

Collection of comic misadventures set in medieval England

The Prang Codex

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*The Misadventures of Wizard Prang
Or: A Futurist's Journal*



By JAY HOLLOWAY

PARENTAL
ADVISORY
SWEARY WORDS!

the Prang Codex

*The MISADVENTURES
of WIZARD PRANG
or: A FUTILIST'S JOURNAL*

Being fragments culled from the daily jottings of a medieval Wizard,
together with the true events behind the entries, revealed in a recently
discovered manuscript

By JAY HOLLOWAY

The Prang Codex

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PROLOGUE

"This is an episodic roller-coaster tale of thwarted ambition and over-weaning greed. Success tempered with failure. Double, nay yet triple, -dealing, with a double pike, forward back-somersault and twice round the block with time off for good behaviour. Our tale is one of epic proportions; a Sweeping Saga of Magic Spells, Mystic Potions and Fabulous Beasts "

Okay ... we'll start again.

Let us, Dear Reader, travel back to a Past Time of Romance and Legend. To Merrie Olde Englande and a time of Courtly Love, Knightly Valour and Daily Disappointment.

The time is roughly the mid twelfth century; around eleven fifty-five - (almost lunch-time, or maybe time for a late working brunch in a nice trendy brasserie).

'tis an age perceived vaguely through the swirling mists of murky time as The Dark Ages, and with good reason, whether because of the dark and secret nefarious deeds common thereabouts, or more likely the totally ineffectual rush-torch type lighting system they were lumbered with, the invention of the fluorescent tube being a mere speck on the distant horizon of the map of human invention.

In quite possibly the most mediæval part of England is buried the sombre castle of the self-styled King Egbert The Bold, the last remaining independent Saxon Monarch in England, due to a very nifty loophole in the law which will come to our attention later in the tale, and a man who could teach Hereward the Wake a thing or two about survival in twelfth century Norman England.

King Egbert, known behind his back as King Egbert the Basically-Bloody-Terrifying, due to his hair-trigger temper and huge bristling Saxon handle-bar moustache; his unsettling habit of shouting into peoples faces from uncomfortably-close range at incredible volume; and his ingenious schemes for extracting monies from serfs and lords alike with scant regard for status, wealth or means. For no-one, it seems, is safe from his grasping claws or his unerringly accurate on-board cash-location radar system.¹

The tales are legion of the innocent land-owner quietly going about the daily round, patiently dealing with the misery that is Mediæval life in the mistaken belief that this happy state of affairs will go on for ever, who suddenly discovers he owes twenty-five years back knight-service without the option. A nasty shock indeed for one who wouldn't know a vambrace if it leapt up at him and assaulted him violently about the face with a limp sturgeon.

The castle with which we are unfortunate enough to be concerned is poised on a low rocky crag, or mayhap a low craggy rock, hanging on by its fingernails above a small valley containing sprawling untidy scrubby farmland of mind-numbing poverty, beyond which is a poor and shabby excuse for a town sitting astride a narrow and now long-lost tributary of the Thames, a league or two down river of the City of London, on the Kentish side.

The whole of the King's small realm is surrounded by a moth-eaten primæval forest, and is effectively sealed off from the rest of so-called civilisation, such as it is in mediæval England, and yet bizarrely a constant thin stream of divers wandering troubadours, mediæval merchants, palliards, hucksters and hawkers, jongleurs, vagabonds, migrant workers, minstrels, mummers, malefactors, inventors, entrepreneurs, con-men, travellers and time-travellers² of all shapes and sizes, trickle through King Egbert's small domain, and somehow inevitably find their way to his door.

The King's small empire is so cut off from the general run of life, that critics have commented that it has been stuck

¹ But be it known that the one thing he fears above all are the legal sharks with their writs and injunctions and arcane incantations of *sub judice* and *habeas corpus* and the terrible power of the small print nestling at the foot of a binding clause.

² Anachronistic characters are not unknown here for King Egbert's realm has scant regard for the conventions of historical fact or the protocols of linear time.

in eleven-oh-one for the last half-century, causing even the reactionary Guylde of Gothycke Artysannes to denounce it as old-fashioned, or as they would have it, *fasshyonné in a mannere moste archaic*, and compelling them to look around for more up-to-date premises, with all *modde-connes*, for their meetings.

There is, of course, cunning method in the King's apparent madness, for if the living standards lag behind at pre-Big Billy Conqueror levels, then so do the wages, allowing the King to stash away an obscene amount of cash while paying his serfs and villeins the equivalent of a handful of poor grade road aggregate for each lunar month they toil.

Against this backdrop of dark-age consciousness and mediæval catering are played the tales of the misadventures of Wizard Prang, graduate of the Thaddeus Q Susquehannah Postal University³ by a scant one percent above the minimum pass mark, and unwilling patsy in the King's various schemes to increase his personal wealth and general standing in the greater world beyond his boundaries - for, secretly, 'tis the King's fondest wish to become a Mediæval Mogul, a force to be reckoned with, and an important player in the game of life upon the greater span of the World's stage, if only he could secure an influential honorary appointment at the Plantagenet Court alongside the new King Henry II, a monarch, 'tis rumoured, with a temper to match his own.

Wizard Prang, that walking testimonial to the woeful level of competence required to achieve a Susquehannah Diploma, and living embodiment of the difficult technique of snatching defeat from the very jaws of success.

Yes dear Trembling Reader, this is a tale of dark deeds, underhand dealings, dodgy traffickings, and horrible tuneless wassailing to the accompaniment of hideous wailing crumhorns. Of coercion, confidence tricks, lack-of-confidence tricks, self-confidence tricks, ring-of-confidence-tricks, magicke, fire and brimstone, and the turning of a quick profit at a dodgy second-hand cart auction.

Our window into this murky medieval world is through the medium of Prang's Journal, a scruffy assemblage of parchment sheets loosely bound in a ratty piece of second-hand vellum, that has survived the ravages of the centuries against all odds. Prang's daily entries however are somewhat economical with the truth to put it mildly, tending to gloss over his faux pas in his dealings with the King and even omitting some of the worst episodes altogether. Fortunately for the sake of history we are able to assemble the true events behind these woefully sketchy diary entries, from various recently-discovered contemporary writings which, unfortunately from Prang's viewpoint, put the record straight.

Here, for the first time together, are extracts from Wizard Prang's Journal, a chronicle clearly not in the same class as Samuel Pepys, together with the real story behind each entry.

³ Academy Susquehannah; Specialities are pastoral study courses in Wizarding, Tap-dance, Mime, Gallows Construction 101, & Quantity Surveying: "if you've got the price of the postage, we've got your diploma"

PART IV: THE MAGIC CARPET

"... September 9th Get back from my holiday in the country today to find the circus was in town. That really put the King in a rage - he hates circuses even more than plays. I found an old book of mysterious tales of the Ancient East and read about flying carpets, but when I conjured one up a stupid clown naused everything up & made the King think it was my fault. Didn't have time to make gold today - probably just as well, we're running out of furniture."

CHAPTER 13

Fortunately for Prang, the ground was so cracked and dry that it voraciously hoovered up the waters of the new inland lagoon like an alcoholic camel that had had the misfortune to be marooned in Prestatyn as the house-guest of a strict Methodist chapel go-er for the thick end of a very dry six months, and then given free reign in a distillery.

As for the castle, it was the first decent clean-out it had had since long before the Battle of Hastings, and even the mouldering wall-hangings had improved with the soaking, apart from the really seriously dilapidated ones that had simply evaporated like the morning mist on a warm Autumn day.

Once the geyser had settled down into a respectable and usable spring, and the wells were all running properly again, things started to get back to normal, or at least as normal as they ever were.

The King instructed Harbinger to take the cost of the repairs to the castle furniture, fixtures and fittings out of Prang's wages, but Harbinger, having consulted his mind-numbingly detailed records in his crabbed and constipated handwriting, pointed out that, due to past misdemeanours, Prang's next wage packet wasn't due until at least very late Renaissance if not well into the Jacobean Period, and he therefore stood no chance of paying for the replacement of so much as a rusty paperclip, and the sequestering of non-existent funds was a futile exercise simply designed to send the King into a tooth-gnashing rage.

The King therefore put the bite on local insurance underwriters Al Lyons & Lester, the two Lyons brothers who sadly hadn't, it seemed, had the foresight to insure themselves against the King, who made them back-date his non-existent Castle Fabric and Contents Fire, Accidental Damage and Theft policy to cover the recent deluge, and make him a huge compensatory pay-out, thus putting the broke into Insurance Broker. All honours being more or less equal, the King amused himself by affecting to be still after Prang's blood, thereby causing him to sleep rough in the hills for several weeks longer than was really needful, and occasioning the King the odd grin over an almond tart or two.

Eventually Prang grew tired of grubbing around in the undergrowth for nourishment, and came creeping back to the castle under cover of a dark moonless night, slipped in through the grimly-slimy aperture of one of the privy outfalls, and lay low in his room, his meals secretly smuggled down to him by Dragon while he waited until the King's temper had improved.

Finally the drought ended and the countryside slowly became greener as it eased gently into a slumbering golden Autumn, and one lazy afternoon the King sat at the table in his solar, bathed in a warm shaft of sunlight, as he comprehensively polished off the last of a large almond and lemon tart with marchpane embellishments.

The door eased open and Harbinger slid subserviently through the opening.

"How goes the day, my Liege?"

"Get bent Harbinger!" quoth the King cheerfully.

"Er ... yes Sire."

Harbinger approached the royal table, clutching a small screwed up parchment in his twig-like fingers.

"Er Sire ... there is a circus come to town Sire. They want to set up camp on the castle meadow Sire."

"WHAATT!! A bally circus??!! That's another bunch of fatuous bozos I can well do without. They're those idiots that insist on plastering so-called comedy make-up all over their hideous faces and prat about in what they seem to assume is a highly hilarious manner aren't they Harbinger?"

"There did seem to be a few of those about Sire. They call themselves clowns Sire."

"Oh do they really? And I suppose they've got idiots on stilts and fools walking across a stupid twangy wire, and those oh-so-funny custard pies in the face too?"

"Oh yes Sire, they've got all of those."

"Gad, why do these swine insist on infesting my bally castle? Well go and hit them hard in the old wallet Harbinger. Charge them a parking fee for every poxy cart, wagon, handcart, litter or flamin' wheelbarrow they possess, and stabling and feed for anything with four legs. Then charge all the humans for board and lodging, and charge the bally clowns double for having the audacity to think that they're remotely funny, and I think we've got all bases covered financially speaking."

"Y-yes Sire. I'll get onto it right away shall I?"

"You'd better Harbinger. I'll stroll along to take a look myself a bit later, so make sure you've got everything accounted for, or I'll be wanting a bally convincing explanation why."

Harbinger left on his latest errand, while the King strolled to the window to see if he could get a glimpse of the circus arriving and gauge how catastrophic an effect it was likely to inflict on his property.

Meanwhile the warm Autumn sun had filtered in to the basement room, and Prang was slumped deep in a saggy old armchair in a narrow shaft of sunlight, with his head buried deep in a book for the third day in succession. Dragon, bored out of his skull with nothing to do and irritated that Prang was so absorbed, tried with consummate futility to attract his attention.

"Prangy! Yo, Prangy!!"

Prang didn't even twitch.

Dragon whistled piercingly through his fangs, and when that produced no result, he constructed an enormous megaphone out of old creased sheets of parchment, then went over to near where Prang was sitting and positioned himself on an old chest. When he was standing at a comfortable height, he aimed the gaping mouth of the megaphone at the side of Prang's head and yelled full-bore straight down the tunnel of his ear.

"Oy, cloth-ears! I'm really, really bored here Wack, let's find somethin' to do before I go right out of me flamin' skull with the mind-numbin' soddin' tediousness of life!!"

Prang merely turned a page and carried on reading.

In desperation Dragon searched the room until he found a worn leather mediæval slipper and hurled it across the room. It ricocheted off the back of Prang's head with a loud THWACKK!! and rebounded into his lap, knocking him into the air with exaggerated force, his heels slipping off the edge of the table with a nerve-jangling crash.

"Whassat? What's going on?"

He picked up the slipper and stared at it in a puzzled fashion.

"Hmm, that's interesting. A magical flying slipper. Where the hell did that come from?"

Dragon just whistled innocently and stared up at the ceiling, suppressing a grin as Prang tried to launch the slipper to test its mystic powers, but it just fell to the floor.

"Sod it, a piece of broken crap, just like everything else around here."

He examined it again, but it just seemed to be a very ordinary pointy-toe mediæval slipper, so he shrugged and tossed it over his shoulder.

The falling slipper rebounded off the head of a passing mouse, who tottered weakly about, badly stunned and seeing whole new constellations of stars whizzing around his head.

"Erg! I don't feel very well, I think I'll go and have a lie down."

The mouse traversed the room in a strange wandering figure-of-eight pattern, his eyes crossed, as he headed for the safety of his mouse-hole.⁴

Prang buried his head in his book once again.

"Right, now where was I?"

Dragon clapped a hand despairingly over his eyes.

"Holy frijoles! I don't believe it!"

⁴ Note for those sceptical readers who question the presence of mouse holes in a stone castle: This particular breed of medieval mouse, now extinct through the great Netherlands Cheese Famine of the late fourteenth century, had incredibly powerful stone-chewing teeth, and a gang of them would easily have halved the production time on the Channel Tunnel, with no overtime, luncheon vouchers or performance-related bonuses.

He took a long run-up, shot across the room, trampolined from a nearby foot-stool straight onto Prang's chest and grabbed up a handful of tatty robe at the Wizard's throat as he yelled with the venomous breath of hot coals right into his face.

"FLAMIN' ADA. WILL YOU NAFFIN' WAKE UP YOU BORING FART!!"

Prang came to slowly and looked vaguely around the room.

"Pardon? Did you say something Dragon?"

"Oh no! Nothing at all. Not a single syllable has passed through the portals of me snout, Oh Cloth-eared One."

He shoved a be-clawed finger up the end of Prang's hooter and grasped him firmly by the inside of the nostril.

"Look, you've had your nose buried in this mouldy old book for absolute æons. Your chores are all going to pot and the King's in serious danger of remembering your rather active part, not to say pivotal rôle, in La Grande Déluge all over again."

A black sooty cloud began to gather above Dragon's head as he warmed to his theme.

"This incidentally means that yours truly, as a known associate, is getting it right in the neck. What's it all about, Prangy?"

Prang's eyes gradually re-focused and he waved the book under Dragon's nose.

"Eh? Oh this book. You've got to read it Dragon, it's great. I got it from that merchant who was here last week on his way back from the East. It's full of *tayles of mysterie and magycke*."

Dragon snorted shortly, charring the front of Prang's robe, and patently unimpressed.

"Yes and I bet that dodgy merchant ripped you off a treat too. Mind you, you could do with a bit of help with your magic now and then, so I suppose it might come in useful one of these days."

"Oh thanks a bunch Dragon. Anyway the Eastern sorcerers and so on have these amazing magic carpets on which they are able to fly through the air and transport them where-ever they want to go in the world."

Dragon howled with laughter and clutched feebly at his sides in simulated pain.

"A likely story! I reckon that merchant was pulling your leg. I bet he's sitting at home right now laughing up his sleeve as he counts the teetering stacks of cash collected from gullible fools like you."

Prang laid the book down on the table and patted it earnestly.

"No, no it's all true. These are *Anciente Tayles of Mysterie and Magycke* handed down by word of mouth for generations."

"The only mystery is how you always get taken in by this sort of laughably implausible old cobblers. It sounds pretty far-fetched to me, and by the way, pronouncing the title in a pseudo-arcane style of speech doesn't make it any more mysterious."

But it was too late, Prang was already dreaming of inheriting the mantle of a powerful Eastern mystic, boosting his magical powers to new heights, and becoming an important and powerful favoured Grand Vizier at the King's right hand, with fitting remuneration, sickness and accident insurance, and a pension scheme to match.

"Just think how useful a magic carpet would be. You could fly where-ever you wanted at a whim with no effort at all..."

"I think I'd rather wait for a bus meself."

"I'm sure I could do it too Dragon. In fact I think I'll try to cast a spell and conjure one up right now, there's plenty of useful tips on how to do it in this book, and some weird diagrams in the back."

Dragon was rather less than impressed.

"Oh here we go. This'll be another one of your five minute fads. You'll soon get fed up with it when you find it's a lot harder than you thought and you can't flamin' do it!"

Prang began to cast spells and mix potions while Dragon watched with a resigned air.

With a final wiggle of his fingers there was a crackling purple flash, and a very small tatty lace doily appeared floating in a very pallid half-hearted fashion, as if ashamed of its insipid appearance.

Prang poked it doubtfully.

"Oo-er. What's this?"

Dragon rolled about the floor laughing.

"It's your magic carpet. Let's climb on and zoom off to the Court of Burgundy for an intimate private luncheon

appointment with the Duke, accompanied by a musical soirée courtesy of Guillaume de Machaut and the Household Band of His Grace's Cornets and Sackbuts."

"Stop taking the piss Dragon. I'm doing my best."

"Gawd help us in that case me old fruit!"

Prang grabbed the doily and threw it out of the window, where it was caught by a breeze and wafted down to alight on the head of a passing otter, who examined it in a pleased fashion and modelled it in a small oval bejewelled mirror pulled from the recesses of a furry armpit for the purpose.

"Ooh, what a lovely hat. I shall wear it for ever."

Meanwhile Prang turned to his bookshelf and took down a large and very dog-eared tome.

"Time to get a bit serious now Dragon. Let's have a gander in here, see if there's any mention of carpets of a flying persuasion."

He flicked through his spell book until he found a likely incantation.

"Just cross-reference this one with my new Eastern Mystic's book. Right, let's have another go."

"Oh come on Prangy, give up now while you're even slightly ahead, you've got no chance mate."

"Thanks for that vote of confidence Dragon."

"Any time Amigo!"

Prang cast his spell again and a mangy, flea-infested rush mat materialised before his appalled eyes.

Dragon collapsed with helpless laughter.

"This is brilliant! Hey, you remember that hopeless jester Pencil-neck hired last week? Well he was a total non-starter in the comedy stakes compared to you, you ought to be on the stage."

"Oh give over Dragon. I can do without all the heckling from the stalls. I'm going to have another try anyway. So here goes."

Prang threw himself into a frenzy of futile spells, while Hogarth, disturbed by all the activity, popped out of the top of Prang's hat to see what was going on, and began to parody Prang's magic passes to Dragon's extreme amusement, as strange floating fabric samples of every type began to appear, hovering eagerly at shoulder height, as if awaiting travel and itinerary instructions.

Meanwhile Harbinger had returned from his circus marshalling activities, the carts and wagons having been parked in a rough group at the rear of the field, while the circus crew began unpacking the big-top in readiness to erect it in the centre of the castle meadow, and was complaining bitterly about being made the butt of a series of hideous innuendoes courtesy of a rag-tag bunch of badly-made up clowns.

"I think you're right about those clowns Sire. They're about as funny as a bout of diarrhoea in a hurricane, and they were all taking the piss out of me."

"I, conversely, am almost beginning to warm to the swine, but yes you're right, the whole pestilential circus affair is nothing but the bastard scion of Theatre, and you know what I think of that Harbinger."

"Absolutely Sire."

For once the King and Harbinger were in accord.

The King rose from his table, his tartage activities temporarily suspended, and perambulated slowly around his sunlit solar.

"I trust you've prised sufficient quantities of cash-money from the swine Harbinger? They should pay right royally for the privilege of sodding up the turf on me bally meadow, and..."

The King's gaze was caught by the richly woven circular carpet in the centre of his solar, on which stood his reclining throne. The fringed edges of the carpet seemed to be lifting slightly and rippling in a novel and unsettling manner.

"What the hell's going on there Harbinger?"

"N-no idea Sire."

"Get over there and take a look."

"D-do I have to Sire?"

They stood and watched as the margins of the carpet rippled gently two or three inches above the floorboards.

"I don't like the look of that Harbinger, call for the carpenter and get the thing nailed down. It reminds me rather hideously of that shitbag Short's pestilential mangy wig."

Harbinger headed for the door on his latest errand, being very careful to skirt the undulating carpet at a very safe distance as he did so.

"Oh, and Harbinger," added the King "go and tell Prang to attend the performance of this hideous circus affair this evening. You never know, it might give him the idea of running away from home to join the bally thing."

"Righto Sire."

CHAPTER 14

 little later in the evening, Harbinger worked his weary way down to Prang and Dragon's room in the depths of the castle. He pushed the door open with difficulty, and found his way barred by a sea of strange floating objects. Napkins, straw mats, palliasses, table cloths, handkerchiefs, loin cloths, bandannas and lengths of sacking jostled each other for flying space in front of his astonished eyes.

He pushed his way through the fabric barrier, until he espied Prang at the epicentre, furiously making arcane passes in the hope that one of them would work.

Finally accepting the inevitable, he quit his magical gestures and fell back into his chair exhausted.

"Stone me I'm flamin' knackered."

Dragon looked around the room and whistled through his fangs.

"Cor blimey. All those spells and not a magic carpet in sight. You'll have to try a bit harder Prang."

"No chance Mate, I'm clapped out."

Harbinger thrust aside a particularly mange-ridden horse-blanket and confronted the Wizard.

"What on earth are you up to Prang?"

"Oh what do you want Pencil-neck?"

"I've come to deliver a message from the King. He wants you to attend a performance of the circus that's recently arrived on the castle meadow."

"A circus? Here? And it's got past the King?"

"Well he has taken rather a lot of money from them."

"I should think so, knowing what the King thinks of circuses. Anyway, why should I go and watch it Harbinger? I don't suppose the King will be there."

"Well there are illusionists on the bill Prang. They may be good."

"Oh crap!! P'raps I'd better go and check them out. Just in case."

Harbinger shoved his way to the door through the sea of faux flying carpets.

"Yes, and I can't fathom what you're trying to achieve in here Prang, but I suggest you get rid of it before it all gets away."

"Oh blow it out your arse Pencil-neck." replied Prang absently as the Chamberlain exited, and turned to address the problem of the flying objects once more.

"I'll just cancel this lot for safety Dragon, then we can go and check this circus out."

"Oh I'm included too am I? Thanks a bunch. You know the circus is about as entertaining as piles I suppose?"

"Yes I know, but I don't like the sound of these illusionists."

Prang cast a spell to cancel the ones he'd cast earlier, but nothing happened, and however hard he tried he couldn't seem to get rid of the crap he'd conjured up. Eventually he had to admit defeat as it was getting very late, so he and Dragon jammed a broom through the handle of the door to keep everything under wraps, and left for the circus.



Prang & Dragon arrived at the castle meadow and found their way barred by a newly erected fence around the circus area as the King hove into view on the path behind them.

"Bloody hell that was a close one Dragon. And what's the King doing here anyway? He can't stick the circus."

"Search me Matey, but I expect we'll find out soon enough."

At that moment Harbinger appeared from the direction of the cluster of caravans, accompanied by one of the downns, and was hailed by the King.

"Get your bony arse over here Harbinger!!"

Harbinger approached at a guilt-ridden scuttle, followed by the down in flapping comedy boots.

"Ah Harbinger. Pass the word to who-ever's running this hideous affair, that I couldn't give a pile of owl droppings

what they charge the punters for the dubious privilege of watching the bally thing, but that I expect fifty percent of the door take at the end of the night."

The clown standing behind Harbinger reeled and paled slightly under his make-up.

"Er, yes Sire. Er ... Sire, this is in fact the owner of the circus ..."

"GAAAHH!! What in Hades is that bally repellent object on your head Sirrah?!!"

The King was staring with distaste at the bright orange fright wig the clown was wearing.

"That's the most offensive bally awful wig I've seen in all me chuff Sirrah! Get the pestilential thing off in my presence!"

The King grasped the wig and yanked at it with extreme force, while the clown yelled with pain and clutched his head.

"Gad! The bally thing's real! Couldn't you wear a hat Sirrah? Or a bag over your head?"

Harbinger nervously intervened before the King got too personal.

"... er Sire, this is Joey Pantolooni."

"Oh is it? Well hello to you Sirrah Loonypants. Loony is a given, obviously, but I suspect that pants may also be a very apt description of your pestilental show."

The clown rubbed at his smarting scalp.

"Sire, I must protest at the punitive fifty percent of the gate you are asking ... er Sire. After all we are paying board and lodging and parking charges Sire."

"Well you're just going to have to lump it, Sirrah Bozo The Clown. Any more bally complaints and I'll have you so tied up in legal contracts you'll be unable to move a muscle, and will find, in comparison, that walking in those bally silly big-foot clown boots is a breeze."

The clown could do little but agree to the King's demands, so the deal was settled.

"Now Sirrah, I'm going in to see just how nerve-crashingly dire this show is, so you'd better arrange a bally comfortable chair for me at the ringside. Come on Prang, look lively, you're going to have to suffer this thing too."

The King swept into the big-top, Pantolooni flapping ahead in his big shoes to arrange a suitably regal chair. Prang made to follow, but was stopped at the gate by a particularly ugly looking minion demanding the entrance fee, so had to dig deep into his pouch before gaining access and joining the King.

The show was every bit as dire as the King had suspected, and Prang was relieved when he discovered that the illusionist left the audience with no illusions that he had any skill whatsoever, and his mind was soon wandering as he began to mentally tackle the problem of making carpets fly once again, and wondering where he'd gone wrong before.

The King was fidgeting testily and beginning to contemplate having the entire talentless troupe of misfits strung up on a gantry and pelted with rotten fruit and ordure, when Prang sat bolt upright and grabbed Dragon's arm.

"I think I've got it Dragon!"

"So have I Matey, if you're referring to senile dementia brought on by advanced naffin' boredom."

"No no! I'm thinking about the flying carpet project. I went like ... that, when what I should have done is gone like ... that!"

Prang demonstrated some arcane, and let's face it, totally similar passes in the air before Dragon's snout.

"Yes well you've got me Prangy. It looks more like you're trying to do that cat's cradle thingy, only without the aid of a net, if you see what I mean. Still, if you're happy I suppose."

Unbeknown to the members of the audience, out of sight behind the rudimentary plank seating, the bottom edges of the big-top began to ripple gently.

"Well I know where we went wrong now Dragon ..."

"No Mon Ami, where we went wrong was coming to see this abysmal circus show. I can feel me flamin' brain rotting."

The King, catching the end of the conversation, leaned over to make an observation of his own.

"Yes, correct me if I'm wrong Prôles, but are these halfwits in fact worse than that shitbag Short and his friend the craphound Curly, even including the awful mangy wig?"

Dragon was about to concur that the impossible was in fact true, when they became aware of the low drumming sound of the heavy canvas of the big-top.

"What in Hades is going on here? Harbinger, find out what's occurring."

"Y-yes Sire ... I ..."

Harbinger rose to his feet, and as he did so, the tightening canvas behind him exerted an extra tug on the ropes, and with a loud twang one of them tautened and the heavy peg flew out of the ground, swung in a wide arc on the end of the rope and knocked Harbinger flying into the ring with a heavy blow to the back of his head.

The hapless Chamberlain cartwheeled into the nearest, and co-incidentally the most ham-fisted dispraxic, down and pitched him onto his arse, while Harbinger landed on his face in a spray of damp sawdust.

The crowd roared with laughter and even the King applauded.

"This is the funniest thing we've seen so far, although it's nothing but simple pratfalls with no comedic subtext. I trust you're doing this on your own time, by the way Harbinger. I wouldn't like to think I was having to pay you to indulge yourself in a new career on my time."

Harbinger attempted to rise, but the heavy peg on the end of its rope was already on the return journey. It curled round the back of his legs and the weight of the peg swung the rope two or three times around until it had tightened securely, before sweeping him off his feet and into the air.

By this time it was obvious from the way the main poles were lifting clear of the ground, that something odd was happening to the big-top.

Daylight was beginning to show at the base of the walls and the canvas was billowing and sagging in a frightening manner. Meanwhile Harbinger soared up into the roof of the tent and became enmeshed in the high wire act's apparatus.

"What in Hades are you playing at Harbinger?! This is no time for this sort of foolery! Get down here at once and find out what the blazes is happening!!"

Harbinger struggled with the cables wrapped around his body, and while the King's attention was distracted Dragon nudged Prang in the ribs.

"Let's make ourselves scarce Prangy. I've figured out what's going on here."

Prang however was enjoying Harbinger's discomfiture on the end of the rope.

"Hang on Dragon, Harbinger's cocked up big-time here, let's just enjoy it for a moment."

Dragon was nudging Prang bodily along the wooden bench towards the exit.

"It's you that's flamin' cocked up Prangy, you idiot! You've just made an enormous magic carpet out of the big-top canvas!"

Prang went white as the truth hit him like a morning star round the back of the cranium.

"Oh my God!! Let's get out of here Dragon, before the King realises what's going on."

"Yeah, and more to the point, who's responsible."

However, at that moment, the canvas ground-sheet laid down on the earth beneath the sawdust and the ring perimeter markers, began to emulate the actions of the big-top canopy, and bulged through its covering of sawdust in places like the preliminary outbreaks of some hideous mediaeval pox, then rose before the King's appalled eyes, scattering a few bushels of sawdust over the first few rows of the audience.

Items of ring furniture began to tumble about the terrified watchers in a decidedly homicidal manner as the ground-sheet really got into its stride, while sections of poles began dropping out of the air-borne canopy above it, trailing lethal wires like guided missiles.

The high wire apparatus began disassembling itself in mid air like the cheapest form of flat-pack wardrobe, and Harbinger found himself rapidly lowered towards the billowing ground-sheet in a series of heart-stopping swoops, separated by instantaneously braked stops which brought him up short in socket-wrenching jerks on his inadequate limbs, until he came to rest upside-down on the end of a twanging wire a mere inch or two beyond the end of the King's moustache.

"What in Hades are you up to Harbinger?!"

"I-it's not my fault Sire, the big-top has turned into a giant magic carpet Sire!"

Harbinger struggled to regain terra firma, but was too entangled in the cables, so had to content himself with twanging faintly in a very nervous inverted fashion in front of the King's nose.

"Oh really Harbinger? And why would you think that? Do you know something perchance? Are you deeply enmeshed in whatever hideous calamity is unfolding before me, eh what?!"

"It's Prang Sire. It's his fault! He's been making flying carpets Sire."

The King eased his moustache dangerously close to the end of Harbinger's nose.

"Are you sure about this Harbinger? Is this intelligence of your own knowledge? Or are you perchance making the whole thing up in order to shift the blame onto some-one else, like the weaselly craphound you are?"

"N-no Sire. His room was full of the things earlier Sire. They were flapping about all over the place. They're probably all still there Sire, shall I go and look S... AAGGHHH!!!"

Suddenly Harbinger shot into orbit with a loud twang as the big-top shifted and the rope tightened again, and he somersaulted over the high wire in a spectacular improvised back-roll.

"I wish you'd stop bally arsing around and concentrate on the matter in hand Harbinger!"

A tent support the size of a young telegraph pole whistled past the King's head, twanging the end of his moustache on its journey through, and he decided that it was time to move.

"You just carry on enjoying y'self Harbinger, while I go and have a little summit meeting with Prang."

The King dodged a flurry of ring apparatus, barged a clown to the ground and headed for the safety of the outside world.

"Out of my way you Bozo! I'm getting out of this hellhole!!"

As the King passed through the entrance, the entire big-top canvas lifted and the side walls hovered above him. He eyed them warily and set off for the castle, muttering darkly under his breath, then encountered Joey Pantolooni holding onto a thrumming rope in a futile gesture of faux control.

"Ah! Sirrah Loonypants! If you could just kindly get your bally circus gear under control and collect all those bozos together, you can kindly sod off out of me bally castle! After handing over the fifty percent gate money of course!"

"B-but Sire, the performance was aborted halfway through Sire. People were asking for their money back S..."

"Not my bally problem Sirrah! In fact judging by the pestilential crap-awful performances you put on, I'd hazard you ought to be bally used to that sort of thing! Just hand over the loot to my steward at the gate. You'll find him standing next to the really big muscular cove in black wearing the interesting black leather hood. The one giving a large axe a good seeing to with a tin of metal polish."

"Y-yes Sire."

Pantolooni stumbled off to gather his troupe together, mumbling brokenly under his breath.

"God, no wonder all our props and gear are total crap. We never seem to make any money at this game, barely enough to keep an anorexic peasant in square meals."

With an ominous thrumming sound, the big-top billowed, then tightened, the canvas tore at one corner and the last few remaining ropes gave way. The grotesque bloated canvas envelope wobbled dangerously fifteen feet above the ground as one of the last iron pegs flew outward on the end of its rope, was released at the limit of the parabola, and rocketed earthwards, piercing the flapping end of Pantolooni's boot and pinning it to the ground. "Oh shit!! Add a new big-top and pair of clown boots to the shopping list of gear we can't afford."

The King, spotting the aerial danger out of the corner of his eye, broke into a trot and gained the rear entrance of the castle, where a passing scullion vouchsafed the information, prompted by the juxtaposition of King's boot and serf's arse, that Prang could be found up on the battlements above the inner ward.

"Hmm, I'd better get up there pronto. It's just like that bozo to attempt some serious Grande Guignol type magic and really cock things up."

The King headed for the staircase to the battlements.



Meanwhile Prang was fighting a losing battle with an armada of floating fabric that had got loose from his room and was attempting to gain the battlements via the doorway of the West Tower. He shoved vainly at the lead "magic carpet" with a broom, but was clearly on the losing end.

"Just wait 'til I find out which idiot let this lot out of our room! Dragon, give us a hand here Mate, it's all got out of control!"

Dragon, however, was looking out over the battlements and watching the futile antics of Joey Pantlooni as he tried to extricate the iron peg from the toe of his boot, when the motions of the big-top canvas caught his attention. The huge distended billowing grey whale-like shape was floating free, and looked like making its mind up to head for the castle.

"We've got an even bigger problem over here Prangy," he called over his shoulder to his companion as he eyed the undulating leviathan nervously, "the flamin' big-top's coming th..."

"What in Hades is going on up here?!!!"

There was a crash as the door of the gate-house tower was thrown wide and the King appeared.

"What are you up to Prang?! That bally circus has gone haywire down there and the bally tent has got away and ... AAGGGHHH!!!"

The King suddenly became aware of the huge looming shape which had appeared over the battlements and was hovering just above him. The heavy canvas flapped and boomed alarmingly and the trailing cables began stripping merlons from the crest of the castle walls. In the wake of the canvas, the ground-sheet brought up the rear shedding items of ring furniture which fell on the scattering peasants below, while a huge cloud of damp sawdust began to cover everything.

"You imbecile Prang!!! Do something!!"

"B-but Sire d-do you think that's wise? I..."

"Just bally get on with it Prang before that thing smothers us all!"

Prang braced himself against an uneasy wind that had arisen, took a grubby piece of parchment from his robe, and prepared himself for one last gargantuan effort.

He cast his spell and there was a sudden terrifying clap of thunder which rolled around the towers as if trying to dislodge them, followed by an appalling cloud of choking purple smoke. The sky darkened as if betokening the crack of doom, but when the smoke finally rolled sluggishly away, the hovering canvas was still there, and if possible even closer.

"Prang, this is not in the slightest degree amusing. Get rid of that bally menacing tent immediately."

Prang began to search his robe in desperation for another spell, when the heavy wooden door leading to the West Tower began to vibrate with the distant sound of crashes and bangs. Dragon and Prang stared at each other in consternation and rising hysteria.

"Oh gawd, what the flamin' hell's that?"

"Search me Matey."

The noises got louder and more and more horrendous as the flagstones began to tremble under their feet. They looked at each other nervously, wondering if the spell was about to demolish the castle from under their very feet, while the King looked as if he was in the grip of an apoplectic fit as he contemplated yet another Prang débâcle and the imminent destruction of his castle.

"Whatever it is, it's coming closer Dragon!"

"Stand by to evacuate Amigo!"

"Don't be disgusting Dragon!"

"I meant run away, you berk."

Suddenly the door at the top of the tower flew into a thousand flying splinters as the large circular carpet from the King's solar burst through and wobbled into view sagging under the weight of the King's throne, a huge chest of drawers teetering precariously right at the edge.

The carpet swooped through the wreckage of the door and headed straight for the King in a sort of homing instinct. The King turned to run, but had barely begun to pick up speed when the circus ground-sheet suddenly appeared and shot over the battlements right in front of him, shedding a dangerous trail of ring furniture and sawdust, the hapless Pantlooni caught in a trailing rope and hanging on for dear life with his shredded boot and hideous fright-wig hairdo flapping in the slipstream.

Clown and King both reacted with shrill shouts of fear.

"AAAGGHHH!!! Out of my way you buffoon!!!"

"AAAGGHHH!!! Look out King!!"

The King stopped dead in his tracks and looked frantically this way and that for a way out, but the solar carpet was right on top of him. It dived suddenly and he was scooped up onto the seat of his throne where he sat red-faced with apoplectic rage, gripping the arms of the throne with white-knuckled fingers as the drawers of the chest shot frantically in and out, scattering a slip-stream of mediæval odds and sods as the carpet described a neat Immelmann turn above the tower and looped Pantolooni's flying ground-sheet. The King's jaws were firmly clenched with fear, and the grinding of his teeth could have drowned out a brigade of Emperor Maximilian's special guard drilling in heavy battle armour on a shingle beach in typical over-enthusiastic Austrian fashion.

Prang and Dragon cowered in terror as the carpet swooped over them completely out of control, and the King reached down to shake his fist at them as he passed overhead yelling at the top of his lungs, then grabbed nervously for the arms of his chair with a suppressed scream as the carpet side-slipped in a thermal rising from the battlements and slalomed across the billowing upper surface of the big-top canvas which rose abruptly into view to meet it over the crenellations.

"PRAANNGG!!! I have a discreet little memo to pass on to you, when you have the time that is!!!"

"Oh blimey! See you later Dragon. I've got to fly!"

Prang scuttled off across the battlements, almost tripping himself up on the hem of his robe in his panic, pursued by the King on his bulging carpet now riding the back of the flapping circus tent like a Hawaiian surfer, howling with rage, and plainly out for Prang's blood, as the trailing cables demolished the upper surfaces of the castle's front elevation.

The circus ground-sheet meanwhile had circled the castle towers and was on its return journey across the battlements as Prang attempted to escape the wrath of the King, and with single-minded inevitability crossed the walkway right in front of him and scooped him up too. Clown and Wizard clutched each other like drowning men, as the ground-sheet looped the West Tower once more and disappeared over the battlements, pursued by the surfing King on his own magic carpet.

Dragon, huddled under the battlements for safety, got up warily as the airspace above him cleared of homicidal flying machines, and dusted himself off. He spotted Prang's hat where it had fallen in his flight and picked it up.

"Hogarth? Are you in there mate?"

Hogarth struggled to the surface spitting sawdust, and looked after the rapidly disappearing King.

"Hmm. Old Prangy'll be on the carpet all right when the King gets hold of him Dragon!"

"Oy watch it Hogarth! I do the jokes around here Mush!"

PART V: THE FIREWORK SHOW

"... December 17th: Tried to make gold today - waste of time as usual. Set fire to the floorboards - King not happy - what a surprise. Rijk back in the castle chipping away - still can't tell what it is. A horrible fat little twat of a Merchant staying with us told the King about firework shows & of course he had to have one: & OF COURSE I had to make the bastards. Got away with it though & made the Merchant look a prat so it all worked out OK."

CHAPTER 15

 Twelve long eventful months had passed since the unscheduled and more than unwelcome visit of the two hammy thespians, Josiah Short and Cyrus Curly, but the memory of the experience was still hideously fresh in the King's mind, and he found himself reliving the episode in his nightmarish dreams once again with the onset of winter ... a thousand hideous memories reborn in every snow drift and sparkling icicle.

Once more the freezing wind howled around the castle, once again Rijk Van Dyke was perched at the top of a set of trestles chipping manically away at a huge inland iceberg, and once more visitors were within the King's domain.

He tried to distract his mind from the ghosts of the past by entertaining a recently-arrived Merchant, but to be honest the bloke was boring the pants off him with his interminable tales and his odious air of portly self-importance, and ruining what would otherwise have been a splendid banquet featuring all his favourite dishes, with a distinct bias towards almonds.

After an evening meal that seemed to last half a life time, the whole court assembled round the large smoking fire in the great hall, their attention focused on the Merchant, a little round self-satisfied fellow enjoying the limelight and preening himself hideously. Not a single member of the court, nor yet one of the lowliest scullions, had particularly taken to him with his strange fringe of beard around his chin like the precursor of the beatnik age, but he seemed to be irritating the King, which was always worth a laugh in a time fairly bereft of good quality entertainment, and perhaps the oily little tick might eventually get his come-uppance into the bargain, so they settled back in relatively happy anticipation of an evening well spent at someone else's expense.

"Well Master Merchant. You have brought us back some fine silks and spices, trinkets and doo-dahs and suchlike crap from your travels in the East."

The King leaned toward Harbinger and muttered a perfectly audible stage whisper behind his hand.

"And fleeced us right royally for the pleasure, what's more, blast his repellent hide!"

"Don't worry Sire, we'll get it all back with interest when he gets his room bill in the morning."

The King looked a little happier and leant forward to address the Merchant once more, a mercenary grimace lurking beneath his Saxon moustache.

"Have you any slightly more interesting and vaguely stimulating tales for our entertainment?"

"Yes indeed. I have something most interesting and tantalising with which to regale and divert you all with, and also an interesting little practical demonstration which I shall undertake to demonstrate a presentation of for your interest and edification."

The King blew a sharp blast of irritation through his moustache at the Merchant's circumlocutory self-important style of address as Prang muttered an aside to Dragon.

"I can see this bloke's going to be a right little show-off."

"And a tedious boring little sod into the bargain! Talk about verbal soddin' diarrhoea Matey!"

The Merchant looked round, annoyed at the interruption.

"AHEM! As I was saying. During my sojourn in the mysterious and far-flung Orient, I encountered divers wise and clever alchemists who were able to conjure up fire and thunder with the sole aid of a little black powder of their own devising."

Prang blew out heavily through pursed lips with disbelief in his turn.

"Gordon Bennett! What did I tell you, Dragon! This is worse than I thought. What a long-winded little ratbag."

The Merchant took out a cunningly-wrought little jewel box from under his robe, opened it and began to pontificate once more at great length.

"As a matter of fact I just happen to have a little of the black powder secreted about my personage even as I speak. Allow me to demonstrate what it can do in practical terms."

"Go on give us a cheap thrill, why don't you." shouted Prang, visibly unimpressed and a little miffed that the Merchant seemed to be encroaching on his own specialist turf.

The Merchant took a pinch of the powder between his finger and thumb and tossed it into the fire with a smirk of anticipation. There was a brief pause while the court all exchanged knowing looks, more than used to public failure and humiliation paraded before them, then recoiled in shock at the sudden suppressed crump of a small explosion accompanied by a thick puff of smoke, and the flames of the fire briefly flared a bright blue as a shower of crackling sparks spattered the flagstones around the feet of the nearest courtiers while coloured lights danced in the air.

The assembled court recoiled with sudden shock and nervous cries, then all tried to cover up their surprise with cries of delight, as if it was just what they'd expected all along.

"OOOHH!! AAHHH!!! How marvellous!"

Prang was less than impressed.

"HUH! Big flamin' deal!"

The Merchant held a podgy self-important finger aloft.

"But this is only the beginning my fine friends. Pray allow me to enlighten you all further, for there is much more to come."

"Of course, there had to be." muttered Prang. "This bloke's starting to get right on my wick Dragon."

"Ahem! These clever alchemists fashion pieces of vellum and leather into special cylindrical or tubular containers into which they pour quantities of their magical black powder to make what they call fireworks."

Prang just couldn't resist it.

"Yeah, yeah. And I s'pose they make these so-called fireworks fly do they? Har Har Har. What a buffoon eh Dragon?"

Dragon muttered uneasily under his breath.

"Include me out Matey! I've got an uncanny feeling you could be diggin' your own grave here. As usual."

The Merchant gave them a baleful glare and continued self-importantly.

"Exactly so, oh sceptical one! They give displays where they launch these fireworks into the sky like shooting-stars and light up the town with sparks and marvellous showers of coloured fire. So yah boo sucks to you Mr Smarty-pants!"

The King however was rather impressed. He liked the sound of these fireworks.

"Ha-hah! What a bally spiffing idea! We must give our own firework display. Ye-es, if we hold it on the castle battlements, then all our neighbours for miles around will be able to see."

The King's eyes gleamed as he pictured the impressive display in his mind.

"Ha! The poor slobs'll be green with envy for the rest of the year! They'll all be giving themselves hernias trying to better that, plus we can rent them benches and flog them expensive refreshments into the bargain."

He rubbed his hands together with avaricious glee, then turned to Prang.

"This is just the sort of job that's right up your alleyway Prang!"

Prang instantly went into panic overdrive.

"What!! A firework display? Oh how super! And you want me to organise it do you? Oh lucky, lucky me! Oh joy!"

"Yes and you make sure it's a jolly good show Prang. An awful lot of people will be able to see it. I shall send the Herald out in the morning to broadcast the news."

The King pondered for a moment.

"Let me see. No time like the present, while the nights are long and boring and the visiting entertainment crashingly dull. I think we'll hold it tomorrow night on the battlements, as soon as it gets dark."

Prang shot off his bench in alarm, instantly galvanised into action.

"So soon?! B-but I won't have time to get ready."

Harbinger sneered unhelpfully, pleased to be out of the firing line for a change.

"You'd better get started straight away then, hadn't you Prang. With your, ahem ... talents, you need all the time you can get."

Prang kicked Harbinger in the shins as he headed out of the hall.

"Shut your face Pencil-neck. I'll deal with you later."

He tottered weakly towards the door.

"Come on Dragon, I need help."

"Too true me old son. Psychiatric help!"

Prang left the hall supported by Dragon as the King turned back to the Merchant with a resigned grimace that betokened his dwindling patience.

"I s'pose it's too much to hope that you've exhausted your supply of lengthy and tedious tales of the mysterious piffling East, so fire away if you must. And of course you'll stay for our firework show tomorrow night."

The Merchant grinned unpleasantly.

"Oh I wouldn't miss it for the world."

CHAPTER 16

 little later the Merchant was strutting self-importantly along a dimly-lit stone corridor humming an off-key wassail on his way to bed, very pleased with himself and his performance at dinner that evening, and looking forward to Prang's public humiliation on the following night.

As he passed a darkened recess in the wall, a muffled sinister voice called out to him from the shadows in a beckoning whisper.

"A word with you if you would, Master Merchant."

The Merchant started and looked about nervously.

"W-What do you want O Stranger? I have no money, no valuables, nothing you could possibly be interested in."

He stepped tremulously towards the niche, eager to demonstrate how free of baubles his person was, and hoping fervently his secret pockets would remain so.

Suddenly a thin claw-like hand shot out and grabbed him by the throat, dragging him bodily into the darkness of the recess with a choking cry of alarm.

In the gloom the Merchant found himself nose to nose with an enraged Wizard Prang who yelled angrily into his face.

"Right Mush! Hand over that black powder!"

The Merchant choked feebly in Prang's strangle-hold.

"AAARRGGHHH!!!"

"You got me into this mess, you horrible little show-off, now you can just flamin' well get me out of it, and that little box of black powder is my only hope."

Prang made a grab for the jewel box, but the Merchant, wheezing heavily through a double bowline tied in his trachea and fighting vainly for breath, knocked the box out of his grasp. It flew straight out of the recess and burst open against the flagstones, sending a spray of black powder shooting all over the floor, to Prang's wide-eyed horror.

He threw the choking Merchant to one side, launched himself urgently out of the recess and fell to his knees on the cold stones as he tried with scant success to scoop up the powder.

"Oh sodding hell!! It's all fallen through the cracks in the floor. This whole thing is all your fault you poncey little crap-hound!"

Prang turned to shout and wave his fist at the Merchant cowering in the shadows of his niche.

"Just wait 'til I get my hands on you, you moronic long-winded boring little shitbag!!"

The Merchant saw his chance to escape and took it thankfully, scuttling away along the passage in nervous haste.

"Shit!! I'm getting out of here!"

He reached the far end of the corridor and turned to shout back from the safety of the corner.

"I'll have the last laugh Prang. Just wait 'til tomorrow night that's all. Boy am I going to enjoy your so-called firework show!"

The Merchant disappeared with a rude gesture of parting, and Prang turned back and scrabbled in vain hope at the flagstones, but the powder had gone. All that is except for a few meagre grains which had jammed tight under the fingernails of both hands.

"Oh crap!! This is hopeless. I'm just wasting time here. I'd better go to my room and try and work up some spells instead."

He wandered off moaning self-pityingly to himself.

"I've had it, I'm dead in the water. I don't see how I can get out of this one."



The King meanwhile had crossed the courtyard on his way to his private quarters and espied the Flemish Sculptor on his trestle, chipping away at a block of ice that bore the beginnings of a huge rudimentary Saxon handlebar moustache. He stopped to admire it and nodded to the artist approvingly.

"Well I fancy we've been here before Sirrah, but I must say that's a bally nice moustache."

"Ja. De snor."

"Ye-es. Look Sirrah, we'll give it one more go shall we, never say I'm not optimistic in the face of all reason. I'll give you this bag of coin, with another to follow on completion."

In a very *déjà vu*-esque tableau, the Sculptor descended the ladder and accepted the bag of gold coins from the King.



Back in Prang's room the panic escalated rapidly through the night. Prang paced agitatedly up and down through a room littered with bowls and crucibles and the mess of discarded ingredients, waving his arms about in patent futility.

"What am I going to do? That bloody Merchant's really shafted me Dragon. That idea you had of nicking the black powder, while bloody brilliant in essence, went tits-up in actuality. When I tried to grab it from him, the fool chucked it down the cracks in the floor."

He came to a stop in front of Dragon and grabbed him by the throat scales.

"What the hell am I going to do Dragon? I haven't the faintest idea how to make one mouldy little squib, let alone put on a whole firework show in front of a live audience."

Dragon prised his friend's fingers loose and patted his scales back into place.

"Never fear Mon Brave! I have a cunning plan. Dig out that old magic kit your mum got you when you were a kid. There must be some nice coloured flash-powders you can use."

Prang stared at Dragon in horror, hardly able to believe his ears.

"Flash-powders! Sodding flash-powders!! Sodding flash-twattting-powders!!! Are you insane!! That was the single most feeble magic kit in the entire universe. My Mum only paid a groat for it, and even flamin' Thaddeus Q Susquehannah pissed himself laughing when he saw it on that disastrous bloody awful Summer School my Mum sent me on. Look Dragon, I'll be signing my own naffing death warrant if I turn up holding that thing. The King'll string me up on the battlements and set fire to me, anything to put on an incendiary display of some sort for the neighbours."

Dragon was annoyingly calm and patient.

"By the cringe, do get a grip Prangy! As long as it looks pretty and you give them a few flashes and bangs you're laughing."

"Oh yes. Har hardy har, oh whoops there goes another rib! And, oh deary, deary me, I appear to have split my sides with an excess of mirth! You know what, you're floating in a stratosphere of insanity with your head shoved right up your arse Dragon."

"Stop being so pathetic and let's give it a whirl. Let's face it, it's your only chance Prangy."

"Oh thanks a bunch Dragon! Now I do feel optimistic about my future, short though it may be."

Dragon began making tubes out of old spell parchments and whistling Dixie unconcernedly whilst Prang collected a selection of very ancient crusted coloured powders from a very worm-eaten old box bearing a badly-illuminated illustration of a junior wizard confidently conjuring fire out of nothing.

When they had assembled all the necessary items Prang looked up a spell in an old book, then kept his place with a rather grubby forefinger while he put some ingredients into the crucible on the fire with the other hand. There was a fizzing noise and a sudden loud explosion as the grains of black powder wedged under his fingernails exploded.

"AAAGGHHH!!!"

He recoiled shrieking and flapped his flaming hand up and down in an attempt to put it out.

"I've blown my bastard hand off!"

He hopped round the room flailing it up and down, which of course merely fanned the flames into a new frenzy.

Dragon came running with a bucket, making very helpful emergency service type siren noises and hurled the bucket of water straight into Prang's face.

Fortunately the deluge put Prang's hand out and he stuffed the smoking remains into his armpit.

"The King'll have to call off the firework show Dragon. I can't do it with only one hand."

"Give over Prangy, the King'd make you do it if you'd blown off both arms and thrown in a leg for good luck. Let me have a look, that first aid evening class I did last year down at the Templar Knights of St John's Ambulance could come in handy here."

Dragon got busy with the first aid kit until Prang held up a hugely bandaged hand while Dragon tied it off.

"There you go Amigo. Practically as good as new, and gift wrapped into the bargain."

Prang looked dubious.

"Bloody hell, look at the size of it Dragon. I won't be able to pick anything up."

"Blimey, you don't half get on my tits with your moaning. You've got another hand haven't you?"

He gestured up towards the narrow slot of window just below the ceiling where pallid daylight was seeping in at the edges of the frame.

"Anyway, it looks as though dawn's breaking, so let's get these fireworks packed away and get in a bit of kip before the King starts shoutin' for you."

Prang struggled clumsily with the unwieldy bandage as he picked up the stuff on the bench and they started to pack it all in a large cardboard box.

CHAPTER 17

That evening the King waited impatiently on the roof of the castle, stamping his thinly-eelskin-clad feet against the cold and huddled in his fur-lined cloak against the probing fingers of the icy wind.

“PRAANGG!!”

Down below the Flemish Sculptor chipped the finishing touches out of the ice sculpture of the King and stepped back on his trestle to check the overall effect. The King, while approving his likeness in ice, had no wish to emulate it himself and was eager to get the pyrotechnic display under way as soon as possible. He blew on his rapidly-numbing fingers and called impatiently for his court wizard once more.

“PRAANGG!!”

“C-coming Sire.”

Prang emerged into the pool of flickering torch-light illuminating the courtyard below carrying a large box of rudimentary home-made fireworks balanced on his bandaged hand, skirted the base of the glistening ice-blue statue, and looked up nervously at the King standing on the battlements. Next to the King stood the Merchant with a smile of eager anticipation tinged with just a smidgin of revenge plastered across his horrible pudgy features as he eyed the amateurishly made casings on the home-made fireworks in Prang’s box and heaved with silent derisory laughter.

“Here I am Sire.”

“Yes well bally get on with it then Prang before we all die of exposure.”

Dragon followed Prang into the courtyard picking up all the spilled fireworks, while Prang set up his equipment and started the show. Groans and boos greeted the feeble splutterings of the first of the pathetic home-made fireworks.

“Boo! Rubbish! Get off!” shouted the courtiers in a chorus, egging each other on and all beginning to enjoy themselves hugely at Prang’s discomfiture, while the Flemish Artist slid down from his trestle and decided to collect his money and run, passing his verdict of the show so far on to Dragon as he passed.

“Crap-awful *schyt vuurwerk!*”

The King was rather less than amused at the display.

“What in Hades do you call that? Can’t you do better than that Prang? This is pathetic! We’re going to look a right bunch of idiots after this fiasco, and I’ll have all and sundry for miles around trying to sue me for the reimbursement of their bally bench hire and ticket monies.”

The Merchant chimed in with a superior smile pasted all over his horrible self-satisfied face.

“Well I don’t like to say I told you so, but you do need to pick the right man for the job, Oh King.”

The King had just about had enough of the irritating little Merchant by this time, particularly as he knew himself that he’d made a hideous faux pas in his selection of Prang for the public display, so he turned and snarled at the Merchant to relieve his feelings.

“SHUT YOUR FACE!!! When I need advice from you I’ll ask for it you smarmy self-important little git!!”

He turned and gestured at Prang to continue.

Prang dived into the box and rummaged around, and finally came up with a carelessly-packaged firework roughly the shape and size of a small firkin.

“Here we are Sire,” he called up to the shadowy figure on the battlements, “this is a Romanian Caundle Sire.”

“What?”

The King turned, distracted in the act of pulling from his robe a bag of gold coins which he held out to Rijk Van Dyke who’d just appeared at his elbow demanding settlement.

“A Romanian Caundle Sire.”

“You’re making this up Prang. Listen, I couldn’t give a marmoset’s mange-ridden muff. Just light the naffing thing while I pay off our Flemish friend.”

Prang set light to the fuse and retired, as Rijk took hold of the leather bag and the King voiced an observation.

“There’s a sort of hideous inevitability about this scenario isn’t there Sirrah? Maybe this time the sculpture will remain intact and survive the rest of the Winter.”

There was a loud bang and the projectile flew into the air on a wobbly arc spraying sparks as the canister began to disintegrate. It somersaulted once, got lodged in the top of Van Dyke’s trestle and hung there leaking flames. Suddenly

the trestle caught light with a flare, and the King and Sculptor, both still holding firmly on to opposite sides of the bag of coin, stood rigid with horror on the battlements watching as the fiercely-burning gantry fell forwards onto the newly-finished ice effigy of the King.

For a brief moment the scaffolding hung there supported by the statue, then the flames took hold and the King's likeness began to dissolve, odd limbs and parts of torso breaking off and falling away as the burning remains of the gantry slowly lowered themselves to the ground into a large pool forming on the frost-rimed stones of the courtyard floor.

"Oh crap!" muttered Prang under his breath, nervously eyeing the King up on the battlements, but for the moment the King was pre-occupied with trying to hold on to some of his money. He tugged at the bag of gold coins, trying to lever it out of the grasp of the Artist, but Van Dyke was as determined as the King himself, and they sawed backwards and forwards, neither relinquishing his grip on the bag in favour of the other, until finally the Dutchman leant forward and, in perfect London-accented English, volunteered the phrases "legal precedent" and "verbal contract".

The King reluctantly let go of the bag, observing drily that the Artist had made good use of his time in the Capital by becoming fluent in two of the most useful terms there were, whilst remaining conveniently ignorant of anything else that might cause him trouble.

Rijk shrugged and spread his arms in incomprehension.

"Oh very funny! Naff off Sirrah!"

With a grin Van Dyke stowed the second sack of coin in his robe and took his leave as the King turned back to redirect his venom against Prang with an eloquent wave of his fist.

"Get on with the bally show Prang. I want to see some jolly big sparks or you're for the high jump."

With feigned confidence Prang brandished a huge cylinder of parchment tied to a stick.

"I've been saving this one 'til last Sire. It's called a rocket."

"I couldn't give a flying fart what the poxy thing's called Prang, so long as I get a big bang from it. Just hurry up and let the bastard thing off before everyone drops off to sleep from boredom and hypothermia, or just bally dies in self defence."

"Right away Sire." Prang turned to mutter a nervous aside to Dragon "This had better work Dragon, or we're deep in the cack me old Mate."

"Less of the we Matey, this is your show remember."

Prang nervously put the rocket into an earthenware jar and fumbled clumsily with his tinderbox, striking a shower of sparks onto the fuse attached to the rocket. The fuse ignited with an uneven sputter and a spray of sparks fell onto his unbandaged hand.

With a flare and a bang the remaining gunpowder jammed under his nails exploded.

"AAARRGGHHH!!!"

He fell back with a shriek of pain, knocking over the earthenware jar as he did so. The rocket went off with a whoosh, shot along the ground right across the courtyard like a lemming heading for the nearest cliff at the height of the jumping season, and with a loud reverberating clang shot right into the mouth of a drainpipe.

The courtiers weren't too sure how to receive this but it looked like Prang was in the old *merde du vache* so they cried out just the same.

"OOHH!! AAHH!!"

They all stood and stared at each other in nervous anticipation as a loud rattling progressed up the inside of the pipe. Prang stuck his throbbing hand into his armpit and watched in horror as the flying incendiary device shot out of the mouth of a gargoyle and flew along the battlements heading straight for the King, who reacted with eyes popping.

"OH MY GOD!! Out of my way you numbskull!!"

The King barged the Merchant to the floor and trampled over him, getting in an extra kick for good measure, and began to run along the roof just as the rocket caught up with him and shot straight through the back of his robe and grazing the royal arse as it passed, the pain causing him to hop and skip like a whirling dervish in the grip of an epileptic fit.

"PRAANNNGGG!! I ... OW! ... want a ... YOW! ... word with you. AAARRGH!!"

Dragon turned to the appalled Prang standing ashen-faced, with his newly-damaged hand tucked under his arm and staring horrified after the King.

"Hey Prangy! I think the King wants to give you a rocket!"

"That's not funny Dragon."

The rocket meanwhile had executed a fast u turn in an archway and was heading straight back towards the King with single-minded speed.

Spotting the new danger, King Egbert ran in panic along the full width of the battlements with flames licking the back of his robes, just managing to throw himself out of the path of the rocket at the last minute. He dived over a low embrasure as the rocket vanished into the sky, and scuttled down the slippery icy surface of an angled buttress on his arse, as Prang beat a hasty retreat through the gate-house to freedom.

The King finally obtained some small relief from the pain of his flame-grilled posterior by sitting on the abbreviated stump of the ice sculpture as steam rose from the seat of his hose and the one remaining half of a large Saxon handle-bar moustache broke off and fell to the flagstones with a dull crack of shattering ice.

CHAPTER 18

Non the small hours of a cold icy morning, long after the court had retired to bed, a tiny sputtering light appeared against the dark night sky as an almost spent rocket spiralled crazily down towards the castle.

The rocket crash-landed on the battlements and slid over to the edge, leaving a trail of sparks as it disappeared into a gutter, emerging from the mouth of a gargoyle, which coughed and spat it out.

The rocket sailed out into the air, hit a buttress and ricocheted in through an open casement, straight into the corridor where the Merchant had first had his confrontation with Prang, and hit the flagstones. As the rocket sputtered almost to extinction there was a sudden flare-up of blue fire followed by a mind-numbing explosion as the tightly-packed gunpowder wedged deep between the ancient stones exploded.

As the cacophony died away the familiar shout was heard once more.

“PRRAAANNGGG!!!! A word in your ear!”

The smoke slowly drifted clear to reveal the gaping hole blown in the floor, while collapsing masonry toppled through to the storey below as minor secondary explosions popped off like hand grenades.

“PPPRRAAAAANNNGGGGG!!!!!!”

Collection of comic misadventures set in medieval England

The Prang Codex

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