



THE DEVIL AND MR JONES

It was 8:23pm when the visitor appeared. He seemed to arrive without a sound; in fact, the first sign of his presence was a sickly smell. It was not malodorous exactly, but consisted, perhaps, of two smells, one of which wasn't pleasant. How had he materialized at all? Puzzling because here was Jeremy Jones working alone in his office in a building with a high-tech security system in which strangers weren't supposed to come and go as they pleased. Yet somehow this stranger differed from other people. He was impeccably dressed. He had slanted eyebrows, a goatee beard and ears that ended in a point.

'Mind if I come in?' he purred.

Jeremy indicated the chair in front of his desk. The stranger approached and, before sitting down, shot the tail of his dinner jacket out behind him.

'Perhaps I should explain,' he said. 'You're experiencing a dream. You dropped off ten minutes ago.'

Ah, of course. A dream. Really, Jeremy should pack in these late nights. He was bound to fall asleep sooner or later.

'So I can wake up whenever I please?'

'Certainly, my dear fellow. However, don't you think this provides an opportunity?'

'In what way?'

'Well, do you know who I am?'

'You're the Devil.'

It was funny. Jeremy hadn't given it a thought before the question was posed. But now he saw clearly that he was faced with the Devil himself. There was nothing obvious to point to in the other's appearance, such as cloven hooves or horns. Yet other details manifested themselves: tufts of reddish-brown hair that peeped out from the visitor's cuffs; a smell of sulphur, which was becoming more distinct.



'I am indeed the Devil,' said his visitor. 'I don't always reveal my identity but, as you guessed who I am, there is no point in denying it. You would think, wouldn't you, with everything I do in PR and advertising, my image would be healthier. Still, it's the way of the world, I suppose.'

One leg of the Devil's red and black striped trousers rested on the other. Strangely, Jeremy found that it wasn't so much nerves that he was feeling as a sense of curiosity.

'Look,' he said tentatively, 'I don't want to appear rude, but why are you here? Am I about to die?'

'Oh, no, my dear fellow. You really are asleep and will wake up shortly.'

'But why are you talking to me instead of Jesus?'

Harsh laughter echoed around the room. Jeremy felt unable to remove his gaze from his visitor, who seemed to draw the colours out of the office and concentrate them on himself in a dark red glow.

'Jesus!' the Devil roared, displaying his sharp canine teeth. 'Dear me, there's a name I haven't heard in a while. The reason I am here rather than anyone else is because, shall we say, your thoughts haven't run along mundane lines lately. Do you have ambitions?' Before Jeremy could reply, the Devil continued, 'I already know you have ambitions. And I, your servant in crime, am here to grant them. Except of course – and you must forgive me – the pleasure isn't all in the giving. I want—'

'My soul.'

'Hell's bells, man. If that was the deal, I'd have a very small clientele. No, the fate of souls is the remit of that other fellow. He has the ultimate say over that side of things.'

'So God exists? There is an afterlife?'

The Devil waved the question aside with a manicured hand.

'If you call this realm of existence life. But let's not get bogged down in metaphysics. I always find myself with lots of explaining to do upon first meeting people. To business, my dear fellow. You want promotion. Your boss, Shawcross, is standing down and there are two



candidates who could fill his role. You are one of them.'

It was true. Jeremy had worked for Seckwell Gowan for 13 years. 13 years working his way up from technical support assistant to technical support manager to technical services director. And now, as soon as Shawcross stood down after the share payout, the MD's position would be within his grasp. Until recently, Jeremy had never entertained such ambitions. It wasn't until the accounting module had come out, the architecture of which he'd designed, that the buzz had started. Various people working for the US parent company had commented on its beauty, and his head had swum with the compliments. In the UK, too, his colleagues seemed to regard him with greater respect, his workload had gone up, and he'd had to work harder to justify his improved reputation.

And yet, owing to circumstances, he could soon be on the dole.

This was because Shawcross, in his mid-fifties, was selling off Seckwells to an equity company. All well and good if Jeremy had had shares to sell off and could make his fortune. But he didn't have shares to sell off. And so his fate, and the fate of his colleagues, was in the hands of the money men. He could either straddle the heights of management or be laid off with a sum insufficient to last his days.

'Tell me,' the Devil went on, 'why do you want this job? It will mean more pressure and less security. Of course, there's the money...'

'It's not about the money.'

'How refreshing to hear that!'

'I think I could do a good job.'

'Go on.'

'I understand the product. I would defend the workforce and ensure that most people keep their jobs.'

'An afterthought.'

Jeremy reared back at this appraisal of his feelings.



'Tell me,' the Devil said, 'the real reason.'

'Well, I suppose I wouldn't feel happy if Peterson was made managing director.'

'Ah!'

'I think the company would suffer with him in charge. He may have contacts in the industry...'

'He's Shawcross's blue-eyed boy.'

Jeremy was reduced to silence, as was his habit in an argument where victory wasn't assured. The room had become hotter and darker. The Devil's features were sharply in focus. The sheen in his hair was dazzling and his eyes glinted with a ruby brightness.

'He's young, he's handsome, he's popular,' said the Devil with a small smile that turned Jeremy's stomach. 'You, on the other hand, are more of an introvert and don't have so many friends.'

Jeremy's face fell.

'Apologies, my dear fellow,' the other added. 'I was only, to use a hackneyed phrase, playing devil's advocate. Of course, I can arrange for you to get the job of MD. You will be Peterson's boss and not the other way round. As I alluded to before, however, I don't offer my services for free. The deal is that if I am to grant this favour – place it in the credit column, as it were – then I require an entry in the debit column.'

Fantastical thought: Jeremy could be Peterson's boss.

'You sound like an accountant,' he said.

The Devil smiled.

'Everything has a price – including life itself. Think of the lives the government could save by doubling the money invested in the health service. The government won't countenance the idea, of course. They're putting a price, as they have to, on people's lives.' The Devil examined his pointed nails. 'And, in my line of work, it's the same principle. I, too, put a price on everything. I place a price, for example, on this business of your gaining promotion. It is rather sordid, isn't it? I



imagine a decent chap like yourself would feel guilty if I went ahead and granted your wish. Guilty, but perhaps not guilty enough. What if the price to pay for this career advancement resulted in, say, somebody's death?'

The room was darker than ever. Jeremy slowly shook his head.

'Don't jump to conclusions, my dear fellow. After all, I wouldn't be the Devil if I couldn't make things tempting.' He maintained his sickening grin. 'What if the person to die was sick and old? What, in other words, if it was a mercy to end his or her life?'

'No!'

'Gently, gently, my dear fellow. Why not relieve somebody from their suffering? Your God – whose house I know you haven't visited for a while – isn't nearly so concerned with matters of life or death. Think of all the stillborn children in the world and the huge loss of life through earthquakes and famines. I know you rebel against the idea of somebody's death. But, believe me, I know God better than you. He's let the world go its own way, hasn't He? This, I repeat, would be a mercy killing. Furthermore, I have no authority over my victim's destination in the hereafter.'

'Who is this person?'

'Good. I'm glad to see we're making progress. I cannot, however, divulge that information. What I will say, to reassure you, is that he or she is not a relative of yours.'

This was insane. Perhaps Jeremy could force himself to wake up.

'Forgive me, my dear chap, if I hurry you for an answer. I have to dash off to Hollywood in a minute. The decision is about your promotion ahead of this Peterson fellow. Yes or no? What do you say?'

The Devil's eyes were hypnotic and seemed to brook all possible arguments. Panic was setting in. How many old people, who weren't relatives, did Jeremy know? Could he trust the Devil when he said that the intended victim was terribly ill and that their death, presumably imminent anyway, would be humane? Jeremy's own father was in hospital, extremely unwell. His dad wanted to die. He hadn't said so as bluntly as that, but he was in great pain.



What would Jeremy do if his dad asked...?

'Time,' said the Devil.

'I...'

'Time.'

'Yes. Yes, I accept.'

The Devil bowed his head. The dark sheen from his hair spread further and further outwards...

Jeremy was awake. The first sight that greeted him was the open doorway. This was a mystery because, asleep or not, he always closed the door. Dazed, he put his things in his briefcase to go home.

What an amazing dream. What did it mean?

He got into the lift to the street below. Clearly, the strain of work had been getting to him and he was overdoing it. The bit in the dream about wanting to stop Peterson from getting the MD's job was, if he was honest with himself, true. Peterson was a decent enough bloke. But he didn't have Jeremy's experience. Nor did he work as hard. The funny thing was, in light of his dream, Jeremy wasn't sure that he really wanted to replace Shawcross.

He was sweating now. Yes, actually sweating – feel his forehead!

Anyway, in the more than likely event that he didn't get the MD's job, at least he would know that he hadn't come face to face with the Devil.

He drove out of Hertford and through Hatfield. What had he been doing before the Devil had shown up? That was it: ruining the cutbacks his department had to face that the sales department under Peterson didn't have to undergo because of their more generous budget. That was typical of Peterson, campaigning for his own staff without seeing things in context. And this was somebody touted as the next managing director! Shawcross was quite blind in some respects. He had allowed things to drift. And Jeremy, more than anyone, was aware it would be a devil of a job—



That was what he'd been thinking before his visitor had showed up. *A devil of a job!* Really, it was too ridiculous for words. And here he was, getting into a tizzy over a stupid dream! El Diablo himself, for goodness' sake!

As he let himself into his two-bed apartment, Jeremy even allowed himself to laugh over the experience.

The next day Jeremy's surroundings didn't seem nearly as sinister as they had on the previous evening. The copy of Vermeer's Milkmaid on the wall conveyed its usual calming effect and, on his desk, his parents beamed back at him from a framed photo. Opposite, seated in the chair that the 'Devil' had occupied, sat William Tyler who had flown over from the States. William seemed surprisingly non-threatening as well. He wore a brown waistcoat and had friendly crinkles in his eyes.

'Shame, Jerry, we haven't had much chance to talk,' he said in his soft Southern drawl. 'It's my fault. We should have got you involved in the ops review.'

'I'll be coming over for the super-conference in May.'

'Yeah, that'll be good. But we need to make decisions now. I don't know how much Doug has told you about what we discussed at the review.'

'Doug' was Douglas Shawcross. And William Tyler was their boss, the CEO of Seckwells in the States, having been appointed to the position the previous month. With such exalted company in his office, it felt to Jeremy simply as though God had replaced the Devil. He had, in fact, prepared for this meeting for some time. He had even devised an itinerary for William, which would take in a West End show and a visit to the London Eye. William had a ruthless reputation. He was all smiles now, but Jeremy had heard stories about how he could take an instant dislike to someone and sack them on the spot.

'Let me run this past you,' said William. 'Doug, as you know, is leaving; he wants to spend more time with his family. Now I've spoken to Chas Peterson. He's keen to restructure all



departments and offload the skylark nine product line. He also thinks the UK office should move to a smaller site.'

Everything was happening at breakneck speed. Ditching skylark, the project he'd been helping to develop for nine months; restructuring departments – in other words, getting rid of people; moving offices, which would involve more disruption...

'That's, um, certainly forward-thinking,' he said.

'Frankly, we could have done with your input, Jerry, at the meetings last week with Jeff and Rand and Stewie Pollux.'

Pollux was the word – or a near-approximation – to describe Jeremy's view of their collective pronouncements. He could imagine himself sitting in a soulless Dallas office, listening to Jeff or Rand, and saying nothing, simply clamming up in the company of these alligators.

'You and I have a programming background,' said William, rather improbably. 'That accounting module was an awesome piece of work.'

Jeremy was still thinking about the past nine months' work and how much effort he had put in for nothing.

'Y'know,' the other went on, brushing an imaginary piece of lint off his high-priced, wide-at-the-waist jeans, 'there's this perception that us technical guys don't mix well and can't manage people. I don't think that that's true.'

It looked as if Shawcross – who wanted to 'spend more time with his family' – had been rushed out the door before he could retire properly. As Shawcross had favoured Peterson as his successor, Jeremy could feel little sympathy for him. Most probably, Shawcross or Peterson had portrayed Jeremy as some sort of geek who was incapable of asserting himself.

'I think we can work together, Jerry. For some reason I was looking at your résumé last night. Do you know we have something in common? We were both born on the same day. I don't believe in astrology, but it is kinda spooky, doncha think?' William suddenly flashed a smile, displaying his perfect teeth. 'Lemme get straight to the point. I want you, Jerry' – he pointed at him



decisively – ‘to run things here in the UK.’

The next ten minutes were spent discussing targets and reviews and other such topics. In truth, Jeremy was only half paying attention. Him – little Jeremy Jones – content to stay in the background (or so some might think). Him – Jeremy Jones – head of the UK office – with, incidentally, influence over Europe and Africa. Him – Jeremy Jones – surrounded by little cherubs dancing around his head and paper streamers tumbling down from the ceiling.

William – Bill, perhaps, to close friends – stood at the door prior to leaving. He put his hands together and hit an imaginary golf ball.

‘You a golfer, Jerry? Next time you’re in the States, we’ll play a round.’

Jeremy abhorred golf.

‘I’d like that, William,’ he said.

And now he was alone to contemplate his success. After five minutes of grinning away to himself, he decided to share his joy. His parents would doubtless like to know of his good fortune. He reached for the phone, but it was already ringing.

‘Hello, is that you, Jeremy?’

‘Yes.’

‘Jeremy, it’s Mum.’ Her voice seemed close to breaking. ‘I’ve got bad news. I’ve just had a call from the hospital. Your dad died suddenly earlier this morning. I was told his death was quite painless.’

Jeremy surveyed the piles of papers laid out on the floor. The funeral was over and he had moved in with his mum to help her emotionally and to carry out those jobs that she couldn’t face, such as clearing out his dad’s study. It was a difficult business. Every now and then he would come across a birthday card, a photograph or a football programme and be transported back in



time. Really, it was amazing what he was turning up. The RSPCA had written a letter thanking Eric Jones for his generous donation. Jeremy had the feeling (more so than ever) that his father had been a decent man.

'Would you like a cup of tea, Jeremy?' his mum called out from the living room.

He had so many memories to draw on in this house. This study, which had used to be his bedroom, was where he had broken a tooth in a pillow fight with a friend and where he had hidden under the bed, aged nine, when he had received a bad school report.

'Thanks, Mum,' he called back.

He rose from the paperwork on the floor. Gazing upwards, he realized that he had missed the top of his old wardrobe, a relic from the past, in his searches. He stood on tiptoe and felt towards the back. To his surprise, his hand encountered what felt like some sort of metal box. He gained purchase on the shoebox-sized object, which was made out of black tin, and brought it down to his level.

Opening the lid, he read in old-fashioned typewritten letters:

ADOPTION PAPERS FOR BENJAMIN PRATT.

The name meant nothing to him. He turned over the top page to find a letter from the adoption home to Mr and Mrs Jones. This was to inform them of the birth of Benjamin, a baby weighing 9lb 3oz, on the same birthdate as Jeremy. There were other documents, one signed by the mother, Catherine Pratt, and details about when and where to pick Benjamin up. There seemed to be no doubt at all about the authenticity of what Jeremy was reading.

Benjamin Pratt.

He clung onto the papers, his throat as dry as tinder and a flush spreading over his cheeks. One would think that at such a dramatic moment everything in his life should find a new meaning and that the news shouldn't altogether be a surprise.



'Oh!' said his mum.

She was heading out of the living room towards the kitchen but stopped in her tracks when she saw what he was carrying.

'I'm adopted.'

'Yes, dear.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Your father...' She returned to the living room, sat down and beckoned him to do the same, but he remained standing. 'Your father thought that it was better for us not to. He thought it would lead to confusion. And I think also he was thinking of me. He thought that after my three miscarriages I would find it difficult, emotionally, if you went back to your biological mother. He felt very strongly that you were now ours and that your birth parents had relinquished all rights to you.'

'Who were my birth parents?'

'Jeremy, sit down.'

'I don't want to sit down.'

'Your birth parents,' his mum continued, swallowing, 'were very young. I wasn't told much about them, although I did ask the lady at the home as much as I could. Your birth father was a Frenchman who came over for a two-week holiday. He did the dirty, I suppose you could say, and then returned to France. Your mother was seventeen and quite poor, I believe. So she and her family took the decision, which must have been very difficult for them, to give you away.'

'How old was I?'

'When we picked you up from the home, you were seven weeks' old.'

Jeremy sat down. It was impossible to organise his feelings. How could you go through 42 years of life and be unaware of something so fundamental? His parents should have told him about his adoption as soon as he could have understood the meaning of what they were saying.

'I used to wonder,' said his mum, 'if you'd have a natural aptitude for French, but Eric told me not to be so silly.'



'Do you know my birth father's name?'

'No. Just your mother's. I suppose, if anything, darling, you're a Pratt.'

And, probably through nerves, his mum began to laugh.

It wasn't until a day later that Jeremy thought of the Devil and his arrangement: a mercy killing of an old person who wasn't a relative. So far as he was concerned, his father would always be his father, but it was true, also, that they were biologically unrelated. He cast his mind in another direction, considering the circumstances behind his promotion. Shawcross falling into disfavour was probably influential in the decision to appoint him. That was somewhat lucky, he supposed. However, there was that business of his sharing the same birthday as William Tyler. Spooky, William had called it.

This was ridiculous. He had been stressed lately and these thoughts about the Devil were no doubt a product of his overworked imagination. After all, although he had felt shocked at the news of his adoption, in some closed-off part of his brain perhaps he had guessed at the truth. Perhaps, also, he had known subconsciously that when Shawcross and Peterson went to Dallas they would fall flat on their faces and that the MD's job would be his.

Perhaps... perhaps...

In the meantime the situation at work, when he returned after a week off, was somewhat anticlimactic. Everyone sympathized with him over his father's death and accepted his new appointment civilly. Even Peterson seemed to take it well.

It was interesting to speculate on Jeremy's problem with Peterson. Peterson, after all, was good at his job and wasn't a gossip type. Probably the Devil, or rather Jeremy's subconscious, had struck at the root of the problem in Peterson's looks. Peterson was ten years younger than Jeremy and more urbane and cultured. Of course, Peterson had his failings: a certain arrogance, a certain smarminess. But perhaps Jeremy had exaggerated those traits in his mind. Jeremy certainly wouldn't get rid of Peterson. And it was hard to believe that he had borne a grudge



against him only so recently.

Human nature was ironic in that sense. One minute you were caught up in a challenge that seemed insurmountable, and the next minute you had conquered that challenge, accepted the new circumstances, and begun to fret over the next challenge. And so life went on. And, in any case, these challenges were all in your mind. Jeremy's feeling of anticlimax continued when he finally got round to telling his mum about his promotion. She was pleased, naturally, although not quite as thrilled as he'd imagined. Her emotions had probably been stretched to their maximum by the grief she had experienced over his father.

In fact, he felt closer to his mother than ever. After the initial shock of seeing his adoption papers, he began to appreciate more deeply her role in his upbringing. She had been 36 when he had come into the world and now she was an old lady – quite fragile on her pins, as she might say herself. They talked at length in the evenings, she reminiscing about his childhood or the quirks of his father, he holding forth on the issues he was facing at work, the vastness of his new office, the new people with whom he was coming into contact. The Jones family was tiny – both of Jeremy's parents had been only children – and since he didn't have someone else to chat to on a personal level, he confided exclusively in his mother. She too, or so he believed, confided all her problems to him.

Although, as it happened, not quite all of them. Two months after his father's death she revealed that she had cancer, and that the disease had already reached stage four. She had known before her husband's death about her condition, but had wanted to keep it a secret so as to minimise his worrying. Her chances of survival according to the doctors were virtually zero.

How could fate, or God, be so cruel? Such were Jeremy's thoughts and, in a sense, it wasn't surprising that late at night on the day his mum broke the devastating news about her health, he received a familiar visitor. The latter, his hair slicked back, was dressed in his customary smart suit, a red handkerchief peeping out of his top pocket, and reddish-brown tufts



sticking out of his sleeves.

'Good evening, Jeremy. Or perhaps I should call you Mr Pratt.'

Jeremy uttered an oath.

'Perhaps,' continued the Devil, examining his pointed nails, 'you think I should have made things clearer in our last discussion. A lot hinged, didn't it, on the word "relative".'

'You killed him. You killed my father.'

'I killed your father,' the Devil repeated. A cynical smile hovered on his burgundy lips. 'Perhaps for future reference I should set out some ground rules in our relationship. Whatever happens – your promotion, to take an example – is a perfectly natural circumstance. In the case of Eric Jones, as I believe I made clear at the time, he died a painless death.'

They were having this discussion in Jeremy's bedroom. Jeremy's last memory was of lying in bed and reading the pay reviews he had asked the departmental heads to draw up. Then perhaps he had dozed off. At any rate, the Devil was perched on the end of the bed, close enough for Jeremy to detect the sulphur, and at an angle that allowed him to see his small shiny shoes.

'You know the identity of my birth father?'

'*Mais oui*. Do you wish to know more about him?'

'No,' said Jeremy after a hesitation.

The Devil's smile broadened.

'Tell me, my dear fellow, how are things at work? If you require any advice, please feel free to ask me anything you like. I am in touch with a lot of people in commerce and industry. I have influential contacts.'

'You probably caused the financial crash.'

The Devil's eyes flashed a bright red.

'Poor Devil that I am, I get the blame for everything that goes wrong. But, without further ado, let's get down to business. The subject is Florence Jones, who you persist in viewing as your mother. Her health is declining and you wish to keep her alive. Is that – and excuse me for



questioning your judgement – altogether fair? She's an elderly lady. She's had a good life, albeit somewhat unexciting.'

'I don't expect my mum to live forever. I just think that cancer is a terrible way to die.'

'And yet it's very common. Even if she recovers, she will get weaker and weaker.'

'I'd like her to die a peaceful death.'

'Tonight?'

'No, not tonight.' *How could he suggest tonight?* 'Until she doesn't enjoy life.'

'My dear fellow, she hasn't enjoyed life since your father passed away. But I'll see what I can do. The cancer, I'm sure, is not irreversible, and her lifespan could be extended and still leave her in a comfortable state. I promise you that you won't be displeased.'

'You promise!' Jeremy scoffed.

'Yes,' said the Devil equably. 'And now for the price for my services. We mustn't forget that, must we? You have, of course, the option to reject my proposal.'

A short silence fell as the Devil weighed up the options. His existence no longer seemed to be in question.

'This is a small thing, this favour; it's hardly worth my while. The only payment I will charge is a temporary dip in sales for your company.'

The immense feeling of relief Jeremy felt was quickly followed by suspicion.

'I'll lose my job?'

'No.'

'Other people will lose their jobs?'

'No.'

'Somebody will commit suicide?'

'No. A dip in sales will be the only price to pay. Not even a big dip. And only temporary.'

Jeremy was determined not to fall for another trick. A dip in sales wasn't even bad in certain respects. Seckwells had been inundated with work lately and it would mean that they could



concentrate their energies on their existing client base. Of course it helped, too, to know such things in advance. It would allow him time to prepare for such an eventuality. And – oh, yes, another thing – the blame for declining sales would fall in part on Charles Peterson as the sales director. Relations between himself and Peterson weren't bad, but a fall from grace might curb the other's cockiness.

'I have to hurry you,' said the Devil. 'I've another client to see in five minutes. Gab, gab, gab, this woman. Always trying to put one over on me. Me, of all people!'

'Yes,' said Jeremy. 'Yes, I agree.'

He awoke. He was sweating heavily. Relief over his mother recovering from cancer combined in his mind with worry about work and the terror of who he was dealing with. He replayed the conversation over and over, toying with the phrase 'a temporary dip in sales', unable to construe a way that he, or anybody else, would suffer.

'It's strange, I feel better today,' said his mum, when he rang her mid-morning from his office. 'It must be one of my good days.'

Jeremy waited for the inevitable bad news to counter his mother's improving health – the news, for example, that Seckwells had lost a major contract or failed to match a competitor in a certain area (which his development team could then remedy). But no news arrived that day or the next week. Or even over the next month. Seckwells still picked up business here and there. Not in a major way, but things were still ticking over. The knowledge that something grim was around the corner was thoroughly unnerving.

And then on Friday the 13th – a day he had felt uneasy about in advance – it happened. His receptionist rang to say that William Tyler was on the line.

'Jerry?'

'Yes.'

'Jerry, your accounting module is a load of crock.'



He was instantly aware that this was the other half of the Devil's bargain.

'How so?'

'How so? I'll tell you how so, old chap,' said William, mimicking Jeremy's accent. 'You know the new ZenixWare platform?'

In point of fact, Jeremy didn't know anything about this platform, which had only just been released in the States.

'Your accounting module crashes on it,' William went on. 'We can't even provide a fix because, unlike the rest of the management system, it isn't modular. Do you know how many sales we're gonna lose, Jerry – old chum – old bean? We're gonna suffer a huge dip. We may never recover.'

Actually, Jeremy felt like saying, it will only be a temporary dip.

The discussion continued in its one-way fashion. William said the US parent company would have to revert to the old accounting module, basic though it was.

'There's something else, Jerry. I've received a letter of complaint about you.'

'Who from?'

'It doesn't say. Someone in the UK. I'll read it out to you.'

There was a rustle of papers. As William read out the letter, Jeremy's mind raced, trying to determine who among his 53 staff might feel aggrieved with him. The criticisms in the letter were vague, relating to his obsession with trivial details and his absentmindedness over staff reviews and the granting of holidays.

'Do you remember when I told you to focus on the people side of things and leave technical issues alone?'

The lecture continued. So far, despite giving his agreement (not strictly true), Jeremy hadn't cut costs by laying off anybody or sent William any proposals about relocating the UK office to a smaller site. What, William wanted to know, was he doing apart from sitting on his 'ass'?

Jeremy wondered if William had a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality or if this was the Devil's



doing. At any rate, the upshot was that Jeremy was required to employ a human resources person. This person would help out not only with issues that he was 'hopeless at' but help out with managing *him*.

Jeremy replaced the phone but almost immediately it started to ring. Tempted though he was to leave it alone, he picked it up.

'Jeremy?'

'Mum.'

'Jeremy, I've got some wonderful news to tell you. The test results from the hospital have come through and I've been given the all-clear. Obviously, they still need to keep me monitored to see that the cancer doesn't return, but that's wonderful, isn't it? Friday the thirteenth has certainly been lucky for me.'

What he had learned above all from this experience was that he should strike no more deals with the Devil. The fellow was diabolically clever and, although things could have turned out worse with the 'temporary dip in sales', Jeremy would not have put it beyond the fiend to have gone easy on him in order to encourage return business.

At the weekly management meeting, he explained to his UK colleagues, in calmer tones than William Tyler, what was happening with the accounting module. Seckwells (UK) had an advantage over the States, knowing about the problem in advance (and the tech services department in Dallas were already busy working on a fix), and Jeremy was able to reveal to whoever was scheming against him that a human resources person would handle personnel issues from now on.

Another insight – this time into the sort of conversation conducted by Seckwells' two receptionists – came one afternoon as he was pinning a note to the noticeboard in the kitchen.



Caroline was telling Louise about the latest candidate for the HR job. The latter had arrived early and was waiting in Jeremy's office.

'She's absolutely stunning. She's got long blonde hair and she's wearing an outfit that I love: a grey dress with a chunky necklace in neutral colours. Mark my words: she's got the job. I bet you anything you like.'

Jeremy, who was listening in spite of himself, drew in his breath. Doubtless there were men who were swayed by looks to the extent that it affected their judgement. But not him. It hurt that anyone could think that he would be governed by such considerations.

He left the kitchen a minute later and walked past the two women in silence.

Let them think what they wanted! He didn't have to employ... Chantal, was it?... unless she showed an aptitude for the job.

It was beyond dispute that Chantal was stunning. It was almost like having Miss World in his office. They chatted about her previous work experience – she came with a glowing reference – and covered such topics as sick leave, pensions and employment law. Jeremy tried to be as thorough as possible in his questioning, but she tackled everything easily. He was tempted to give her the job there and then – she was the last candidate – but the overheard conversation in the reception area still rankled with him. Why did everyone focus on looks? Even the corridors seemed more crowded than usual as he showed her out of his office and, as she was leaving the building, he found Peterson standing beside him.

'What a corker. Tell me she's got the job.'

'She's very promising.'

'She's more than promising,' said Peterson, his eyes fixed on Chantal's backside. 'If I were you, I'd tell her to start tomorrow.'

Jeremy looked sourly at the speaker, although the latter was too engrossed in Chantal's posterior to notice. No wonder men had the reputation that they had. And no wonder Jeremy felt himself to be on a different wavelength to Peterson.



Nevertheless, there was no real alternative to Chantal for the HR role and so Jeremy made her a formal offer. Whatever anybody thought about the reasons for this decision, Chantal struck him as the best person for the job.

And the early signs, after she had accepted his offer and taken up her position, were positive. She organised a redundancy package for someone on long-term leave whom he'd been too soft on.

'Has she got a boyfriend?' Peterson asked him, shortly after she had started in the job.

Jeremy replied that he didn't know.

'You don't know? Come on, man, where are your priorities?'

Not in my pants, he felt like replying.

The amazing thing was that Jeremy felt comfortable in Chantal's presence. Although she was undeniably beautiful, it was a natural beauty that she didn't appear to be aware of. And she was a truly nice person. In fact, he felt able to confide in her about the letter of complaint that had been sent to William Tyler.

Within a day, she had come back with a fax copy of the letter.

'Leave it to me,' she said.

Within another day, she had produced a name.

'John Colson.'

'John? Are you sure?'

'Ninety to ninety-five percent. I talked to him on my second or third day here. He was more diplomatic face-to-face than he was in the letter, but some of the comments he came out with match what was written to William. The other thing is the style of writing, which is similar to the style he uses in his emails, in particular the way he refers to people by their initials.'

John was Peterson's number two. He had always been friendly, if somewhat shy and withdrawn, in Jeremy's presence.



Could Peterson be using John as a mouthpiece?

'I recommend you talk to him directly,' said Chantal.

'And then?'

'And then, if he confesses, say that you're addressing each of his points and it's a shame that he didn't come to you first.'

Half an hour later John Colson was facing him and Jeremy was explaining how someone had written a letter of complaint to William Tyler. With John's face already red, Jeremy accused him of being the author.

'A lot of your points are valid. That's why we're carrying out wholesale improvements of our system of management starting with myself.'

John gulped and nodded his agreement. Jeremy, more pleased than anything at unearthing the perpetrator, beamed his forgiveness.

'Let's forget about this, John. All I want is for you to carry on doing the great job you're doing and come and see me or Chantal if you've got problems.'

'Thanks, Jeremy,' said the other, bashfully.

He strode over to Chantal's office, feeling that an annoying worry had been dealt with effectively and that, between them, he and Chantal were a fantastic team.

Unfortunately, the female half of the team wasn't in her office, and he asked Caroline if she knew where she was.

'She and Charles have gone out to lunch.'

'Just now?'

'Ten minutes ago.' She smiled and dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. 'Louise saw them holding hands.'

He returned to his office in not such a buoyant frame of mind. He really hadn't suspected it until now, but obviously he must have feelings for Chantal. His original view, of finding her attractive (in an objective way, of course) and thinking that they got on well, had developed into



something deeper.

And yet they had hardly known each other for any length of time...

She must, unwittingly, have cast a spell on him. She must have said something, or a combination of things, to make him think that there was something special about her and about their relationship...

And now that, unfortunately, he *did* feel that way about her, it hurt. Indeed, the thought of her and Peterson holding hands, and perhaps kissing, was enough to turn his stomach. His clothes, as he walked around his overly large office, felt sticky, and his cheeks weren't just warm to the touch, they were hot.

Naturally, a certain visitor appeared that evening. It would make no difference, Jeremy told himself, whatever tactics the Devil employed. He had no interest in coming to a deal over Chantal. However painful things turned out – say, if Peterson and Chantal got married – this was an issue he would face on his own.

'A political broadcast,' the TV announcer read out, 'on behalf of the Satanic Party.'

And there he was, enclosed in the world of television, yet oddly exuding the same pungent odour.

'All alone this evening?'

'Go away,' said Jeremy. 'The Satanic Party won't get my vote.'

'Dear me. And I have such warm feelings for you. I was just wondering if you had any other weaknesses, aside from your ambition and a desire to keep your adoptive mother alive beyond her natural time when, hey presto, along comes lust.'

'It's not lust,' he snapped. 'It's more than that.'

'Is it? These feelings of yours aren't permanent, you know. That's what people often fail to understand. When the lust goes, just what is left exactly? Rarely love in my experience and certainly not love of the passionate variety.'



'There can still be a loving friendship.'

'Or, to express it in another way, a power struggle resolved. But let's stick, my dear fellow, to your feelings for Chantal. Just think about this for a moment: do you love Chantal now that she's cosyng up to Peterson? What do you think they're up to tonight?'

'Shut up.'

The Devil's grin widened.

'Wrath. Another deadly sin. Look, my dear fellow, let me give you a lesson in life. Your adoptive father died recently, followed, nearly, by your adoptive mother. Now both of these events, understandably, gave you a shock. They brought home to you just how lonely you are and how, in the future, you'll have nobody to keep you company. Loneliness is a human feeling; it's nothing to be ashamed of. The point is that Chantal came along when you were ripe for feeling the way you do. It's the same with your career. Ten years ago, whether you got the top job or not did not matter that much. But now, after the fuss everyone made over your accounting module, it's a different story. And let's remember that you're not getting any younger. You felt that this was your last chance of promotion.'

'I'm not interested in any deal,' he said.

'Worthy of you, my dear fellow. Worthy, if a little disingenuous. Let me reveal to you a secret while I'm in an expansive mood. Whenever I allow people to win the heart of their dream-lover, their feelings for that dream-lover invariably diminish over time. That is why my proposal—'

'I'm not interested.'

'That is why my proposal is different from my last two proposals. My dear fellow, I feel guilty over how I have treated you. That accounting module will be the devil to fix. As a gesture of goodwill, therefore, I will make this offer to you free of charge.'

'The offer is Chantal?'

'Free of charge.'

'No consequences?'



'No.'

'Peterson won't commit suicide? Chantal won't die in childbirth?'

'Please understand, my dear fellow, that I can't vouch for everything that happens in this world. That other fellow sometimes gets involved in spite of Himself. What I will say categorically is that nothing will change by my doing and that Chantal will not only drop Peterson, she will marry you.'

'She doesn't have a terminal illness? She isn't a murderer?'

'No. Her personality is sickeningly lovely.'

'This is wonderful!' Jeremy cried. 'My God, are you really the Devil?'

'I am the Devil. And...'

'That was a political broadcast on behalf of the...'

Jeremy continued to watch the TV with the broadest of smiles. It seemed to him that the whole world was smiling.

Chantal rang through to his office at 9:30 the next morning.

'Hi, I've got news. Shall I pop over?'

The sound of love wasn't readily apparent in her voice but Jeremy sat back, wondering what would happen when she arrived.

A knock on the door, a couple of steps into the room, and then...

Yes, it was him, Jeremy Jones. The same old him and yet, by her hesitation, she was clearly seeing him in a new light. All this, instinctively, he felt in a split-second. In a way it was depressing that these new feelings had been induced only by some form of otherworldly intervention.

'News from the States,' she said. 'William Tyler has left the company.'

'Why? What's happened?'

'There was a rebellion of some sort.'



Jeremy started laughing. 'Poor old Billy-boy. You don't know what the repercussions are for us?'

'Sorry.'

'I don't know why I'm laughing, then. Hopefully, they've got enough problems in the States, what with that pesky accounting module, not to give us a thought. Do you think we should up sticks and move to a smaller office?'

She shook her head.

'Good,' he said. 'Hopefully, they'll stop nagging us about that as well. Do you want to meet up for lunch?'

'Actually, I was going to—'

'Cancel your current lunch date? Thanks! We've got important things to discuss.'

'OK,' she replied with a smile.

Lunch, then dinner, followed. Then (what fun!) a sleepover. It was true that they were moving at breakneck speed in their relationship. But why not? They both felt the same way about each other and, indeed, about lots of other things too. Seckwell Gowan (UK) soon became a business concern effectively run by the two of them. And was it his imagination? His association with Chantal seemed to garner him more respect from his colleagues. Even Charles Peterson seemed humbled by his and Chantal's relationship. People like Peterson, Jeremy concluded, were hardier than people like him. Peterson would get another job or another girlfriend, if he wanted. He wasn't as sensitive to life's tribulations.

Six months went by. It was time to take the next step. Chantal had already met Jeremy's mother and he had met hers, Mr and Mrs Morel. It wasn't quite so exciting, knowing that your marriage proposal would inevitably meet with a positive response, but Jeremy didn't care. He



popped the question and received a resounding, 'Yes!' He didn't even think that much about the Devil these days. The latter had done his bit and now could leave him alone. Jeremy still headed up the company; his mother was in good health (his father had died but arguably that would have happened anyway); not least, he had got together with Chantal, who was kind and beautiful. After the honeymoon, he resolved to start going to church. The Devil, when he thought of him at all, wasn't nearly as clever as Jeremy had imagined.

So it was quite a surprise when the Evil One showed up on the first night of Jeremy's honeymoon. The first sign of his presence was, as always, a smell of sulphur, followed by his face in the bathroom mirror of his hotel room.

'AAAAH!'

Jeremy jumped backwards.

'No need to worry, my dear fellow. This is only a courtesy call, what you might call an after-sales service.'

'After-sales,' said Jeremy, spitting out the repugnant phrase.

'Yes. Unfortunately, although I'm sure you'll be different, many of my clients are unhappy with the solutions that I provide for them. I don't know why. I explain the conditions, they agree, and then they moan that they didn't understand or that they didn't read the small print.'

'What are you doing here? You said that your last proposal was free.'

'It was, indeed. And, for your part, you kept to your side of the bargain.'

'What side of the bargain?'

'Chantal.'

'Are you saying that you *wanted* me to end up with her?'

'Indeed.'

'But I'm deliriously happy being with Chantal.'

'A complete success, then,' said the Devil. 'I think you can judge for yourself how unwarranted my reputation is. Do I take it that our business is done and that you no longer require



my services?’

‘Yes. A million times, yes!’

And, saying thus, he was faced with his own reflection. What Chantal in the other room thought of him shouting, he couldn’t imagine. He threw some water over his face and exited the bathroom. Funnily enough, she didn’t seem to think anything was amiss. Lying in bed, she looked lovelier than ever, her red negligée showing off her perfect figure.

What on earth was the snag in getting married to such a beautiful person, inside and out? She hadn’t had a sex change. She wouldn’t, he was sure, turn into a nagging shrew. And he couldn’t believe that they would ever fall out.

Half an hour later, she said, ‘I don’t know where you get your energy from, Jeremy. The English aren’t supposed to be good in bed.’

‘There’s always the exception,’ he said, examining his nails, before realizing that that was a habit of somebody else. ‘Actually, I’ve never told anyone about this, but I’m adopted. My biological father is French.’

‘Oh, wow. Sacré bleu. Have you ever met him?’

‘No.’

‘And your biological mother?’

‘I’ve haven’t met her either.’

He talked about how he had found his adoption papers and the ensuing conversation with his mum.

Chantal cuddled up to him.

‘My parents have a romantic story too. They had a whirlwind romance in their teens and then were separated for a few years. My mum’s parents didn’t approve of my dad who, in those days, was meant to be a bit of a wild character. However, not to be defeated, Mum and Dad kept in touch and eventually they met up again and got married. I think my mum couldn’t wait to lose her maiden name. Do you know what it was?’ She paused for effect. ‘It was Pratt. P-r-a-double-t.



Catherine Pratt.'

Jeremy could hear a faint laughing in his ears.

'Thankfully, I've inherited my father's name,' said Chantal. 'He's virtually lost his accent these days, but the name, Morel, is French. He first came to this country on holiday when he was eighteen.'

Jeremy buried his head in his hands. He knew that when he looked up again, and gazed into Chantal's face, her adorable features would assume a more familiar appearance.

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