No. There is a third way. A gentle slide from one condition to another.’

‘And what will happen to our new friend?’

‘Oh, our employees are known to be men of resource, gentlemen. I’m sure they know how to deal with a man whose face no longer fits, eh?’

There was laughter.

* * *

Things were a little fraught in Unseen University. The wizards were scuttling from building to building, glancing at the sky.

The problem, of course, was the frogs. Not rains of frogs, which were uncommon now in Ankh-Morpork, but specifically foreign treefrogs from the humid jungles of Klatch. They were small, brightly coloured, happy little creatures who secreted some of the nastiest toxins in the world, which is why the job of looking after the large vivarium where they happily passed their days was given to first-year students, on the basis that if they got things wrong there wouldn't be too much education wasted.

Very occasionally a frog was removed from the vivarium and put into a rather smaller jar where it briefly became a very happy frog indeed, and then went to sleep and woke up in that great big jungle in the sky.

And thus the University got the active ingredient which it made up into pills and fed to the Bursar, to keep him sane. At least, *apparently* sane, because nothing was that simple at good old UU. In fact he was incurably insane and hallucinated more or less continuously, but by a remarkable stroke of lateral thinking his fellow wizards had reasoned that, in that case, the whole business could be sorted out if only they could find a formula that caused him to *hallucinate that he was completely sane*.*

This had worked well. There had been a few false

* This is a very common hallucination, shared by most people.

starts. For several hours, at one point, he had hallucinated that he was a bookcase. But now he was permanently hallucinating that he was a bursar, and that almost made up for the small side-effect that also led him to hallucinate that he could fly.

Of course, many people in the universe have also had the misplaced belief that they can safely ignore gravity, mostly after taking some local equivalent of dried frog pills, and this has led to much extra work for elementary physics and caused brief traffic jams in the street below. When a wizard hallucinates that he can fly, things are different.

‘Bursaar! You come down here right this minute!’ Archchancellor Mustrum Ridcully barked through his megaphone. ‘You know what I said about goin’ higher than the walls!’

The Bursar floated gently down towards the lawn. ‘You wanted me, Archchancellor?’

Ridcully waved a piece of paper at him. ‘You were tellin’ me the other day we were spendin’ a ton of money with the engravers, weren’t you?’ he barked.

The Bursar got his mind up to something approaching the correct speed. ‘I was?’ he said.

‘Breakin’ the budget, you said. Remember it distinctly.’

A few cogs meshed in the jittery gearbox of the Bursar’s brain. ‘Oh. Yes. Yes. Very true,’ he said. Another gear clonked into place. ‘A fortune every year, I’m afraid. The Guild of Engravers—’

‘Chap here says,’ the Archchancellor glanced at the sheet, ‘he can do us ten copies of a

thousand words each for a dollar. Is that cheap?’

‘I think, uh, there must be a mis-carving there, Archchancellor,’ said the Bursar, finally managing to get his voice into the smooth and soothing tones he found best in dealing with Ridcully. ‘That sum would not keep him in boxwood.’

‘Says here’ – rustle – ‘down to ten-point size,’ said Ridcully.

The Bursar lost control for a moment. ‘Ridiculous!’
‘What?’

‘Sorry, Archchancellor. I mean, that can’t be right. Even if anyone could consistently carve that fine, the wood would crumble after a couple of impressions.’

‘Know about this sort of thing, do you?’

‘Well, my great-uncle was an engraver, Archchancellor. And the print bill is a major drain, as you know. I think I can say with some justification that I have been able to keep the Guild down to a very—’

‘Don’t they invite you to their annual blow-out?’

‘Well, as a major customer of course the University is invited to their official dinner and as the designated officer I naturally see it as part of my duties to—’

‘Fifteen courses, I heard.’

‘—and of course there is our policy of maintaining a friendly relationship with the other Gui—’

‘*Not* including the nuts and coffee.’

The Bursar hesitated. The Archchancellor tended to combine wooden-headed stupidity with distressing insight.

‘The problem, Archchancellor,’ he tried, ‘is that we have always been *very much* against using

movable type printing for magic purposes because—'

'Yes, yes, I know all about *that*,' said the Archchancellor. 'But there's all the other stuff, more of it every day . . . forms and charts and gods know what. You know I've always wanted a paperless office—'

'Yes, Archchancellor, that's why you hide it all in cupboards and throw it out of the window at night.'

'Clean desk, clean mind,' said the Archchancellor. He thrust the leaflet into the Bursar's hand.

'Just you trot down there, why don't you, and see if it's just a lot of hot air. But walk, please.'

William felt drawn back to the sheds behind the Bucket the next day. Apart from anything else, he had nothing to do and he didn't like being useless.

There are, it has been said, two types of people in the world. There are those who, when presented with a glass that is exactly half full, say: this glass is half full. And then there are those who say: this glass is half empty.

The world *belongs*, however, to those who can look at the glass and say: What's up with this glass? Excuse me? Excuse *me*? *This* is my glass? I don't *think* so. *My* glass was full! *And* it was a bigger glass!

And at the other end of the bar the world is full of the other type of person, who has a broken glass, or a glass that has been carelessly knocked over (usually by one of the people calling for a larger glass), or who had no glass at all, because they were at the back of the crowd and had failed to catch the barman's eye.

William was one of the glassless. And this was odd, because he'd been born into a family that not only

had a very large glass indeed but could afford to have people discreetly standing around with bottles to keep it filled up.

It was self-imposed glasslessness, and it had started at a fairly early age when he'd been sent away to school.

William's brother Rupert, being the elder, had gone to the Assassins' School in Ankh-Morpork, widely regarded as being the best school in the world for the full-glass class. William, as a less-important son, had been sent to Hugglestones, a boarding school so bleak and spartan that only the upper glasses would dream of sending their sons there.

Hugglestones was a granite building on a rain-soaked moor, and its stated purpose was to make men from boys. The policy employed involved a certain amount of wastage, and consisted in William's recollection at least of very simple and violent games in the healthy outdoor sleet. The small, slow, fat or merely unpopular were mown down, as nature intended, but natural selection operates in many ways and William found that he had a certain capacity for survival. A good way to survive on the playing fields of Hugglestones was to run very fast and shout a lot while inexplicably always being a long way from the ball. This had earned him, oddly enough, a reputation for being keen, and keenness was highly prized at Hugglestones, if only because actual achievement was so rare. The staff at Hugglestones believed that in sufficient quantities 'being keen' could take the place of lesser attributes like intelligence, foresight and training.

He *had* been truly keen on anything involving words. At Hugglestones this had not counted for a great deal, since most of its graduates never expected to have to do much more with a pen than sign their names (a feat which most of them could manage after three or four years), but it had meant long mornings peacefully reading anything that took his fancy while around him the hulking front-row forwards who would one day be at least the deputy-leaders of the land learned how to hold a pen without crushing it.

William left with a good report, which tended to be the case with pupils that most of the teachers could only vaguely remember. Afterwards, his father had faced the problem of what to do with him.

He was the younger son, and family tradition sent youngest sons into some church or other, where they couldn't do much harm on a physical level. But too much reading had taken its toll. William found that he now thought of prayer as a sophisticated way of pleading with thunderstorms.

Going into land management was just about acceptable, but it seemed to William that land managed itself pretty well, on the whole. He was all in favour of the countryside, provided that it was on the other side of a window.

A military career somewhere was unlikely. William had a rooted objection to killing people he didn't know.

He enjoyed reading and writing. He *liked* words. Words didn't shout or make loud noises, which pretty much defined the rest of his family. They didn't involve getting muddy in the freezing cold. They

didn't hunt inoffensive animals, either. They did what he told them to. So, he'd said, he wanted to write.

His father had erupted. In his personal world a scribe was only one step higher than a teacher. Good gods, man, they didn't even ride a horse! So there had been Words.

As a result, William had gone off to Ankh-Morpork, the usual destination for the lost and the aimless. There he'd made words his living, in a quiet sort of way, and considered that he'd got off easily compared to brother Rupert, who was big and good natured and a Hugglestones natural apart from the accident of birth.

And then there had been the war against Klatch . . .

It was an insignificant war, which was over before it started, the kind of war that both sides pretended hadn't really happened, but one of the things that did happen in the few confused days of wretched turmoil was the death of Rupert de Worde. He had died for his beliefs; chief among them was the very Hugglestonian one that bravery could replace armour, and that Klatchians would turn and run if you shouted loud enough.

William's father, during their last meeting, had gone on at some length about the proud and noble traditions of the de Wordes. These had mostly involved unpleasant deaths, preferably of foreigners, but somehow, William gathered, the de Wordes had always considered that it was a decent second prize to die themselves. A de Worde was always to the fore when the city called. That was why they *existed*. Wasn't the family motto *Le Mot Juste*? The Right Word

In The Right Place, said Lord de Worde. He simply could not understand why William did not want to embrace this fine tradition and he dealt with it, in the manner of his kind, by not dealing with it.

And now a great frigid silence had descended between the de Wordes that made the winter chill seem like a sauna.

In this gloomy frame of mind it was positively cheering to wander into the print room to find the Bursar arguing the theory of words with Goodmountain.

‘Hold on, hold on,’ said the Bursar. ‘Yes, indeed, *figuratively* a word is made up of individual letters but they have only a,’ he waved his long fingers gracefully, ‘*theoretical* existence, if I may put it that way. They are, as it were, words *partis in potentia*, and it is, I am afraid, unsophisticated in the extreme to imagine that they have any *real* existence *unis et separato*. Indeed, the very concept of letters having their own physical existence is, philosophically, extremely worrying. Indeed, it would be like noses and fingers running around the world all by themselves—’

That’s three ‘indeeds’, thought William, who noticed things like that. Three indeeds used by a person in one brief speech generally meant an internal spring was about to break.

‘We got whole boxes of letters,’ said Goodmountain flatly. ‘We can make any words you want.’

‘That’s the trouble, you see,’ said the Bursar. ‘Supposing the metal remembers the words it has printed? At least engravers melt down their plates, and the cleansing effect of fire will—’

‘scuse me, your reverence,’ said Goodmountain. One of the dwarfs had tapped him gently on the shoulder and handed him a square of paper. He passed it up to the Bursar.

‘Young Caslong here thought you might like this as a souvenir,’ he said. ‘He took it down directly from the case and pulled it off on the stone. He’s very quick like that.’

The Bursar tried to look the young dwarf sternly up and down, although this was a pretty pointless intimidatory tactic to use on dwarfs since they had very little up to look down from.

‘Really?’ he said. ‘How very . . .’ His eyes scanned the paper.

And then bulged.

‘But these are . . . when I said . . . I only just said . . . How did you know I was going to say . . . I mean, my actual words . . .’ he stuttered.

‘Of course they’re not properly justified,’ said Goodmountain.

‘Now just a *moment*—’ the Bursar began.

William left them to it. The stone he could work out – even the engravers used a big flat stone as a workbench. And he’d seen dwarfs pulling paper sheets off the metal letters, so that made sense, too. And what the Bursar said *had* been unjustified. It wasn’t as if metal had a soul.

He looked over the head of a dwarf who was busily assembling letters in a little metal hod, the stubby fingers darting from box to box in the big tray of type in front of him. Capital letters all in the top, small letters all in the bottom. It was even possible to

get an idea of what the dwarf was assembling, just by watching the movements of his hands across the tray.

‘M-a-k-e-\$\$\$-I-n-n-Y-o-u-r-e-S-p-a-r-e-T-y-m—’ he murmured.

A certainty formed. He glanced down at the sheets of grubby paper beside the tray.

They were covered with the dense spiky handwriting that identified its owner as an anal-retentive with a poor grip.

There were no flies on C.M.O.T. Dibbler. He would have charged them rent.

With barely a conscious thought, William pulled out his notebook, licked his pencil and wrote, very carefully, in his private shorthand:

‘Amzg scenes hv ocrd in the Ct with the Openg o t Prntg Engn at the Sgn o t Bucket by G. Goodmountain, Dwf, which hs causd mch intereft amng all prts inc. chfs of commerfe.’

He paused. The conversation at the other end of the room was definitely taking a more conciliatory turn.

‘How much a thousand?’ said the Bursar.

‘Even cheaper for bulk rates,’ said Goodmountain. ‘Small runs no problem.’

The Bursar’s face had that warm glaze of someone who deals in numbers and can see one huge and inconvenient number getting smaller in the very near future, and in those circumstances philosophy doesn’t stand much of a chance. And what was visible of Goodmountain’s face had the cheerful scowl of someone who’s worked out how to turn lead into still more gold.

‘Well, of course, a contract of this size would have to be ratified by the Archchancellor himself,’ said the Bursar, ‘but I can assure you that he *listens very carefully* to everything I say.’

‘I’m sure he does, your lordship,’ said Goodmountain cheerfully.

‘Uh, by the way,’ said the Bursar, ‘do you people have an Annual Dinner?’

‘Oh, yes. Definitely,’ said the dwarf.

‘When is it?’

‘When would you like it?’

William scribbled: ‘Mch businfs sms likly wth a Certain Educational Body in t Ct,’ and then, because he had a truly honest nature, he added, ‘we hear.’

Well, that was pretty good going. He’d got one letter away only this morning and already he had an important note for the next—

—except, of course, the customers weren’t expecting another one for almost a month. He had a certain feeling that by then no one would be very interested. On the *other* hand, if he *didn’t* tell them about it, someone would be bound to complain. There had been all that trouble with the rain of dogs in Treacle Mine Road last year, and it wasn’t as if that had even happened.

But even if he got the dwarfs to make the type really big, one item of gossip wasn’t going to go very far.

Blast.

He’d have to scuttle around a bit and find some more.

On an impulse he wandered over to the departing Bursar.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ he said.

The Bursar, who was feeling in a very cheerful mood, raised an eyebrow in a good-humoured way.

‘Hmm?’ he said. ‘It’s Mr de Worde, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir. I—’

‘I’m afraid we do all our own writing down at the University,’ said the Bursar.

‘I wonder if I could just ask you what you think of Mr Goodmountain’s new printing engine, sir?’ said William.

‘Why?’

‘Er . . . Because I’d quite like to know? And I’d like to write it down for my news letter. You know? Views of a leading member of Ankh-Morpork’s thaumaturgical establishment?’

‘Oh?’ The Bursar hesitated. ‘This is the little thing you send out to the Duchess of Quirm and the Duke of Sto Helit and people like that, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said William. Wizards were terrible snobs.

‘Er. Well, then . . . you can say that I said it is a step in the right direction that will . . . er . . . be welcomed by all forward-thinking people and will drag the city kicking and screaming into the Century of the Fruitbat.’ He watched eagle-eyed as William wrote this down. ‘And my name is Dr A.A. Dinwiddie, D.M.(7th), D.Thau., B.Occ., M.Coll., B.F. That’s Dinwiddie with an o.’

‘Yes, Dr Dinwiddie. Er . . . the Century of the Fruitbat is nearly over, sir. Would you like the city to be dragged kicking and screaming *out* of the Century of the Fruitbat?’

‘Indeed.’

William wrote this down. It was a puzzle why things were always dragged kicking and screaming. No one ever seemed to want to, for example, lead them gently by the hand.

‘And I’m sure you will send me a copy when it comes out, of course,’ said the Bursar.

‘Yes, Dr Dinwiddie.’

‘And if you want anything from me at any other time, don’t hesitate to ask.’

‘Thank you, sir. But I’d always understood, sir, that Unseen University was against the use of movable type?’

‘Oh, I think it’s time to embrace the exciting challenges presented to us by the Century of the Fruitbat,’ said the Bursar.

‘We . . . That’s the one we’re just about to leave, sir.’

‘Then it’s high time we embraced them, don’t you think?’

‘Good point, sir.’

‘And now I must fly,’ said the Bursar. ‘Except that I mustn’t.’

Lord Vetinari, the Patrician of Ankh-Morpork, poked at the ink in his inkwell. There was ice in it.

‘Don’t you even have a proper fire?’ said Hughnon Ridcully, Chief Priest of Blind Io and unofficial spokesman for the city’s religious establishment. ‘I mean, I’m not one for stuffy rooms, but it’s freezing in here!’

‘Brisk, certainly,’ said Lord Vetinari. ‘It’s odd, but the ice isn’t as dark as the rest of the ink. What causes that, do you think?’

'Science, probably,' said Hughnon vaguely. Like his wizardly brother, Archchancellor Mustrum, he didn't like to bother himself with patently silly questions. Both gods and magic required solid, sensible men, and the brothers Ridcully were solid as rocks. And, in some respects, as sensible.

'Ah. Anyway . . . you were saying?'

'You must put a stop to this, Havelock. You know the . . . understanding.'

Vetinari seemed engrossed in the ink. 'Must, your reverence?' he said calmly, without looking up.

'You *know* why we're all against this movable type nonsense!'

'Remind me again . . . Look, it bobs up and down . . .'

Hughnon sighed. 'Words are too important to be left to machinery. We've got nothing against engraving, you know that. We've nothing against words being nailed down properly. But words that can be taken apart and used to make other words . . . well, that's downright dangerous. And I thought you weren't in favour, either?'

'Broadly, yes,' said the Patrician. 'But many years of ruling this city, your reverence, have taught me that you cannot apply brakes to a volcano. Sometimes it is best to let these things run their course. They generally die down again after a while.'

'You have not always taken such a relaxed approach, Havelock,' said Hughnon.

The Patrician gave him a cool stare that went on for a couple of seconds beyond the comfort barrier.