

Meanwhile the King had arisen and replenished his on-board almond tartage stocks, and was taking a short post prandial constitutional along the battlements, as was his wont of a fine morning when there was no pressing stringing-up and gonad-spiking awaiting his urgent attention.

He strolled along the aged stones and sucked in a huge lung-invigorating breath, and was about to breathe out deeply, when his attention was caught by something on the edge of his vision, which choked off the exhalation at its birth.

“Harbinger!!”

The Chamberlain was crossing the inner keep below, and leapt nervously into the air at the shouted usage of his name from above.

He looked up warily and espied his Liege’s moustache jutting out over the merlons above.

“Drag your sad arse up here Harbinger, I would have words with you!”

Harbinger slipped into scuttling mode and disappeared from view at a rapid pace as he headed for the staircase to the battlements above.

Minutes passed before the overworked Chamberlain finally emerged, sweating and pasty-faced, onto the walkway behind the King, and approached his Lord with trepidation, wondering what awful misdemeanour he’d unwittingly committed this time, or what vital task he’d omitted to perform.

“Ah Harbinger. About bally time too! You really have got to do something about speeding up your bally response time Harbinger, otherwise things might just get a little sticky for you around here!”

“Y-yes Sire. I’ll see what I can do Sire, although I generally go as fast as I can Sire.”

“Well we’ll have to put you in training then. Can’t have you getting slow and flabby can we.”

“N-no Sire.” replied the lath-thin bony Chamberlain.

The King strolled over to the battlements overlooking the castle meadow.

“Now Harbinger. To the matter in hand.”

“Y-yes Sire?”

“Explain to me if you would, just exactly what those bally things are, and what the cack they’re doing on me bally castle property!”

Harbinger approached the parapet nervously, and reeled with horror as his appalled vision took in the unwelcome sight of a number of huge craggy rocks and boulders scattered untidily about the previously pristine sward of the castle meadow.

Feeling the King’s gimlet eye on the back of his neck, he was about to frame a suitable explanation which would exonerate himself from any possible involvement in whatever was going on down below, when a stranger hove into view on said turf, tottering under the weight of a huge boulder that had clearly not been tailored to fit him, while the huge unwieldy bulging sack that swung from his shoulder exerted a random force that threatened to pull him over in the opposite direction, with the boulder on top of him.

“Who the blazes is that cretin Harbinger?!”

“I-I’ve no idea Sire. S-sorry.”

“Well you’re supposed to know, dammit!! You’re supposed to keep abreast of what’s going on in me bally castle and keep me informed, so we can keep out undesirables and charge the arse off the ones we let in. How the hell am I going to keep up with the rate of inflation of almond tartage otherwise, tell me that eh what, what?!”

The Chamberlain, as usual, had no useful input to contribute to the discussion, so the King kicked the stone wall in frustration and dismissed him with a wave.

“Get down there and find out what the bozo’s up to, then we can work out a suitable scale of punitive fees.”

Harbinger scuttled down the long stone staircase to interview the new arrival. However on his wheezing return to the battlements above, it seemed they were no further forward in their quest for knowledge of the stranger’s business.

“So what is he up to Harbinger? What does the swine want and why is he infesting me turf?”

“Er ... it seems he makes hinges Sire.”

“What?!!”

“Er ... hinges ... Sire.” repeated Harbinger uncertainly, making a flapping swinging door motion with his hands.

“Hinges?! What, for bally doors and gates and things?”

“I suppose so Sire.”

“Then what the cack is he doing sodding up the velvet sward of me bally meadow with foreign boulders, if I might enquire?”

Harbinger shrugged and spread his hands in defeat.

“I suppose I’m going to have to poodle all the way down there myself and sort this out. Remind me to dock your wages for that Harbinger.”

The King crossed to the staircase leading down from the battlements, and paused at the doorway.

"Oh, and if this incident should turn out to be in the slightest degree connected to you, you can pencil in a sunbed appointment for yourself with the Headsman and his brazier."

With this ominous promise the King disappeared down the staircase, a further injunction floating back up to the Chamberlain as his voice receded downwards.

"You'd better come too Harbinger. You never know, I might have to exact emergency retribution on the spot."

With great reluctance Harbinger dragged his weary bones over to the stairs once more.

Meanwhile on the meadow to the rear of the castle, the new arrival to said castle environs had deposited the enormous boulder with risk of imminent hernia, and was fighting the large bulky sack in an attempt to wrestle it to the ground. Finally overcoming it, he began to take out an assortment of hammers and chisels as the King arrived on the scene.

"Ho there Sirrah interloper!! Now see here, all me doors and gates are in perfect working order, but there may be a little carpentry about the place you could turn your hand to. How about that?"

"Carpentry? But I'm total crap at carpentry Sire. I can't tell a chisel from a trepanning saw."

"What? So how the flamin' hell do you install the bally things then, tell me that."

"I just dig a pit and shove them in Sire."

"What?!!! You bury the flamin' things? And then what?"

"Well ... nothing Sire. I just ask for the money and leave."

"And people actually pay you for this service do they?" queried the King, feeling his grip on reality slipping away.

"Well not so far Sire."

"I'm not bally surprised Sirrah! So in a nutshell, if I wanted to order some, you'd turn up, carve up the surface of me bally land, bury the sodding things for no apparent reason, and then try and charge me for the privilege?"

"Er, yes Sire. But it's all in the aesthetics you see Sire. The way the things are cut, and the way they sit in the land Sire. That's what you're really paying for Sire."

"Oh is it really? Well stap me!! And in the meantime, while we're all standing around admiring the lovely aesthetic way the poxy things are rammed into the naffing ground, the gate of me bally castle's falling off!!"

"Is it Sire? You want to get in a carpenter Sire. Get some hinges made."

"WHATTT!!! And have him bury the cacking things in the castle meadow I suppose?"

The Stranger is now as confused as the King.

"Er ... why would he do that Sire?"

"IDON'T BALLY KNOW!!! It was your sodding idea!!"

"But ..."

The Stranger ground to a confused halt, and he and the King stood staring at each other in extreme bafflement.

The King began again, trying a different tack this time.

"Right. So tell me why you've strewn sodding boulders all over me previously pristine meadow then Sirrah. And make it a bally good reason!"

The Stranger answered slowly, picking his words with care.

"I've just been telling you Sire. How I make a pit to put them in ... Sire."

"Don't start that again!! We're just going round in flamin' circles here Sirrah, and I'm getting somewhat hacked off, which could result in a certain amount of pain for you. Now ... tell me about those boulders, and forget the bally hinges."

The Stranger knows he's onto a loser, but the die is cast.

"But ... they ... are ... Sire."

"What are what Sirrah?!" yelled the King, now certain he's sliding down the slippery slope to madness.

"The boulders are the henges Sire."

"HENGES?!*!*!"

The Stranger patted the flank of the nearest boulder.

"This is a henge Sire. Or it will be when I've aligned it and set it in the ground."

The King whirled on his Chamberlain, who had been trying vainly to manoeuvre so that one of the largest boulders came between himself and the King.

"Harbinger you witless bozo!! I've been driven to the brink of madness by this imbecile due to your inability to deliver a simple message correctly! I won't forget this in a hurry!"

The King paused to let this ominous warning sink in, then turned to deal with the new arrival.

"Now then Sirrah. Let's forget all about carpentry and pesky hinges shall we? Now what the blazes is a

henge?”

The Stranger indicated the strewn boulders with a sweep of his arm.

“These are Sire, collectively.”

The King has gone too far down this road to quit now.

“And ... what ... are ... they ... for?”

“Ah ... that’s a difficult one Sire ...”

“Well I think you’ll find a short sojourn in my pillory being pelted with runny fruit by a bunch of rancid peasants loosens up the memory wonderfully Sirrah.”

“It’s not exactly a memory problem Sire. It’s more a sort of never knew in the first place type of situation.”

“So in other words, you travel around the countryside passing yourself off as a bally henge expert, when really you’re just a clueless bozo who sods up the pesky landscape!”

“Er ... it’s a franchise Sire.”

“Oh My God!! So in other words you forked over a huge sum of money for a sure-fire business scheme which some clever twat assured you would make you an over-night expert in henge building?”

“Er yes Sire.”

The Stranger chewed at a ragged nail while the King digested this latest information, then appeared to think of something that might help.

“I did a training course Sire.”

“Oh really. And, tell me, what exactly did that involve?”

“Well ... the bloke took me to see one he’d recently built for a special client Sire. A really big one out in Wessex somewhere. A stone one.”

The King clapped a hand to his brow.

“Oh boy!! I’ve seen that one Sirrah, and apart from being completely pointless and a bally waste of good land, it’s several thousand years old!”

“Oh shit!!”

“Shit indeed Sirrah! And you’re in it right up to the bally armpits. Now tell me pray, have you *actually* built one of these henge thingys?”

“Er ... well I started with a Hay Henge Sire ... cunningly wrought from plaited grass Sire.”

“Hmm. Well worth several groats of some poor slob’s hard earned cash I should think. So, that one’s still standing is it Sirrah? Still a monument to futility?”

“N-no Sire. It got eaten by goats Sire, and the customers took me to court.”

“Quite right! Any others?”

“Well then there was Twig Henge. The customers had a lovely plot by the river put aside for it.”

“So what happened Sirrah?”

“There was a flood and the whole thing fell over and floated away, and I got sued.”

“Sheesh!! Carry on Sirrah.”

“Then I tried Thatch Henge.”

“And ...”

“It burst into flames and burned to the ground Sire.”

“Bloody Hell!! So you got sued again.”

“Just about to go through the courts Sire, so I desperately need to earn some cash, and I thought I’d try my hand at building a Stone Henge Sire.”

“Well no one could accuse you of not persisting in the face of all reason Sirrah. However you’ll find I’m not in the market for a Henge, the bally things look like the last word in pointless futility to me, and if you don’t get the surface of me sward returned to its original velvety texture, you’ll be coming up against Minge Craphound Shagbag Minge on my behalf in open court.”

“Y -yes Sire.”

The King turned to his Chamberlain once more.

“And don’t go thinking I’ve forgotten your part in all this Harbinger. In the meantime you can help this bozo restore the meadow, then I’ll see you in my solar at sundown and we can get down to discussing ... what in Hades is going on over there?!”

The King’s eye had been caught by a thick greeny-purplish cloud that was seeping oozily from the narrow slot of window that ventilated Prang and Dragon’s abode, and hanging ominously just above the surface of the moat.

As he stared in horror, flashes of localised lightning flickered around the narrow embrasure.

“Gad! I’d better go and see what that witless fool Prang is up to this time. You two idiots stay here and get on with your tasks.”

The King broke into a fast regal stride and disappeared into the castle. Harbinger watched him go, then let out

a pent-up breath of relief.

“Thank God he’s out of the way for a while. Now we can get on with repairing the meadow in peace.”

But when Harbinger turned around the Henge Builder had made good his escape and left the hapless Chamberlain to repair the damage by himself.