

Thwack! Gordon jumped and squeaked involuntarily. If there was any justice or fairness the ruler should have passed right through Gordon's head, an unknowable apparition. So much for the oft-touted joys of Untouchability. Why had he been touch intro'd to his boss Ponsonby? Gordon couldn't see the need. And if they hadn't been then both annoyances - Ponsonby and his petty ruler - would have been invisible, not there at all as far as Gordon was concerned.

How many times now had Ponsonby swatted Gordon on the back of the head? Gordon thought his boss would answer something like 'too many by a long chalk'; at least Gordon could agree with that. And damn these non-reflective screens, he thought. It added to the unjustness: they meant that despite Ponsonby being fully visible to Gordon, he could still not see his boss silently sneaking up behind him until it was too late.

It didn't hurt but it irritated. Why does Ponsonby have to treat me like a naughty school-boy?

Which, as it turned out, was the exact same thought that Ponsonby was having about Gordon. Ponsonby then silently answered his own question: because that was precisely how Gordon was acting.

They both sighed their own individual sighs of quiet exasperation.

On this occasion the whack was particularly unwelcome as Gordon was right in the middle of perfecting a new slouch position, 3.1 beta, a highly promising development of number 3. It not only gave a gratifying level of comfort, it also allowed him to keep his hands on the computer keyboard - therefore ostensibly working to anyone looking on - while still leaning back at the perfect angle to doze with his eyes open fractionally, just enough for him to claim he was not asleep. This was no easy feat as the computer chair was clearly designed with the specific aim of keeping a person bolt upright and alert, something that Gordon liked to treat as a challenge. Amongst other sedentary sports he considered himself a slouch champion and he was well shaped for this particular pastime, being roundly padded: no chair would best him.

"Mr Mulch, I see that we are daydreaming again, hmm?" Ponsonby was now stood beside Gordon, arms folded disapprovingly. It wasn't a question.

"Me sir no sir. I was just considering the fracules for this image." Gordon shuffled himself upright.

Ponsonby's eyes narrowed. "Fracules, eh Mulch? That's what it is this time, is it? Not percanity? Or tronklet?"

Gordon blushed under Ponsonby's hard unbelieving gaze.

"It will be quite interfracular, you see sir, this particular image," mumbled Gordon.

"Mr Mulch, I believe you are once more attempting to drag a sheep's fleece over my ocular organs," said Ponsonby irritably. It displeased him intensely when Gordon used such technical terms, particularly as he was positive that Gordon made them up solely in an attempt to baffle. Ponsonby was in charge of the archive project but his interest and knowledge was in history, politics, and historical research; he cared little

for the technology.

Gordon knew he had been rumbled. His problem was that Fortescue Ponsonby was no fool, but it was too late now, he had to follow it through or get another formal reprimand. "Well the links between the different sort of fracules in the image, sir. When it is processed. Sir," replied Gordon in his best all-innocent-who-me voice.

Ponsonby sighed. Mulch could be most tiresome on occasion. "Kindly proceed without dallying, Mr Mulch," he said as he walked away, pocketing the offending ruler as he went. Obtaining suitable staff was problematic and it was regrettable that Mulch was by far the best computer tech that Ponsonby had on the archive project. Consequently he had to swallow the recalcitrant pill offered, or 'just suck it up' as some of his less erudite staff would doubtless say.

Gordon allowed himself a brief smug smile as he heard Ponsonby walk away. Ponsonby always talked like he was in a poncey play, using big words where small ones would do. Gordon's riposte - to use a Ponsonby appropriate word - was using made-up technical words and then waiting for Ponsonby's reaction, to see if he could get away with it unsuspected. So far he had not succeeded. Pity that that will be the most exciting thing that happens to me today, thought Gordon.

Gordon looked at his computer screen and let his mind drift once more. Boring, boring, boring. It was almost funny, that Ponsonby had made it sound interesting, exciting even, at the interview. Yeah right. More fool Gordon for believing a toff in a cravat.

He spent his days selecting various options to compress the photographic images, the videos and the scans of the documents to take less space on the optical disks. The supply was finite: no more disks could be made. He even got a small - minute, actually - bonus if he exceeded the reduction target he had been given. So he got paid more for producing less: a thought which pleased Gordon. For the first few weeks it took some head scratching to work it all out but after that it was same ole, same ole, day in, day out, week in, week out.

Gordon clicked to bring up the next scanned document. At least Gordon didn't have to do the actual physical scanning of everything: that would have been mind-numbing purgatory. It must be catching - he had done it again: used a Ponsonby-type word. Put the thing on the scanner, press the scan button, take it off.. in an endless stream. Reasons to be cheerful, thought Gordon, that some poor slob's have got it worse than you.

The document appeared to be a short book. The first page had one word 'Anonymous'. Well thought Gordon, doesn't that simply say everything about it. Someone really put a lot of effort into that. Damn, he'd have to actually read a few pages to work out what it was about, to decide what name to give the compressed file.

He sighed and clicked on to the next page and glanced at it. That was strange, it had a big red diagonal

watermark right across the page: 'Secret'. The text was small and faded behind the watermark. He quickly flicked on to the next page, then the next, then the next. They were all watermarked 'Secret'. Now here was something worth sitting up for (voluntarily).

Gordon knew for sure that he wasn't supposed to see anything like that. Yes, as a general rule everything was confidential blah blah, but without exception every document he had seen so far was yawn inducing. Maps, city plans, financial records, chronicles of public works, minutes of supposedly historic council meetings and political decisions, all of which in retrospect were almost exclusively no more than an apostrophe - or nothing at all - in the journal of the city's development.

Gordon looked around to make sure no-one was looking and of course no-one was: they were in their own bubbles of boredom. He flicked back to the second page of the book and started reading.

The date showed that it had been written less than 10 years after the founding date of the city, some 250 years ago.

The first line took his breath away: 'The unauthorised biography of Hamilton Sharp.'

The man who had founded their city, the man who had effectively saved humanity, a legend in his own lifetime, still admired and revered to this day by everyone, including Gordon. From his early days in school Gordon had been told all about this saint-like man, leading a perfect, selfless and untarnished life, ever the gentleman, working all his life tirelessly - and solely - for the benefit of the people.

The man whose likeness was literally on a pedestal with a larger-than-life marble statue in the middle of the park named after him, the only park in the whole city. Anything really important had the name 'Sharp' attached to it, or his first name, including Hamilton Tower, the tallest and most impressive building in the centre of the city that it did indeed tower over. And the current Custodian (his direct descendant) still ran the city, from the top of that building.

Gordon read on. It said that Hamilton Sharp had been an up-and-coming politician immediately prior to the Great Disaster, highly ambitious but penniless and lacking in connections. At the age of twenty he had changed his given name from the prosaic Milton to Hamilton. The diary said that he thought it sounded more stately and imposing and would help him 'climb the slippery pole'. Gordon couldn't believe the words used about his hero, everybody's hero. It upset him.

The biography said that he had sought out then married into the rich and powerful Sharp family. Well, that was a coincidence, a man with the last name Sharp marrying into the Sharp family? Keeps it simple I suppose, thought Gordon.

Then he read on. Hamilton's last name had in fact been Glub and it was only upon marriage he had changed it - Milton Glub had become Hamilton Sharp!

The picture showed a young Milton/Hamilton - clearly a very handsome man, and judging by the pose,

he certainly knew it. The book said that he had settled by choosing the nice but plain Annabelle for his wife, the only eligible spinster of the Sharp clan.

What? thought Gordon. He had to read and re-read the paragraph. This awful book implied, no, said outright that Hamilton was actually a man with pretensions, bent on furthering his own political ambitions and that it was for this reason that he married Annabelle. It also said that she understood and fully accepted their bargain: she got to hang on the arm of a highly attractive man and would help him ascend to power and she would be the 'first lady' of the city. And a Sharp would be in charge. Crebacious!

Gordon wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers and clicked onwards. It was wild salacious stuff.

He gasped out loud: Hamilton had had a mistress! A bona fide, horizontal dancing, jiggy in the afternoon mistress! Surely that could not be? It was impossible, disgusting to contemplate, like finding out that in her youth your mother had been the town bicycle, or worse, did it for money.

Ruby Lovett was a dancer in a burlesque show. There were two pictures. The first one showed her in her burlesque costume, what there was of it. Her ample chest looked like it was about to fully escape the basque - it was most of the way out already - and her legs were visible almost all the way up to heaven. Then there was a close-up of her perfectly symmetrical face, with long lashes surrounding topaz-coloured eyes - wait, no they appeared to be different colours? - and beautiful high cheek bones, the whole framed by long blond hair. She was simply stunning.

As was the document, every page of it. Gordon sat back and shook his head in disbelief. It can't be true, it simply can't. Why would someone write all this .. drivel?

It was like tugging at a big crusty scab; it hurt to do it but once you started you can't stop despite the pain and blood that would inevitably follow. He leaned forward and read on. According to the biography Ruby was not only highly sensual and openly so, she had had a number of children by Hamilton, all girls with the same attractive looks, and even that Annabelle knew about the affair and that they were Hamilton's! Gordon grunted out loud; he couldn't help himself.

Not only that - incredibly - despite it all Annabelle was friends with Ruby, close friends. Gordon squeaked. How could it be true? Hamilton Sharp was their saviour, Gordon's saviour, everyone's saviour.

The next page was even wilder: it said that it was not only Hamilton that had had an affair with Ruby - Annabelle had a long term lesbian carry-on with Ruby and that Hamilton knew! A real love/lust triangle. Specacious!

Gordon slumped down in his chair, settling into a deflated and sad version of slouch position number two, his arms dangling by his side.

It had been drummed into Gordon his whole life, into everyone, about the honourable Hamilton Sharp. Not only was he the perfect super-citizen he was the loving husband, wonderful family man and model of

propriety.

Gordon felt cheated.

Thwack! "Mr Mulch! What precisely are you currently examining, hmm?" Ponsonby was standing right behind Gordon again. Gordon was miffed to get the ruler treatment twice in one day. He shuffled bolt upright as fast as he could, trying and failing to block Ponsonby's view of the computer screen. Ponsonby leaned over Gordon's shoulder and read down the page. Ponsonby started making distressed squeaking noises.

Yes, Ponsonby had been told that there could be confidential documents but after having assiduously checked everything in the first few weeks, then done spot-checks for a few weeks more, he had found nothing at all that would frighten the horses. He certainly never expected to see anything which might be seditious, such as this.

"Mr Mulch, stop this instant, this instant I say! You should not be perusing.. such as that!" he exclaimed, going scarlet in the face. Gordon thought that Ponsonby might burst a blood vessel.

Everyone turned in their direction and stopped what they were doing, eyebrows raised, mouths open. Hearing the ever-genteel dandy Ponsonby shouting was about likely as him pulling his pants down and crapping in the middle of the floor.

Ponsonby mopped his brow with his kerchief and urgently looked around. "Everyone! Kindly return to your respective tasks!"

Everyone slowly turned away and pretended to work, all of them keeping an eye and ear half-pointed in Gordon and Ponsonby's direction. It was the most excitement they had had in the historical archive project in.. well, there never had been any excitement at all before, ever.

Ponsonby hissed "Mr Mulch, cease immediately. Close that infernal document! And accompany me to my office forthwith."

Ponsonby slammed his office door (another first) and gave Gordon a thorough chewing out in his own restrained and refined way. Who'd have thought that Ponsonby could lose it so thoroughly? pondered Gordon.

Gordon had been injudicious, ill-advised, incautious, even - rash. Ponsonby said that further, Gordon was contrary and mutinous and not infrequently tried to take advantage of Ponsonby's good and fair nature. How could Gordon treat him so shabbily?

Gordon again wheeled out his all-innocent-who-me voice, with some effort - this time it was not easy to avoid smiling at Ponsonby's agitation.

"Mr Ponsonby, I really am sorry if I have occasioned you any discomfiture; that was not my intention. I was merely visually analysing the document to assess its fraculariness."

Even in Ponsonby's perturbed state Gordon was sure that Ponsonby would spot Gordon's use of flowery language and understand it for the bear poking it was; likewise the made-up word. Gordon was not the vindictive type but two demeaning whacks on the head in one day had really ticked him off, so he took the opportunity to give Ponsonby a metaphorical whack in return.

Ponsonby looked hard at Gordon. "Mr Mulch, I think we both know that every part of that is a complete fabrication." Gordon looked down to avoid Ponsonby's stare. He had to in order not to laugh.

Ponsonby kept wittering on. After a while Gordon tuned out and spent his time looking at a dead fly on the floor under Ponsonby's desk, that curiously only had one wing.

"Pay attention Mulch" Ponsonby barked.

Gordon looked up but his eyes soon focused past his boss. The office had some nice art and the odd framed manuscript and Gordon let his eyes wander. To one side behind Ponsonby was a framed photo of the head of Records & Archives, Aubrey Sharp. A bit funny looking, thought Gordon. On the thin side with high cheek bones and pointed nose but the most standout feature was the hair. What was he, mid-forties may be? His hair was black but with three wide white streaks that went front to back, one right down the middle and one above each ear. He looks like a badger thought Gordon. He smiled to himself briefly.

Every now and then Gordon tuned back into the conversation, to hear Ponsonby emphasising over and over again the importance of keeping secret, no, completely dismissing from his mind what he had read and consigning it to oblivion. In any event the document was unquestionably of dubious heritage and clearly was a complete concoction of vicious falsehoods. In the end it seemed to Gordon that Ponsonby was pleading with him to keep it under his hat. Gordon nodded, his attention still on the dead fly. Then he had a distressing thought: his employment prospects might now be about as dead as that fly.

His worst fear was suddenly confirmed when Ponsonby said "Mr Mulch, I think it would be prudent for you to go home this very minute." As Gordon left he could see Ponsonby speaking frantically on the telephone.

What had Gordon done?