

Seven Steps
to
Perdition

By Kevin Saunders

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This work is dedicated to The Divine Judge - whose dread wrath is yet
to be beheld; to The Sacred Heart of Jesus - who scaled and
sanctified *those steps* for us; to Our Blessed Lady - who weeps for us
still; and all the Angels and Saints; to Bon and Juney, and the
"Second Eleven"; and last but not least, to the sinner that is each
of us.

Beannacht De

kcs

31st May 2000

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CONTENTS

Who's Who	5
Introduction	11
Step I	
Pride: one's most cherished armour	13
Step II	
Wrath: Buck's chapter and verse	43
Step III	
Envy: the snake in everyone's grass	79
Step IV	
Lust: where thoughts do wander	101
Step V	
Greed: overdoing the stuffing	130
Step VI	
Avarice: for want of gain	141
Step VII	
Sloth: just take it easy	157
Epilogue	167
Da Lord's Ear (Song)	126

Who's Who?

Dramatis Personae

Madre - is a very special person, endowed with the 7 Sacred Gifts and more, much more ... and kindness itself to all creatures - particularly those in need. She exudes loving tenderness and seems to be forever bathed in a warm luminous glow. The Christmas Lights' are never far from her side.

Voice: Exquisite and gentle Irish

Accompanying Music: Schubert's Ave Maria (instrumental)

Dramatis Animae

Nob-El (all bow) - Queen of the Cats. She is a very clever cat with a very big heart and no tail - or not much of one anyway. Always acts in mysterious ways. Has an imperial bearing and an attitude to match. Does not like the rodents at all. Casey's bosom buddy. Has a special place in her heart for Juniper - the firefly.

Voice: Imperial Chinese (in English) with a Canadian twang

Accompanying Music: classical Chinese (opera)

Juniper the firefly - Leader of The Christmas Lights' - (Juni for short) - is a little bundle of joy. His silent light radiates pure love to all; and when in flight, his wings clink and chime like a glockenspiel. His presence is always soothing and a welcome delight for all who see him. He's a real little chimer!

Accompanying Music: Tchaikovsky - the dance of the sugar plum fairy

Sandy - is a loveable yet stubborn ol' mule who can sometimes be a bit of a jackass. Many years ago he decided he'd done his bit, so he haltered and then sat down. Now, he just sits on his haunches and mutters the same old stories to himself or any creature that passes by. As soon as the other animals hear "ooh, that reminds me of a story..." - they all disappear.

Voice: Diplomatic English / BBC

Accompanying Music: Elgar's Morning Suite

The Ol' Trout - is an ageing neon-spotted rainbow trout with an imperious attitude and a raggedy old fur coat. She drinks gin throughout the day. She became a cold fish when her lustre began to fade, and like an ice-whorl, she comes billowing in and out of the animals' affairs generally leaving a trail of misery in her wake; but she means well and dispenses nothing but good sense - or so she imagines. She prefers not to mix with the hoi polloi (t'other animals) because she believes they all have designs on her silverware. And she often disappears in the depths seeking a rarefied air - amongst others of her ilk, and despite all appearances, she is not happy.

Voice: Slurred, refined BBC English with a Birmingham twang

Accompanying Music: Balfe: I Dreamt I lived in Marble Halls (The Bohemian Girl) / Joan Sutherland

Benny Diction - is a devilishly handsome bespectacled black bat with a white splash at his throat. He wears a purple-edged cape, and a purple ring adorns his right paw and a thick chunky diamond ring on the other paw. He's partial to his pipe and enjoys the company of the other animals, mostly. He is a sociable bat, except in that he prefers to live alone and keep the other bats out of the belfry, so to speak. Sometimes, but only when he's really tired (hic) - he stutters and stammers a bit ... but then, don't we all. He's a very busy little bat - always flitting to-and-fro and never hanging around

for very long. For some unexplained reason, his appearances / disappearances are always accompanied by a loud clap of thunder and a bright flash of lightening.

Voice: BBC spoken / sung English plus occasional Latin

Accompanying Music: Elgar / Nimrod / Battle Hymn of the Republic / Alleluia chorus

Mog (*pronounced "Mo"* (the Q is silent) / **Moll** - is a British Blue female cat and a stickler for punctuality and punctuation. This rather aloof feline sits quietly and observes all that goes on. She misses little and comments rarely. When she's annoyed, she often rattles her broadsheet newspaper - which is always at hand. She enjoys catnip and other non-garden varieties of 'erbs that seem to make her more relaxed, happy and calm - so no one really minds it at all.

Voice: BBC English / quite refined

Accompanying Music: (Victorian Garden) / Tchaikovsky - Oboe

S'et (*pronounced "sssst" in fox-speak - sounds a bit like a loud whisper*) **or Hatch** (*in general animal-speak*). He is a mysterious and handsome fox. He knows many things for he's been here for such a long time, but no one really knows what he's up though they all respect his crafty ways. And he's generous with his advice and has a liberal attitude with anything that takes his fancy. He's often in the jolly company of *Tinker* and *Casey* - all of 'em supping porter and whispering quietly.

Voice: Well-spoken but with a strong Birmingham accent

Accompanying Music: theme from Crossroads / tbc

Tinker - is a big old shire horse. He's a soft ol' thing, always ready to help whenever called upon to do so; he thinks deeply, and moves slowly. Nothing makes him panic except the sight of *the commodore* with his beaming rat-like smirky-smile. Occasionally, he remembers his glorious days in the military, leading the parade. He's partial to his toolbox and loves to tinker (hence his name) around the stables. The trouble is, with four hooves - it's very difficult to do anything really useful except tinker some more, and sup the porter, and watch his geraniums grow.

Voice: Colonel Blimp / Old Soldier

Accompanying Music: Mozart - No. 4 Horn Concerto / Rodetsky March

wuffer - is an Irish red setter with deep expressive passionate eyes, set in a handsome face and a glossy coat like burnished copper / ginger bread and wears a bright green collar. One minute he's full of the joys of spring, the next - and for no apparent reason - he becomes enraged (by nothing in particular) and worries those around him; and just as quickly - he's as right as rain again and has forgotten all that has just happened.

Voice: "wuff" - barks only.

Music - traditional Irish / something with changeable discordant sounds

Casey - a sentinel, is a fearless Irish Terrier sporting two grey lines on his chin whiskers; has a penchant for his pipe / cigars, and wears a collar around his neck which glows when evil is afoot. His lively wit, ready grin and easy-going nature makes this formidable hound a good friend to have, but a mighty and fearsome opponent.

Voice: BBC English with strong Irish lilt

Accompanying Music: Irish fiddle music / jigs / bohdran (at times of danger)

Buck - is an enigmatic billygoat who roams the land free and unfettered with a constant glint in his eye. He's very serious, impetuous, unpredictable and self-minded and is liable to butt-in at any time - head's / comments included. He's as stubborn as can be when he wants to be, which is often. Likes to be mysterious at all times. Always seen with a book in his hooves - hence his name.

Voice: Old salt - speaks in clipped comments e.g. 'yep, no, aye aye matey'.

Accompanying Music: sailor's hornpipe / Rachmaninov's 3rd Movement?

Commodore P. R. Atty (*pronounced "Per-atty, rhymes with gepati*). He is a mean, low-down and very dirty rattus rattus who is generally up to no good; even on the odd occasion when he tries to be good, he always has a hidden agenda. He's a busybody; getting mixed up in everyone's affairs. The other animals just call him *Pratty*.

Voice: like Fagin / Oliver Twist

Accompanying Music: Prokofiev's Wolf (Peter and the Wolf) / tbc

s'eL - is S'et's mate. Ferociously proud of her foxy partner, she's been round the garden a few times and is for the most part, a kind and generous vixen. She doesn't tolerate fools lightly and can't stand any shenanigans.

Voice: Broad Birmingham twang

Accompanying Music: theme tune from Crossroads

ZIM - is a metallic horse and Tinker's soul mate. She is very hard working, loves crunching numbers, is industrious and always likes to have Tinker close at hand.

Voice: Strong German-cum-English

Accompanying Music: Wagner - Ride of the Valkyrie

Ding-Dong - a kind-hearted country female goat with an earth-mother gentleness and bags of love to spare.

Voice: English with a French twang

Accompanying Music: Guantanamera

The Christmas Lights' - these are all the other little fireflies who are never too far away from *Madre*, and always lead by Juni. Each one glows with an iridescent rainbow of colours and are a sight to behold; when together they radiate pure enlightenment ... it's magic.

Accompanying Music: sleigh bells - Prokofiev's - Lt Kranja(?)

snatch - the ghastly sidekick of *the commodore*. This is a dreadful creature in every respect and one to keep as far away from as possible. Forever out to cause trouble for just about every other creature at any given opportunity. Is very fidgety, has a nervous disposition and furtive eyes which are always on the lookout for any chance at mischief.

Voice: Fidgety comic-Indian type

Accompanying Music: Crossroads theme played on a sitar

siD - itself, a shadowy-spectre, is a bit of a devil and somewhat of a backward entity, which makes *it* absolutely livid, especially when *its* schemes and capers go awry. When this happens - as they often do, siD behaves in a most devilish manner - cursing, threatening and foams at the mouth and then starts muttering about *its* "...most glorious achievement" - something about "being the original" - whatever that may mean? It is a constant shadowy companion to one and all, but especially to *the commodore*.

Voice: almost unintelligible whisper / gruff and gravelly sneer

Accompanying Music: Prokofiev's - RyJ / 'around the grave'

Seven Steps to Perdition

Introduction

Somewhere between 'here' and 'there' - between the realms of one's imagination and conscience, is the 'state of Pwelgas (pronounced *Pel-jas*), in which - there is a pail. Who put it there - none can recall, but everyone knows of it; some have suggested that it is the temporary repository of the animals' souls - and they might be right too; but anyway, there it sits and there it is. And just beyond the pail is a garden - *The Garden of Need*.

The Garden is a beautiful, ethereal, mysterious and magical place, where everything is not quite as it seems; and seams are not quite everything. It is a place where much happens and much does not. Otherwise, it's pretty much as things are, but most of all, it is a place where needs must, especially when siD drives ... and *it* does, and they, often do. And who is dis siD, I hear you ask? Dis, or should I say, dat's a good question; and the answer to it and more will be revealed. And it's a real revelation too, but for now, let's begin...

Our story is about a community of animals that live near, on or about a small sunlight-dappled clearing somewhere in the vast space that is *The Garden of Need*. It is home to a number of curious critters and creatures that abound, and the adventures they have. But mostly, this story is about *you* - things that *you* may have done, may do, or may be contemplating doing, and it also concerns anyone you know, and perhaps everyone you don't know. In these tales that follow, you might discern "things" which may have happened in your life or in the life of someone close to you. Indeed, some of the tales are painful, some of them are poignant, some of them are truly sad, but whatever you do discern, don't worry - that particular message is heaven-sent

and was meant specifically for you! So, dear reader, without further
ado - let the tale unfold...

Seven Steps to Perdition

Step I

Pride: one's most cherished armour

Within *The Garden of Need* is a never-ending forest, in which - stands a magnificent tree. *The Tree* has been there since before time began - or so 'tis said - rising majestically above all of the other trees of the forest; many of which are also very big and also very strong, but whatever their size, they simply pale into insignificance when compared to the awesome might, majesty and power of *The Tree*.

The Tree provides shelter and a place to rest for any and all creatures. It is where Benny mostly hangs about (when he's around that is), and down below - not too far removed from the base of *The Tree* lives the Ol' Trout herself, in a deep dark pool that was formed by a clear-water spring that bursts forth from amidst the mass of tangled roots which immediately gets tainted by the wickedness and evil lurking within the dark waters. It's hard to see the bottom of this foreboding sterile pool because of the absence of light, and even the Ol' Trout herself can't sink to such depths - no matter how hard she tries. And despite some of the other animals' unbridled curiosity - especially Tinker's, no earthly creature knows for sure what lies down there in the shadowy depths ... and if they ever did, they'd quickly wish they'd never had.

No misbegotten creature, except siD, was aware of what lurks at such depths; the depths of depravity of mere mortals. And in its shadowy guise, siD oft proved to be a casual acquaintance of many, a companion to some, and a constant shadow to the ill-chosen few. But more of siD later ... back to the font of life...

Once the water overflows the brambles bordering the dark pool, a babbling burbling brook emerges into the breezy fresh air and sunlight. It glides along at a languid pace where life and light enter into its richness and from then on, it nurtures life in abundance: crayfish, ducks, dragonflies, frogs, fish, herons, kingfishers, Mayflies, otters, owls, water rats, voles and many more besides. There's even the odd snake or two lurking down dark, dank and abandoned holes, friends of siD's and acquaintances of *the commodore* - apparently.

Not too far from *The Tree* and into the depths of the forest is an old tumbledown portal, at the foot of which is a green algae-and-weed covered swamp. In keeping with its surroundings, the portal is the gateway from one shadowy world to the next and not a place for the feint of heart ... and one wanders as many a lost and lonely wanderer wonders aimlessly, wondering why they wander so, in this gaudy limbo - dank and drear, such as it is? Which is all the more surprising as it is the favoured hidey-hole of the infamous *commodore P. R. Atty* and his fidgety partner-in-slime. But even here, wonders will never cease.

Below the welcoming reach of the mighty branches of *The Tree* is a clearing, where the animals wander to and fro', dither and dally and generally go about their business. And, at dusk of every day, some of them gather around to discuss the latest events or simply to tell a tale or two, i.e. all except Nob-El (all bow) - Queen of the Cats - who, whenever her most regal imperiousness deigns to appear, absolutely refuses to do so, "on a principal" says she, "which" - says she, "needs no further elaboration" says she. The other animals simply reckon she's got no tail to tell of - so to speak! And that may be so ... and so it may be.

During the animals' twilight gatherings, there is a universal code of behaviour that lets all the animals sit in peace, mostly. Only once was this rule ever broken - by *the commodore* when - egged on by siD - he attempted to eat a flutterby which was saved in the nick of time by the prompt intervention of S'et; it - the flutterby, now rests in peace. As for *the commodore*, he is under constant observation whenever he's afoot. In his defence, *the commodore* pleaded 'he was only doing what rats do ... which is rat'. For his honesty, which everyone hailed (and hardly believed - although it was the unmistakable truth) - he was spared the severest punishment; but the ultimate judgement is yet to be made; and everyone present and even those not present thought him a real rat. And that he most certainly is.

With the setting of the afternoon sun and the early evening appearance of the new moon, the assembled animals quietened down, as *the commodore* wished to speak.

"R-r-r-r-rattttt-a-ratttttt rat ... well, sink me m'dears..." he said with a sneer, "I know you all must have heard it too - unless I got bells in me ears - but I wants to know what's going on at the stables. Them strange noises; been going on all day and nights it has - so what is it, what is it, and what's more, I wants to know what's that old nag up to? It's driving me bonkers, absolutely bonkers" he screeched, whiskers all a-twitch.

None of the assembled animals answered because none of them had a clue what *the commodore* was ranting on about. That is, with the exception of Tinker, who fidgeted slightly and looked askance at *the commodore*. Tinker always fidgeted when *the commodore* was nearby, and with good reason too. Every time *the commodore* came anywhere near Tinker - especially with that leery-grin on his rat-like face and with his ratty whiskers a-twitchin', it usually meant trouble - for Tinker. And this time was no exception either.

Tinker was cogitating - very deep and ever so slowly ... as he always did, "if I just ambled forward a bit, I could accidentally-on-purpose tread on the rat and no one would really mind. Hmmm, what a splendid idea" - and as he pondered some - on that interesting thought, he found himself edging slightly forward. Then, in a multicoloured flash, he saw and heard the twinkling sound of *Juni - The Silent Light* go blinking by - right in front of his very large eyes and suddenly, Tinker caught hold of himself, whinnied, and said, "Oooaaaar, I say, simply marvellous, absolutely marvellous!"

What he didn't realise was that when *Juni* went twinkling by, the pure love that he radiates removed all evil thoughts from Tinker's mind without him (Tinker) even realising it ... and that's because *Juni* is a very special little light ... a Divine Light, and a true gift from Heaven. DG

"What's that ol' glue pot talking about now?" screeched *the commodore*.

"Wha - what-was-that ya blighter?" snorted Tinker, who then began to shiver and tremble all over with a growing urge to shuffle forward and complete his earlier mission; even though he'd had no recollection of it.

"Hold yer 'orses our kid" said S'et calmly, "Y'ouve no need to get yerself all upset over *Pratty*. Let's just here what he's got to say first and if it 'aint no good, then ya can step on it - hur hur!". Upon hearing this, all the other animals giggled, snorted, twittered and haw-hawed - whichever was most appropriate.

Then, from nowhere in particular, there was a terrible clap of thunder and a blinding flash of lightening. Shrieks, squawks,

whistles and screams went up as they all put their heads down deep into the soft welcoming earth. Of course, within a cat's whisker, they all realised what it was ... or more correctly, who it was.

S'et, first to spot most things, raised his earth-covered paw and looking skyward said, "yarright our kid, wha's wi the thunder-an-frightenin' then?"

"Ohhh, I do wish he'd stop doing that!" snorted Buck, shaking the mud from his heavy brow - even more agitated than normal.

And when the rest of the animals had regained their composure, they too looked skyward and were greeted by a gentle, "Errrrm, - cough - ahern" - it was Benny. He was standing downside-up (being somewhat vertically challenged) on a slender branch of *The Tree*.

"Aherm. I don't wish to interpose..." he said, followed by a few moments silence (he always did this for greater effect and to make sure all the animals were paying attention), "...but, the admiral is right and therefore, he must have a chance to have his say" he softly whispered. Then with a magnificent burst of energy for one so small he roared directly at *the commodore*, "Come on buster - now get on with it ... I would have been here earlier but as you may have noticed, I'm having to wing-it now ever since parting with my previously-owned mode of transport - *sniff!* -- and I won't even mention what's still due to me either, and as I don't wish to *carp* on about such, (said with an ominous steely gaze beamed directly at the rodent) kindly get a move on - will ya - *cough!* "

Not missing the irony of Benny's message and without feeling any sense of shame, "*carp dem* yourself - *hee hee hee*, and my name's not buster" mumbled *the commodore* ever so quietly to himself, his fetid

breath steaming; and failing - one might add, to mention anything about yet another of the little rat's debts way overdue.

And, now fully awoken from his usual activity of staring deadpan at one and all, Buck bleated out, "I'll bust-yer" he said, shaking his rock-'ard and magnificently horned head from side to side and almost butting those animals within reach. And because one never quite knew what was going on behind those horns of his, it was best not to dilly-dally.

At this, *the commodore* snapped back, "Who'se yer tailor sir?" - followed by, "...and what's got your goat - hur hur hur!"

Immediately upon hearing the rat's remark, Buck started to snort ferociously, jumping up-and-down in a most un-goat-like manner. It frightened everyone, especially *the commodore* ... and realising he'd gone a bit too far this time, he quickly screeched, "Aw-right, aw-right already! Sheez. What kind of civilised behaviour is that supposed to be ... tsssssa - nothing but kidology if you ask me, tsssssa - what an ol' goat." But having said such, he remained absolutely petrified; and so should he be.

By now, all the assembled creatures were in an agitated state. This pleased *the commodore* because he always did this: created disharmony and confusion every time he was up to one of his capers. siD, ever-present and lurking about *the commodore's* shoulder whispered some more into the rat's flea-ridden ear. And even though siD - a shadow of his former self, was there, *the commodore* had no idea where his (own) words or thoughts were coming from, "Now..." he thought, "this is the time to get 'em ... hee, hee, hee - oh what a darling r-r-rattus r-r-rattus I am" - sssss-haaaah! - and he heaved a raunchy *sigh!*

"Ok, Ok, Ok, settle down now everybody ... eyes-down now, come on, let's go..." said S'et authoritatively, as he stared menacingly at *the commodore*.

the commodore knew he couldn't mess everyone about another second longer without the real risk of suffering actual physical bodily harm to his rat-like self, so he began...

"Yyyyyeeeeessssss well (said with a sneer) - the other day, I was minding me own business (*met with a multitude of groans and tssssks from those assembled*) and just wandering around by the stables 'aving a look-see at what the loud clinking noise that I had heard. Now we all know that Plod (a nick-name that Tinker did not like) - hee hee - errr, so sorry - Tinker, is always doing something or other around the place and so my natural rat-honed instincts took over."

"What - ya scarpered did ya?" growled Casey, removing the cigar from his powerful jaws - smirking, and showing off a fearsome set of teeth - much to the amusement of all assembled. He could see siD very plainly in the shadows behind *the commodore's* back. This made his white collar glow and also made him growl in a very frightening manner, which in turn, freaked the rat and consequently made siD disappear.

"tsssa - who rattled your chains - dog-face" sneered *the commodore*; at which, Casey merely replaced the cigar between his jaws and just smiled - some might say menacingly, at Pratty, who continued...

" ... anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted..." (*but he couldn't help his little rat-like features from trembling, for it was never a good idea to upset Casey; with him, you just never knew what might happen?*) "...I used one of my many secret entrances into the stables and was nearly blinded by the sights what I saw. And what did I see? Well, I sees Tinker, Hatch (*S'et's other name*) and dog-face over

there, staring at a funny looking brilliantly shiny golden thing ...
it looked like a pair of golden keys?"

At this, Tinker swished his tail and snorted, "Yer-a bounder, ya blighter - nothing but a bounder. What d'mean sneakin' up on an ol' war-horse when 'is back's turned. Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr - it's not good form ya know, not good form at all, not indeed."

"a-herm. Now then Tinker" said Benny, and he stared at him for a few moments in silence and made a cross sign and just said, "...remember!" - and then, he turned to the rodent and said, "And as for you, *carpe diem* indeed ... I should have known better. Never mind, one lives and learns, I suppose..." and with a final steely gaze at the rat, there was another explosive round of thunder-and-frightening as he flitted off up into the upper branches of *The Tree*, with his purple-edged cape billowing in the wind.

Being better prepared, none of the animals flinched this time at the explosion of sound and vision. And Tinker just remained silent and motionless, and just swished his tail - to and fro.

There was a moment's silence when suddenly...

"Come on, come on ya old duffer", snapped *the commodore*, " you just can't stop there. What's the bat all about and why so mysterious? What's he mean - "remember"? And what're you up to? - and how come I don't know about it?" - he squeaked furiously. "I should have you all in irons for this. I can y'know, I can do that - I can, I can have the lot of you - all banged-up no problem - remember, I'm a class one rat with a third rate commission!" - and so saying, his yellow eyes glared just a little too brightly at the long-dreamt prospect.

Mog, who had remained silent (as ever), up until now - smartly rattled her broadsheet newspaper and looked directly at *the commodore* and purred, "Don't be so ridiculous. Anyway, anyone with any sense knows exactly what he means." And then she just stared intently at *the commodore* with her tail flicking hither and thither. When a cat looks at a rat in that certain way, the rat knows instinctively what's upon the cat's mind. The very thought of it made *the commodore* sick with fright.

S'et sat up and spoke, "a-wright yow lot; that's enough excitement for one day, let's pack it in and get our heads down. Whatever Benny and Tinker are up to, it's their business. So, just forger-abou-r-it and go home. An' that means you too *Pratty*"

With these words, they all headed off into the gathering darkness to do just that. And most of them never gave it another thought as they tramped, flit, flew and crawled through the night. That is, all except *the commodore*.

If it was one thing he now knew for certain in the sordid corridors of his warped mind, those golden keys belonged to him and him alone. "Yes, it's true, it was for him that they were, and the rest be blowed!" he mused. And with his whiskers twitching and ears fidgeting to operate at maximum range - *listening out for any sneaky varmit that might try and make him its late night snack* - he scurried quickly away towards the stables. Now, he - the bravest of brave - was going behind enemy lines. He was on a mission - to recover what he believed to be his beloved golden keys ... and no one but no one would stand in his way.

And then, with an abrupt *thump*, he bumped into Sandy, who was adhered to the ground by way of his derriere - as normal.

"Ohh hell-lo there - how lovely to see you", brayed Sandy.

And once *the commodore* had picked himself up off the cold damp earth, he recovered his wits when he realised what, or more precisely whom - he'd actually bumped into. Letting out a big rat-like sigh he said, "hello colonel m'dear - you frightened the life out of me sitting there like that in the dark".

To which Sandy replied, "Ah well, there you go then. Anyway, that reminds me, did I ever tell you about the time when I once met someone in the dark wood at the dead of night? No? Well, I shall tell you then ... many years ago..."

But as soon as *the commodore* heard those words, he knew the story would last at least another hour or two at least. It wasn't that Sandy's stories were new, because like all the other animals, he too had heard most of them before. And not just once either. If it was one thing about Sandy that you could rely upon, it was the fact that he would repeat the same stories over and over and over again, almost *verbatim*. So, leaving Sandy in a world of his own, braying to the empty night and the stars, *the commodore* continued forth into the darkness on his delusional self-serving mission.

It was quite some time before Sandy even realised *the commodore* had disappeared - but it mattered not, he had been left on his own before (but never alone) and was quite used to it; and besides, he had many, many more stories to tell ... and soon enough, someone else would drop by, of that he was always certain - for he was never alone for too long. And sure enough, sooner or later, someone always did!

Meanwhile, continuing along his dark path, *the commodore* came across the Ol' Trout herself, enjoying a bit of stargazing and a refreshing

stellar-bath whilst admiring her very magnificent self in the reflection of the cold limpid pool.

Startled by his sudden and rude appearance, the Ol' Trout huffed and puffed a few times and then said in a commanding tone, "You there, yes - you, that rat there - come here - INSTANTLY!" at which, *the commodore* - realising he could do nought but obey, obeyed, instantly!

Seeing she still commanded one of the lowest order, she was encouraged somewhat and continued - albeit indignantly, "Wh-hot manner of creature are you that sneaks up and spies upon a refined filly (*author's note: she meant 'fillet'*) in her prime, and I don't doubt other perfectly decent folk too, in the midst of the night - hey? Come on you verminous little rat, speak up, speak up I say, speak up!" - her pouty nostrils flaring and her gills flapping impatiently at the cheek of it all.

But by now, *the commodore* had got the sense to say nothing, except he muttered under this breath, "whacha gassing on about now y'old trout" and chortled quietly to himself - but the Ol' Trout's hearing was rather sharp - from years of practice of eavesdropping on quiet conversations in dark corners, and so she heard every word of it. And because the rodent had said it in such an insulting manner, she was perfectly out of breath and utterly speechless. Whereupon she had an immediate attack of the vapours (literally), went green around the gills and felt a pressing need to take the air - like straightaway! So, with her neon-spots all angrily aglow she flopped into the pool in an electric rainbow of shimmering colour. And before the ripples had reached the edge of the pool, she reappeared and said, "Mark my words *commode-dear*, before this night's out - you will take a great fall. And I shall tell you one more thing - it will be your last fall! I know of such things, and don't think I don't because I do, I do too!" - and with that, she disappeared into the depths of darkness

once again, way down deep, into the inky depths below the rippling pond's impenetrable surface.

"That was pretty impressive" mused *the commodore* as he strutted on his way, "but what the heck was the old kipper going on about?" - he wondered to himself, "Ah well" he thought, "snooty ol' thing - what does she know about anything anyway." And so he continued forth, and headed towards the stables, where...

Tinker, S'et and Casey were each supping a glass of porter and mulling over the earlier goings-on at the day's meeting. Casey had a cigar clamped between his jaws, as did S'et - who also enjoyed an occasional puff. Tinker just took long sideways glances at the pair of them when it got too smoky, but said nothing.

"I tell yow what..." said S'et -

"what's that then Hatch?" asked the other two in unison.

"...well, I wish that blessed bat (hur! hur!) - wouldn't keep making those blinkin' noisy wotsits every time he shows up. That blinkin' thunder-an-frightenin' is just about doin' my head in. And not only that, what's the deal between you two anyway?" - directing his comment particularly at Tinker, who upon hearing it, took another sup of his favourite porter and licked his lips, and would have swished his tail, that is, if he wasn't already sitting on it.

"Ahhhaaaa now then ... good question that Hatch, good question indeed ... but like you know, when a fella is retained to keep a secret - he's duty-bound to do so. Ohhhhh yes, indeed he is, duty-bound he is, absolutely he is, indeedy-doodo ... he must!" - said Tinker, with a gentle whinny thrown in for good measure.

And never one to be outfoxed, S'et just said, "Corr-ect!" and left it there - hanging...

And so, the silence hung in the air - as they supped and they puffed.

Then, out of sheer curiosity, Casey said with a wink at S'et, "Of course, Tinker only knows what he's been told ... he wouldn't be aware that maybe others might know of it too..."

S'et ventured, "Cor-rect again!" and left it there ... hanging once more.

Within minutes, this trivial bit of information had petered through to Tinker's innermost thoughts. And he was approaching the inevitable conclusion that both Casey and Hatch too, had also been told *the secret*. And the more he pondered and wondered, the more convinced he became. After nearly swallowing a puff of blue smoke that was deliberately directed at him by the other two mischievous rogues, Tinker snorted derisively, gave them both a very long sideways glance each, and then took a healthy draught of his porter, shifted his weight sideways, freed his tail - which he then swished with delight, and so began his tale...

"Now then, now then, listen-in you chaps..." he said in a parade-ground whisper.

And with a wink and a nod, both S'et and Casey grinningly leant their well-pricked ears to the story that was about to unfold and settled down comfortably, for a good tale was about to unfurl for sure.

"...well now, where was I?" intoned Tinker, "Oh yes ... right chaps, here we go ... it all started the other night: I was having a late night munch - what you might call a bit of a roll in the hay - so to speak,

hey! - oh, anyway, when I suddenly noticed the *Aurora Glorialis* - The Christmas Lights' - they appeared to be all around me. And, what with their heavenly tinkling and twinkling and the sheer delight of it all, it made me weep so, with absolute joy, I can tell you. Then, in a flash of thunder-and-frightening, Benny and *Madre* appeared. Benny said nothing but *Madre* smiled at me. And I must admit, I was so happy I cried with joy (sniff) - her voice is like quicksilver - so pure and utterly glorious.

Then *Madre* spoke, she said, "Noble Tinker - I am commanded to entrust into your care these *Keys of Heavenly Gold*. Don't ask why, oh faithful servant, simply take them and hold them to your heart until I return. Give them to any soul that seeks them; and on no account must they be denied - even to the blackest of soul's. Heed me these words and obey. For I shall return soon enough to collect them" - and with that, *Madre* was immediately girdled by The Christmas Lights' and they collectively disappeared into the night in a blinding flash of dazzling colour."

"Cor - stone the blinkin' crows" said S'et, and whistled.

"So, come on then, what happened next?" asked Casey, whilst busily recharging their now-empty glasses, and when he'd done that, he then placed a fresh stogie in his jaws.

"Well, then Benny said to me, "Tinker, Tinker, Tinker (he sung those bits I seem to recall), what a most special gift you alone have been given. Entrusted to be The Keeper of *The Golden Keys*. It is truly a singular honour that has been bestowed upon you. Now, you must place them where all can see them, yet none can reach them. Only one may be The Keeper of *The Golden Keys*; and that one - is you. Be mindful of your calling and treasure your responsibility - no matter how hard

the future may be. *Pax Vobiscum'* - and with that, and another accompanying round of thunder-and-frightening, he too disappeared."

"So, where's this gold then, where did yow put it our kid?" enquired S'et - with an unhealthy looking speculative glint in his eye?

"Can't ya see, Hatch old boy - they're right before your very eyes", replied Tinker.

At this, both S'et and Casey began a frantic search looking hither and thither for a set of golden keys. After a while they pleaded for a clue as to their whereabouts. So, whenever they were close, Tinker said, "warm", and when they were not close he said, "cold". And so it continued, until the lustre of excitement left the pair of intrepid hunters-cum-speculators feeling rather like failed and fatigued gold-diggers.

"Come on now Tinker ol' sport, where are they, we really would like to see them - p-l-e-a-s-e, we'll do a-n-y-thing you want - we just want to have a look, so just show us, please?" - they pleaded, hoping to appeal to Tinker's good nature.

And Tinker, not wishing to hurt their feelings and remembering what *Madre* had said, pointed to the leather and brasses that adorned his magnificent hide. And there, set right beside his heart were indeed a pair of the most beautiful *Golden Keys*. They were and had been at all times in plain sight, yet out of reach - due to Tinker's immense size and grandeur.

S'et and Casey just sat and stared in awe, transfixed. And the longer they stared, the more they continued to stare. And before they knew it, a feeling of serene joy and understanding overcame them both, and their respective coats bristled with pure enlightenment.

For awhile, time seemed to absent itself as they all just sat in silence, simply looking at each other and smiling. Their smiles were the knowing smiles of those that have discovered an absolute truth. In this, there was no uncertainty. Shortly thereafter, they refilled their glasses and lit fresh cigars and continued to sit there in silent wonderment, enjoying the seemingly never-ending moment. They would have sat there until dawn arrived - puffin' and-a suppin', but on this particular occasion, *the commodore's* dark little form would appear from the sky first.

Up in the rafters where *the commodore* was lurking, he had indeed heard almost every word spoken by the trio below, bar a few snippets which he did miss was, he felt, due to the mistral at his back. But whenever he turned round - all he saw at his hairy shoulder was darkness itself; and unbeknownst to the little varmit, he was right, for it was none other than *Darkness itself* ... it was siD. But before *the commodore* was able to blink his squinty rheumy eyes to try and get a better look, his attention was diverted to the goings on down below ... because, in strolled Nob-El, followed by Buck - upon whose back perched *Moq*, sitting there in a most magisterial manner; and following closely behind Buck's broad rump, lolloped wufferc- who didn't know whether he was coming or going. Poor wuffer.

They silently gathered around the sitting trio, and with the exception of Nob-El, helped themselves to a glass of porter and a puff - except *Moq* - who produced an thick unevenly-rolled cheroot from one of her hidden folds - and then lit it.

"Well?" bleated Buck, " surprise surprise, 'aint ya going to ask us how we know?"

"Go on then," said S'et, "how jow-lot find out about-rit?"

To which, Moq replied, "Don't be silly. Anyone with any sense would know the answer to that one!"

"Well, come on then - how?" - retorted S'et in a miffed tone.

As one, they said, "We've seen the light too!"

And there was no more to be said. Because nothing more needed saying.

After a while, amidst the puffs and the slurps and curls of sweet blue smoke, and now that they were all comfortably settled, Moq said, "Now that we all know the truth, isn't it about time the others, including that ghastly rodent were let in on the secret?"

"Cor-rect" - said S'et, accompanied with a nod of his wily head.

"Absolutely, ol' girl" - snorted Tinker approvingly.

"Hmmm. I suppose we should", growled Casey; but then - his collar began to emit a faint hue, which caused him to growl a little more fiercely. "And don't forget the Ol' Trout herself - she needs to know too" said Casey, between growls.

"Ah, but she's so bedazzled by her own brilliance she couldn't see the light if it was right before her very eyes ... which it is!" - added Moq, sagaciously.

Just then, it was noticed by the others that *wuffer's* green collar began to glow too; then they watched in astonishment as he started to leap up and down and run round and round in circles; barking and yapping and snapping and leaping. It was an odd and fearsome

spectacle indeed. And truth be told, it quite upset the other animals - *the commodore* most of all.

At this moment, Buck bleated, "come out come out wherever ye are - ya blasted black-hearted critter" - and butted the nearest object which just happened to be a rather thick post connected directly to a large cross-beam upon which *the commodore* was lurking on high; and as a result of Buck's thoughtful intervention, the post and all it was connected to shook so violently - *the commodore* up on the cross-beam could barely cling on ... and but a second later... a squeaky, "sink-me m'dears" was heard about the rafters, and the next thing they saw was *the commodore* tumbling head-over-claws into space. But being *the commodore*, he was quick enough to make sure he aimed for *the softest spot* he could see - irrespective of whomever he might sink his claws into in the process, which in this instance just happened to be Tinker's broad back. And when the rodent landed with an audible 'plop' on Tinker's back, Tinker let out a huge whinny as he felt those nasty little claws dig in, and consequently spilt his porter all over his shiny brasses. Tinker was so infuriated by the rodent's uninvited appearance that he rumbled from deep down in his chest a mighty "nay!" ... quickly followed by another *neigh!*

"Come down off me back ya wicked blighter" - said Tinker with a derisive snort.

At this, and still feeling the effects of his rather rapid descent and corkscrew landing, *the commodore* could do little else but meekly obey. When he had successfully negotiated his way to *terra firma*, and - finding himself surrounded, he went into an immediate *terror infirma* spasm and just sat immobile and shivered quietly, if somewhat violently, as the recollection of a previous prang came to mind.

The first to address the rodent's most impertinent entrance was S'et who said, "well, blow-me-down - look wot the wind blew in!"

To which, Nob-El rejoined, "I would quite happily alter that to '...*what the cat dragged in*', if given the opportunity to verify the statement after the effect!" Nob-El winked at Casey and they both chortled softly at this; though Nob-El seemed to grin a little too widely for *the commodore's* nerves to withstand.

All the other animals enjoyed this little jest and had a little giggle or two, and that seemed to unnerve *the commodore* even more.

Sensing and fearing for his own ratality (read 'mortality'), *the commodore* squeaked, "oh fi-ne, it's OK for you m'dears to 'ave a bit of spicy fun at me expense - oh yes. But, let me tell you this - I 'eard wot was said and I know you's have got to give me that there bit of 'eavenly gold if I wants it. 'Ain't that right ... it is isn't it, eh - 'cause *Madre* said so 'erself, didn't she now."

The utter logic of this dreadful creature's words rang true and reverberated in all the animals' hearts. For once, there was no denying the validity of the rodent's demand, even though it pained them all to imagine what on earth he would do with such a precious store of Heavenly Gold.

But never one to hold back, Buck bleated, "come here you, ya monster, I'll give ya something to think about to take the cocky chatter out of your head," and with that, he launched an impressive and immediately unsuccessful head-butt in the general direction of the rat, only to be halted by the immensity of Tinker, who intervened, much to his own consternation.

Overcome by the sudden excitement, wuffer went ape and nearly woofed the house down giving an unusually splendid performance.

S'et sat up and said, "steady on there Buck our-kid (hur! hur!) - yow'll just be bangin' yer 'ead off ol' Tinker there for no reason at all ... remember, he's only doin' 'is duty, looking after the meek and miserable," and then took a long draw on his cigar ... and an equally long bead on the present whereabouts of Tinker's *Golden Keys*.

Casey turned to Tinker and said, "Tinker ol' chap, well done! That must have been very hard for you..." - and he tittered a little at this, as did most of the others - then he continued, "...as much as we feel we're all being hoodwinked once again by the fetid little rodent, his demand, although most annoying, in this instance, is incontestable. But I strongly suggest we put it to the vote, and if there's a tie, then it would be up to Tinker to decide, 'cause he's *The Keeper!*"

At this, the others nodded in total agreement. Even *the commodore* decided he would take sides with Casey (but only because it suited his purpose), and felt he was brave enough to nod in agreement too.

And had anyone cared to look beyond their respective noses, out in the field beyond - there was also another nod of agreement from a happy little nodding donkey; who also knew the tale ... and the absolute truth of it.

"*Amen to that!*" whispered Sandy to the twinkling stars, as he sat there with a big cheery grin on his placid little face under the light of dat silvery moon, humming His tune.

Seeing as almost everyone was in general agreement, Tinker shuffled his awesome bulk and said, "Brrrrrrrrr ... w-h-ell, it seems we're all

decided without the need to vote, eh-what! Let's face it, the blighter's correct in what he says - even though it rankles me to agree with the little bounder. I say what *Madre* said, so - *let him have it!*"

But, before anyone could utter a sound, there was a terribly loud C-R-A-C-K and the stable shook; in fact - even the very ground itself shook. The animals instinctively raised their eyes towards the stars in great expectations - to witness the dickens of another bat-arrival however, it was only Buck - acting the goat, as usual ... when he'd heard Tinker say, "...let him have it" - he did just that. He catapulted himself at *the commodore* and with such a powerful butt, that if it had connected, it would have sent *the commodore* to his final (divine) court appearance.

After the commotion, Casey quickly recovered his cigar which was shaken from his jaws by the powerful blast, and immediately gave it to Buck - to 'ave a puff and quieten him down a bit. This seemed to settle the goat somewhat, and calm was restored once more. Even wuffer had quieted. In fact, he had quieted so much it became evident that he had once again, upped-and-run away to who-knows-where?

Another mystery, perhaps?

Now that the animals had once again settled, S'et said, "awright there Buck our-kid (hee hee), come on now and settle down a bit. It's time we put the rat out of his misery..."

And once again, Buck began to twitch and rock his huge horns from side-to-side in a menacing fashion before S'et realised what he was a-thinking, "...naaaaa, that's not worr-I mean at all..." said S'et, "...just let me finish will ya!", then he turned to Tinker and said, "Tinker, give him The Keys will ya, and let His will be done."

At this command, Tinker duly obliged and removed the *Golden Keys* from his heartfelt place of safety. Without a word, and with a little dismay, he laid them on the floor in front of the rat. As he removed his hoof from them, they began to shine with a lustre never before seen by any of the assembled. The rat's eyes narrowed in sheer and sickening delight at his latest and most precious acquisition.

The silly little rodent ... if he but knew?!

At the sight of this most strange spectacle, the rest of the animals just opened their eyes even wider in wonderment, and none more so than S'et - who had a few private thoughts of his own about all that shiny gold.

Anyway, not one to miss an opportunity, quick as a flash, *the commodore* scraped up *The Keys* and shoved them into a dark recess about his filthy louse-ridden body so that they were no longer visible to one and all. He then, full of false confidence, glared at each of the animals in turn, and with a final sneer, headed off into darkness.

But behind him and in his wake, there appeared a dark shadowy figure that loomed. And the sneaky over-confident little rat never even noticed ... silly fellow.

Once *the commodore* was safely away from the stables, he headed off in the general direction of the swamp. He felt safe and secure there, near the sewer. Once he arrived, having successfully circumnavigated the still-braying donkey, 'well, there was no need to chat as there was nothing he needed from him on this occasion, so why bother', he thought (most unkindly, yet typically); then he entered his little hovel and making sure no one was around to steal his *clef d'or* ...

'his' glorious keys (finally in his possession - at long last!), no, he just wanted to sit and remember, and stare at them for the rest of the night and imagine all sorts of things he was going to do with his (imagined) new-found power.

Unfortunately - for the rodent's future, there was another bright spark that had plans for *The Keys* - one who truly understood their worth. It was the malevolence that was his constant companion in one of *its* many forms. The shadowy spectre lurking behind the rat's ears suddenly bloomed into night and overwhelmed the space in which *the commodore* was admiring the *Golden Keys*.

Startled, and scared witless by the manifestation and accompanying sulphuric stench, *the commodore* let out a shriek that would have frozen the blood of a saint if one had been present. But none ever would. It was Pratty's penultimate utterance. The next one would, in all probability, be his last...

If truth be known, siD, was not a nice fellow at all. Well, *it* wasn't even a fellow really. But *it* was a former leading light - or so *it* constantly claimed - but now, *its* light is that of an altogether different cast; and is but a mere shadow of *its* former self. But *its* awesome frightening presence commanded a certain degree of one's attention - to which *the commodore* was most attentive, and thus, the rat stared into the frightening and bottomless pits of *its* deep dark eyes and trembled uncontrollably.

When siD whispered, it's sound was like the roar of a typhoon, and though almost unintelligible, it got an instant connection straight through to the rodent's very confused thought processes.

"Now then, my little dark servant, present to me those *Golden Keys* and claim your ultimate reward: for once done, your worth is no more

and so shall yel be cast into the pit of quiet solitude for an eternity beyond eternity, to ponder in silent isolation and suffer the exquisite pain of realisation that this is your lot forever - without redemption - ever!" it hissed. There was a pause - like being in the eye of a storm, and then in a hissing growl, siD continued sarcastically, "erm, hello - anybody home? Did I say I had finished? No? Well, this is the part where you hand me *The Keys* ... Do it NOW rodent - be quick and hand 'em over", it roared in a most fearsome manner.

But *the commodore* being *the commodore* was fermenting the beast's previous monologue in his own putrid little mind when he suddenly realised that what this darkness thing up to, was nothing more than a bit of skulduggery, theft even. And it was his beloved *clef dor* that this vile perpetrator wished to relieve the poor ol' *commodore* of; and when that thought struck him, he squeaked in his most courageous tone, "not on your life mate. Sink me - whose yer tailor sir, and what's yer business ripping-of an 'armless little fellow like meself of a simple pair of worthless old shiny keys that was gonna sit nicely on me jacket here? Oh no. Not a chance matey, NO!" And despite the feeling of dread in his bones, he made a dash for the nearest bolt-hole and disappeared - just like a rat up a drainpipe.

Astonished at the rat's disobedience, the dark wind *itself* was but a fraction of a whisper behind the rat's tail, and even though *the commodore* was scampering as only a truly frightened rat can, he heard a terrible commotion inside his pointy little head - when time itself seemed to stand still and everything was happening in super slow-motion, then the commotion stopped and he heard a dangerous voice speaking to him from within...

"You absolute fool! You have no idea what you have just done? By refusing to give me those *Golden Keys*, my legions can't enter *those*

gates and restore me to my preferred seat. For that, you must surely suffer. There was but one chance - and now, you've ruined it; even *Madre* herself said that "even the blackest of soul's" was entitled to have them if they did but ask? Well, I asked, I even asked politely - well, polite for me at least, but because you're such a greedy little rat - you refused ME (*it roared*), without even realising it. And now, because of *their power* - I could not remove them from your feeble grasp, even though I nearly tore asunder the very universe at my first attempt to get them!"

Meanwhile, doing his best to ignore the terror both inside his head and that which was right behind him, on his tail - so to speak, *the commodore* was running as fast as his little legs could carry him, and then in an instant, he emerged into the beautiful clear darkness of a starry night with a cool night breeze and the scents of the swamp greeting his runny nostrils, and scrabbling furiously to prevent his plunge into space, he came to an immediate halt - barely hanging-on with his worm-like tail as he, once more, dangled precariously over the precipice...

"Wooops-a-daisy...", he screeched, "...almost a gonner again - hee hee", he thought as he giggled nervously, peering into the abyss. And as he stared hapless into the void, a terrible presence appeared right behind him, and by now, *siD* was very angry indeed.

"Right you little rat - I'm going to ask you one last time to give me those blessed *Keys*. If you do, you can have anything your nasty little heart desires ... just think about it, anything you ever wanted, yours for the asking ... all you gotta do is give me *The Keys*...

(*What siD was really thinking was this 'Give me those keys you little git ... you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't - in fact, either way, you're damned - and then some.'*)

...so, the choice is yours - make up your mind?", it hissed, and then unleashed a cloud of super-heated putrid steam from *it's* flaring nostrils and flambéed the piece of timber upon which *the commodore* was hanging onto for dear life...

With his filth-encrusted nails about to be scorched and his hold on life - perilously close to the end, *the commodore* said defiantly, "ok you big scary git - it's OK for you to be puttin' the frighteners on a little fellow like me like this but, let me tell you this, these golden keys mean more to me than anything else so there. I almost had them in my grasp once before but fings didn't go my way ... rats, rats, rats ... but never minds, now I gottem, and I 'aint ever gonna let 'em go ever again, not for you, not for no one. You must realise, I am COMMODORE P. R. ATTY - from a distinguished line-up of rats and it's more than my jobs worth or for the honour of rats everywhere for me to hand over these 'ere Keys to you or anyone else. And that's me final word. It's more than the keys ya-see, now it's a matter of me pride!" And with that...

The next thing that happened, as far as *the commodore* would later recollect - was the appearance of The Christmas Lights' followed by a peel of thunder and a flash of lightning. And he was quite convinced he also heard Benny speaking to siD.

author's note: It was what actually happened but for now, on with the story...

...there was a terrible 'whooshing' sound as siD vented an eternity's impatience directly at the squittering rodent - and as *the commodore* plummeted towards certain doom, he pondered the meaning of the calming sylvan voice now reverberating around his little rat-like head: "*These Golden Keys belong to all that want to find them; no*

creature - however mighty or no, is above any other beyond The Gates that The Keys open. You too were made welcome but you chose to defile the way and tread your own dark path to perdition. And so now - you will discover another door, a door where siD and his shadows' await your arrival with open claws. Remember, little one - what came before a fall, oh high-and-mighty commodore-no-more" - and just as swiftly, the comforting words left his head quicker than they had entered, for - all of a sudden, he came to a sudden stop, and plunged no more!

Yet it was a very "soft" stop, and that in itself was mighty puzzling? Still too stunned to move or speak, *the commodore* opened his narrow beady eyes and squinted - and there, looking down upon him was none other than *Madre* herself, a beautiful young maiden with the fairest of skin and the reddest of hair, bathed in a glowing blue-white light that seemingly radiated from within and shone around her whole being. For it was *She* that tended to the sick and the dying. And looking directly into his querulous eyes, *Madre* just smiled at the rat and laid him gently on the hard earth; she never spoke ... she didn't need to, her smile said it all.

But having gathered his senses about him, *the commodore* seized his opportunity and with nerry a thought for any other than himself, did sink his big yellow rotten teeth into her soft and gentle hand, and without another thought, he scurried off into the undergrowth, unable to comprehend his very narrow escape and his good fate.

That was the last that was seen of *Pratty* for quite some time. However, what *the commodore* didn't realise was - that when all others had forsaken him, his very miserable existence had been saved - once more, by the love of another. Or maybe, it was the pure and unconditional love of a Mother!

But, later that evening, down by the swamp in the depths of the undergrowth, he could be heard chortling to his rat-like self, "hee hee hee - oh wot a clever little rattus rattus we is, oh yes, we is, we is, we is. If they think they've seen the last of me they've got another think coming. Then they'll see just how truly powerful I really is ... we'll show 'em! Oh yessssssssssssssssss, oh yessssssssssss!" , he snittered, whiskers all a-twitch.

And behind *the commodore's* tiny form, there flitted a dark shadow that seemed to leach the very light out of the dark hole - for 'twas nothing more than just a black hole, a place suitable for siD and his kind. But that is no surprise, for that is exactly what it was, a most suitable abode for the denizens of the dark.

There then followed a dreadful silence; and thus it remained until daylight removed all traces of the dark shadows-of-the-night, and light was once again restored to *The Garden*.

And as the light of life caressed every creature in whichever nook and cranny they took shelter, peace and harmony were restored. And a sense of celebration permeated the sweet air. One by one, all the animals assembled around *The Tree* - including *the commodore*, wuffer and the Ol' Trout herself, and Sandy too ... all gathered around to share in the glory that was truly theirs.

Shortly thereafter, Tinker was briefly reunited with His *Golden Keys* and was then presented with a medal by Benny in place of the *Golden Keys*, which Benny then took yonder to return them to their proper place. And in the spirit of harmony and good, all of the other animals also received a medal - even the rodent, who was still proclaiming loudly about 'his keys' being unlawfully removed from his rat-like persona, etc. - but nobody was paying much attention to his ceaseless squitterings. Then in a rainbow of the most dazzling colours, The Christmas Lights' formed a beautiful multicoloured arc

around *The Tree* and in one glorious chorus, the assembled creatures (notable exceptions being the Ol' Trout, the rat and his partner-in-slime) sang *Alleluia*. And so, as things returned to normal, life in *The Garden* went on...

Epilogue

Benny said to siD, "pax vobiscum demon" to which siD replied "yes, yes, very nice - but let's get on with it shall we. I couldn't bear to listen to another one of your lectures".

And then Benny said, "but of course: now, you know why you lost yet again don't you ... no - well, I shall e-lucidate".

siD countered, "yes, yes ya bag of fur, get on with it or I'll send some more of my "emissaries" to call upon you and "assist" you in your earthly endeavours - hurhurhur" - and it chortled in a most vulgar manner.

Benny ignored the vile remark and proceeded to speak, "well, the answer to the burning question: *Madre* did say, "even the blackest of soul's" etc... and obviously it must have occurred to your bad self why you never qualified? Well Luci ol' chap - the simple answer is - you isn't dat black ... you're just a fallen star whose light is rapidly fading; and perhaps you're also forgetting something else, *i.e.* you 'aint got a soul! Oivé!"

siD simply fumed when he heard Benny's remarks and went ballistic; *its* silent roar was heard throughout the universe and beyond. And then, *it* glared once more at Benny and instantly evaporated into nothingness - where *it* truly belongs. And Benny, well - he just disappeared in a booming round of thunder-an'-frightening and was remarked to have been seen with a grin the size of the Milky Way across his handsome little face. Ode to joy.

Seven Steps to Perdition

Step II

Wrath: Buck's chapter and verse

All became quiet once again in *The Garden* and things got pretty much back to their normal state, which being abnormal by any normal standards - made things quite confusing for one and all. After seven long days of relative peace and quiet had elapsed, the sound of a mighty goat-like roar and a heavy thumpin' of the ground shattered the "virtual earth's" silence in *The Garden*.

The source of this tremendous disturbance was none other than Buck. Not only was he interrupted whilst having an enjoyable read - "a chargeable offence" - he often bleated, and one where he would instantly holler and throw said book at the alleged offender - literally, but more importantly, he had just been informed by Ding-Dong - his udder-half, that one of the "kids" had just claimed that the old donkey - Sandy, had been playing some "funny" game just now in the front field.

The fearsome noise had awoken the other animals from their slumber and aroused them from their daily affairs. Tinker, harnessed in his gleaming Sunday best, came at a canter; chased by S'et (*a funny turn of events to see a fox chasing a hunter!*), and Casey tailed along behind them both, cigar glowing bright in the slipstream.

On hearing all the commotion, the Ol' Trout herself raised her bloated self out of the cold icy water and cast a rather fishy-looking eyebrow - a big blue false one it was too - in the hubbub's general direction and then, not wanting to be a fish out of water - promptly continued counting her silverware for fear someone she knows

might sneak behind her cold spiney back and nick it all - and it wouldn't do to have one's best silver out, if any of the *hoi polloi* were in the vicinity, oh no, it certainly wouldn't do.

At Buck's side - as the animals gathered, stood wuffer and his mate - The Barren - a rather skittish and fidgety cr'ature. They, *i.e.* wuffer and The Barren, each wore the gravest of expressions and were shaking their respective noodles from side to side, wuf-wuffing and tut-tutting, generally raising the tension and adding to the melodrama. This in itself was strange because normally, The Barren's input to any animal-family business was usually nought but an ignominious expulsion of hot air, which often came out like a big *hiss!* And in fact, that was precisely what it was.

wuffer and The Barren were never comfortable in the presence of (most of) the other animals, but out of them all, they did seem to have a glad communion with *snitch* and his equally skittish rodent-mate - *snatch*, a ghastly creature and a rat of an altogether different hue. A frightening sort of arrangement under the best of circumstances, but, adversity does the strangest of bedfellows make, or so 'tis said.

Among those gathered, one could hear a cacophony of squeaking, twittering, snorting and nattering, but above the din, one voice could be plainly heard saying...

"Moq's 'as appeared - and the grasses parted - I tell ya it were true!" whispered Casey into S'et's ever attentive ear as they settled in next to Tinker, who was himself busily trying to avoid sitting on any of his fellow creatures.

"Look, watch her now ... see what I mean" continued Casey, and sure enough, silently, from the undergrowth with her broadsheet folded

neatly and tucked inside her fancy silk waistcoat, did Moq appear and then assume her place at the gathering. Furthermore, she had an odd sort of vacant look about her, and a rather dry, overpowering scent of unidentifiable herbs was patently evident.

'Evidence enough' - thought Tinker, quietly to himself.

Next to turn up was *the commodore* with his dusky partner-in-slime - *snatch*, in tow. (*author's note: in rat-speak, the commodore's name is snatch*) *snitch* was overjoyed that something interesting was going on, for it was far too quiet in *The Garden* of late for his liking. And anything he enjoyed, *snatch* - his dreadful sidekick wanted it too - usually for her festering rat-like self that is, to gain whatever profit she could for her own devious purposes.

"Maybe I could help ... things along - hee hee hee", said *snitch* to no one in particular, with a little chortle thrown in for good measure; and *snatch* - in anticipation, just twittered and twitched nervously, eyes peering every which-way and missing nothing. And although *snitch* and *snatch* always felt a little nervous about joining the animals, especially since *snitch's* previous episode, *snitch* felt strong enough to believe that none of them would do him any (intentional) harm.

And he was right too, for they never would; though they might consider it a plausible possibility or maybe just entertain an occasional idle thought; but that's just about as far as they would ever go ... maybe? Though one or two of them were committed to the idea of *snitch's* early commitment to a more cosseted and comfortably padded environment ... though, only time would tell if they were right or not. QED

And as for *snatch*, well - she was safe too. In fact, *snatch* was always safe: despite a siren's wail to the contrary ... the substance

of which was at best a bit rocky, and altogether a most decidedly fishy tail. And there are many like her astride the mound. And there's many a hound yet that will answer that poisonous honey-laced call ... to their detriment ... *c'est tragique!* ... *c'est la vie?*

So, the scene was... S'et, with Moq, Tinker, Casey, wuffer and The Barren, *snitch* and the ever-ghastly *snatch* - in all her ordure, and Buck - raging still, Ding-Dong with one of the "kids" - 'Veracity' - a cheeky little minx with a *come-hither* look in her biddy eyes?!? (The other kids having been sent to graze in a greener pasture yonder).

Then, before anyone could blink, in trotted S'et's mate - s'eL, with her brush held just a little bit too high and proud. A hardy old vixen if ever there was one. She squeezed into a space beside S'et and nodded graciously, if somewhat nervously to the assembled, took out her bingo card and bookie's pencil and said, "Oooooer, y'arrright!" - and then sat, ready-and-waiting for the 'session' to begin.

Suddenly, from over the hill there came a yodelling kind of sound, accompanied with a reverberating, "Tinnnn-ker, o Tinnnnn-ker. Vo bis du? Tinnn-k-errrrr". It was the sound of *ZIM (Ze I-ron Maiden)* - Tinker's faithful pony-and-trap.

Upon hearing this sonorous entreaty, Tinker began to fidget some, and as *ZIM* got nearer and nearer he thought it best to reply before his fritz get fried, "Ooaar - err ummm - yes, 'ere we are then dear, down in the meadow, thar knows..." - his brasses clanking in-time with his imperceptible shivering. Dear ol' Tinker.

Presently, the owner of the searing metallic voice arrived upon the scene, "Ach zo, zis iss vot chu iss dooing. Vot about my haus-vork?"

Vot about mein gar-ten? Vot iss going-kon? Vell ... vell ... vell - cum on zen, voss ist?" ... this was *ZIM* at her best, equa-metallica ... in all her base-metal glory, stamped at birth mit ze iron cross, it became her lifelong cross of iron; her wunder-bar, which she bore with dignity and a sense of real pride. And quite rightly too.

Previously, *ZIM* had been sitting all by herself, and a thought struck her: she wondered where everybody was - especially Tinker? It was not like him to skip off - well, not often anyway. And as she was already supposed to meet s'eL for a spot of number crunching, she decided to come a-calling - so to speak.

The assembled all muttered their swift greetings, followed thereafter by a collective "shhhhh!"

And then, once the commotion had died down sufficiently (for her grand and mysterious entrance), Nob-El silently appeared from seemingly out of nowhere; a bit like the Cheshire Cat but without the cheesy grin. Casey - her mate, noticed her first - which wasn't too difficult because she was sitting right by his hindquarters, with one of her unsheathed claws strategically placed, tapping rhythmically. And taking note of the look of astonishment on Casey's face, and the fact that his cigar mysteriously disappeared from its ever-present place - the other animals all knew what it meant, and understood ... they were all, once again, in the sublime presence of...

Nob-El, Queen of the cats (all bow), who is a feline of a different stripe altogether; and unlike any of the others'. A real tigress at heart - rarely seen, less heard. When silence had descended and she judged everyone was paying sufficient attention, she glanced around at each of the animals in turn and bowed in a dignified if somewhat imperial manner, as was her nature. But when she came to the rodents' - she did not, for there was a limit to even her good graces.

Instead, she smiled - ever so slightly, and revealed a perfect set of the most beautiful white teeth. And very sharp they are too. This almost made *snitch* and *snatch* scurry for cover but they were so terrified, they just froze on the spot. After which, and once the other haughty dignities were enacted, Nob-El gently prodded her mate in a 'tee-hee' sort of way. He understood the silent and unseen message perfectly.

And then, with a snort and a whinny - Tinker called all to attention, and the impromptu gathering looked to S'et, who after whispering, "y'aright hun" to his mate; then turned and gave a wink to the assembled and said, "awright our kid - oops, I mean our-Buck?"

At which, Buck's yellow eyes just stared, void of any emotion in their deadpan reply, which quite unsettled all those who could see ... it was an ominous sign indeed.

"Well, don' bovver yourself too much on our account our kid, but we've all come runnin' to see wots the noise all about in case anyone was 'urt. And, now that we're 'ere, what is the noise all about, eh?", said S'et, accompanied with a rather menacing swish of his brush.

But before Buck could unpeel his furry lips, Ding-Dong bleated-out, "iss-im en-it, iss-im wots dun it ... yeaahhh, im - iss-im I tell ya..." - and after several more repetitive statements of the same, she eventually ran out of steam and became quiet once more. Well, this uncoordinated outburst puzzled no one, and everybody had the good manners to sit and politely wait until she'd expressed herself...

"...stick to milk deary", muttered *the commodore* under his fetid breath unkindly; and now that she had dried-up, Buck turned and glared at her in thunderous silence, and then she fell; silent.

Buck then stamped on the ground with his heavy hooves, shook his tremendous horns at everybody and then said, "What Ding-Dong's trying to say is that one of the "kids" reckons Sandy played some unfunny 'funny' games whilst they were playing together in the front field. That's it. There's nothing more to be said. It's done. And now, I want him. And when I find him, I will sort him out good and proper!" - he raged, pawing the ground into a furrow ... one that neatly matched the one on his tempestuous brow.

Tinker was the first to respond, and after shaking his massive frame, he said, "eherm erm-er now then Buck ol' boy, erm, steady-on ol' man, what's all this business about, eh ... and what the deuce is an unfunny funny game, eh, that's what I'd like to know?" For some reason, Tinker couldn't quite grasp the terrible meaning of what Buck had just alleged.

Moq purred and then said, "Tinker dear, do get a grip. Even the most cloth-eared lignum-equine could understand what's going on", and with that and a twitch of her whiskers, she turned and fixed her penetrating gaze on *snitch* and *snatch* - one of her favourite pastimes which unnerved them terribly, much to her own amusement and delight.

S'et, sensing a heightening of tensions intervened and said, "Buck our-kid, this is a very serious thing y'know. Are you sure about this? 'cause if y'er not, you'd best be better than double-sure and then doubly-doubly sure again before it gets out of hoof - so to speak" - he then turned to Tinker and said, "Don't worry Tinker me ol' cocker, I'll fill yer-in a wee bit later when you get a round in - OK!"

Tinker - not sure whether to be offended at Moq's earlier statement (he was still thinking about it), decided to think about it a little

longer and just nodded his head, gave his tail a mighty swish and thought some more about what Moq had said: 'Cloth ears' he thought, '...that's what the ol' Commissioner used to say ... but I never understood him either ... brrrrrrrrrr-brrrrrrrrrr' - he snorted, and then decided to just sit still, wear a thoughtful expression and listen instead. It always worked well for him in the old days when he encountered things beyond his understanding, and he didn't see any reason why it shouldn't work just as well for him now. So that's precisely what he did do, and of course, it did.

Casey, normally the quiet type, then took the floor and spoke out, "Buck, I know all this sounds a bit - *ruff* - (he growled), but I think you'd better tell us a damn sight more than you have already, and not just sit their in silence, fuming ... there's no 5th amendment here y'know. And whilst we're at it, why don't we listen to the wee one has to say and see if there's any truth in Veracity?"

At this eminently sensible suggestion, the assembled nodded in general assent, that is - except wuffer and The Barren, who remained silent, but for different reasons: wuffer - unable to vocalise, could only 'wuff', and The Barren - well, she never spoke in public anyway. But everyone knew in a flash that they didn't agree with what was about to happen, *i.e.* getting Veracity to flirt with veracity, because - quick-as-a-flash and without as much as a bye-your-leave, they just upped and scarpered. Charming - *NOT*, the other animals thought, but this type of behaviour was par for the course for this misbegotten pairing.

And then, as if things weren't exciting enough already, there followed a gentle clap-n-flash of thunder-and-frightening, and Benny appeared amidst their midst in all his 'umbleness. This startled them for an instant, but - once they realised it was Benny and not some

other malevolent sprite, Veracity notwithstanding, they quickly settled down.

In greeting the assembled as was his custom, Benny sang, "Prey, my Brothers and Sisters" - to which, in unison they all began, "*Pater noster, qui es in cælis:...*"

"No, no, no, - I said "prey" not 'pray' - although, when I come to think of it, it's not such a bad idea at all. So, seeing as we've all started, he said, "*let us pray...*"

And so they did.

When prayer was over, Benny coughed his dry, throaty, smoky cough and said, "A-herm, now then, what's all the fuss about ... and why the solemnity ... and where's my glass? Come on jumbo..." he said, and looked to S'et, who looked at Tinker, who in turn looked at Moq - who was still staring intently at *snitch* and *snatch* and never batted an eyelid - so to speak.

So Tinker turned his gaze towards Casey, who just grinned back at him and then said, "OK, why not - how about the rest of ya?" - and proceeded to produce a flacon of the very best port he just happened to have to paw! What's more, he also had enough glasses of the correct size - so as not to offend the aficionados amongst the gathering, and proceeded to set about giving everybody present a glass filled with some lovely, thickly delicious port to be getting on with.

However, as was usual, s'eL insisted she must have some lemon with her port, "oooo no-ooo, no-oo - otherwise it wouldn't be proper now would it?" - she guffawed in earnest.

Casey - with a big wink replied, "you're a real fish-and-chip brushie, aren't ya our kid. hee-hee-hee" - he chortled.

"Ooooooerrrr, c'mon yow Casey, yow knows better than that. We'll 'ave none of yer shenanigans 'ere - thank you very much", s'eL bantered back good-naturedly.

"A-herm" coughed Benny. At which, everyone immediately became settled once again.

"Now then, S'et, what's all the noise about?" - he enquired, staring quizzically over his demi-lunettes.

S'et said, "awright there our Benny, one of Buck's "kids" reckons ol' Sandy's been playing some "funny" game up there in the front field" - nodding in the direction of Buck and Ding-Dong; "...and we heard the commotion and came runnin' to see what's what? ... that's what's what".

"HMMMMMMMM" - replied Benny, with a most thoughtful and pained expression suddenly appearing across his countenance.

Tinker, having now pondered long and hard, shuffled his massive frame - giving half the assembled a real scare, then said, "Ooor, now I know - 'cloth ears' - winter warmers, eh. Very good they are too - oh-h-oh yes. A-har-har-har, very good that, Moq, ah-har, very good indeed I say, ah-har!" - and he snorted in sheer delight - having (at last) finally worked it out, or so he thought. And now, that he'd gotten that off his considerable chest, and feeling very pleased with himself, he downed the glass of port that Casey had given him in one quick schniff, quickly followed by a satisfied snort.

Well, none of the other animals were quite at Tinker's current operating speed, but then, they all knew what he meant and grinned perceptibly, especially Moq.

"Well done, plonker!" squeaked *snitch*, with a leery sneer on his be-whiskered mush.

"I 'eard that, ya boulder!" replied Tinker, shaking his mane with some vigour.

Meanwhile, not far away, the Ol' Trout herself peered out from behind a large and glassy fishy eye and tried to focus her very tired (*hic!*) gaze on the events now unfolding, but as that was beyond her at present, she just simply scowled. Her multicoloured spots were vivid. And she was livid.

"Why was I not invited to such an obviously important meeting? Don't they realise I'm not there. I'm perfectly sure they do; they need me, they really do - why don't they all realise it?" - she mused, somewhat painfully.

"Oh well, what do I care ... I know more than they do and they all know it too. I'd better recheck my lovely silver, you never can tell with that sneaky lot" - and in a splash, she retreated once again to the cold and chilling comfort of the pond's lonely and murky depths. Little did she realise that her presence would have indeed been appreciated. But none of the other animals would ever call on her, for every time they tried previously, she never responded - even though she was aware of their presence; and on the rare occasions that she deigned to do so, it was only with a cold and fishy reply, the ripples of which, spread out in ever-widening circles. Most unwelcome they were too. So eventually, "they" stopped calling

altogether. And so it remains to this day ... except for her kindred bookend and the other confused one.

Meanwhile, in a field nearby...

'A perfect place to plant some lovely cabbages and potatoes...' - thought Sandy to himself, who was still in the front field looking over at all the commotion with his derrière still firmly glued to *terra firma*. 'I wonder what's going on over there ... oh well, best not be too inquisitive, you never know where that sort of thing can lead to?' - and with that thought ringing around his geranium-draped cranium, he continued to sit. And wonder?

Back to the gathering...

By now, Buck was so enraged at everything, he couldn't move or see or hear or do anything for being so angry. His boiling wrath at Sandy was raging through his veins, and shrieking madly in his mind, calling out for vengeance. So there he stood. Rooted to the spot. Ding-Dong and the questionable "Veracity" remained where they were, not daring to move, or even hardly to breathe - for fear of unleashing the puck's fury.

And if only they could but see it, there was a darkness surrounding the young "kid's" head, and Buck's too. To the casual observer, it appeared as if they were both under the same cloud. And they were too. It was siD, sowing seeds of evil and blowing a tissue of lies into the "kid's" ear, and planting bitterness and dark thoughts indeed, into Buck's.

snitch and *snatch* then sidled up to Buck in a combined effort to stir the pot a little, the other animals - not bothering to listen-in, talked quietly amongst themselves.

And with all the goings-on, the sensible ones amongst them quite forgot to question Veracity (- or did they?), as was previously suggested by Casey; and catching sight of Sandy over the hedge yonder in a nearby field, minding his own beeswax - as usual, they decided to go for him, as much to find out what's going on in his mind as to listen to his side of the story. So, without much ado, they moved away, aware that neither Buck nor the rodents had yet spotted him, being so engrossed with each other and their confounded dark whisperings ... more mischief in the making, to be sure.

Within a matter of minutes, they were in Sandy's ever-cheerful presence...

"Hello there everybody..." - said Sandy cheerfully, quite unperturbed, "...how lovely it is to see you all. Anyone fancy a cheese sandwich ... no? ... or a walk down-the-road there, then ... no? ... or a spot of whiskey perhaps ... no? ... ah-well, never mind then, maybe later, eh?" - he offered optimistically and in good faith; but on this occasion, no one took him up on his well-meant offers.

author's note: The innocent reader might ponder Sandy's gracious offers and how he might provide them if anyone of the other animals had said 'yes' - but remember, in The Garden, all things are possible; though - where, precisely, "down-the-road" was, is best left to one's own imagination!

But when the animals gathered somewhat menacingly around him, Sandy - no fool to any likely grievous situation, especially one so close-at-hand, took on a more serious air and said, "oh lumme, not more bleedin' tigers..."

But the other animals neither heard nor understood his fear.

S'et then leaped straight in and told him what Buck's *udder-half* and "kid" had laid at his door.

When Sandy heard this, his immediate reply said with heartfelt indignation, "Absolute piffle ...what utter nonsense!"

And then, to everyone's absolute astonishment he said, "Now then, anyone for that walk?" - and looked at each of them and none of them whilst he said it, nodding his shiny pate up-and-down, as only a donkey in distress can ... a really distressed nodding donkey.

Casey then spoke thus, "Sandy, dreadful though it is, you must realise that a terrible allegation has been levelled against you; and to say it's really got Buck's goat - so to speak, is an understatement. We're just trying to figure out what's what - that's all, and attempting to determine whether or not - or what, in fact, the truth of the matter really is? It's in everyone's interests if you co-operate, so wander not and don't wonder old friend. Now, just relax, concentrate, and then tell us precisely what happened when you were playing with Buck's "kid"? And don't leave anything out, omit nothing ... for everyone's sake ... especially yours."

And once again, Sandy - with a seriously sheepish grin on his asinine face, just said, "...it reminds me of a time when ol' Womb-ek and Shakle-m were in charge, they were two real donkeys you know - 'cept they got caught; I was better than that, only I was too late and all the soft jobs had gone, so they made me a donkey-wallah instead, anyway..." - and so he continued, seemingly preoccupied. But his audience was somewhat aghast and could not comprehend his obvious lack of concern as to the seriousness of his situation, or was it merely his possibly-feigned reluctance to meet it head-on?

It became quite obvious to the more sensible animals, that Sandy was oblivious to events that were unfolding around him, or that he was simply shell-shocked by it all, or maybe, just maybe - he was possibly 'sick', and in dire need of help, or that he was right he was right to be unconcerned because it was utter nonsense!

The big question was - where did veracity lay? Was it with Veracity or a harmless and much loved, generally good-natured old donkey?

Feeling they could get no further without complicating the issue, it was agreed amongst the animals that *veracity* and nothing but - must be the order of the day. So, they decided to split into two camps: one to investigate and one to cogitate.

Much, much later...

It took quite some time before all the ensuing enquiries and investigations took place, and many unpleasant and (not necessarily true) things were said and heard. The truth however, was as elusive as ever. And as no final conclusion could be ascertained without jeopardy, there was only one thing left to do ... they assembled near *The Tree* (with one or two exceptions) and called upon the good offices of Benny to intervene and shed some enlightened light onto this very dark situation.

And before they could say another word - Benny suddenly appeared out of the blue. This time, there was no thunder and there were no bright flashes of lightening - instead, a mournful wail was heard from over yonder: what it was none of the animals knew or wanted to know, so not one of them felt it worth asking Benny to elaborate upon - for they were sure he knew. But whatever their feelings, it was a most dreadful wail none the less ... maybe it was the prelude of *the banshee* ... perhaps!?

"Aherm" coughed Benny, "now then, what's all this? Don't tell me you don't understand what's going on?" - he asked of them all.

But none of them had a clue. And so, never one to be shy about coming forward, S'et asked, "Well then, when it all comes down to it Benny, what do YOU believe in?"

To which Benny sang proud and true, "*Credo in unum Deum,*" - and then he started to float heavenward, continuing thus, "*Patrem omnipoténtem, factórem cæle et terræ...*" - and slowly ascended until himself, his singing and everything about him became nought but a speck in the heavens.

Craning their respective necks to the sky and watching as Benny became but a speck in the heavens, one petulant voice was heard...

"Tssskkk!" squeaked *snitch*, accompanied by an even louder double "tssk tssk!" from *snatch*, "huh, if we'd been born where the sun rises - I bet he would've been singing a different tune altogether now?" - and they both smirked at *snitch's* cleverness. So too did *siD*, in the wings - so to speak.

But none of the other animals responded to his silly statement. Moq, with her tail flicking this-way-and-that said, "Stupid rodent ... how very stupid you both are. Anyone with any sense knows that he sings the song of where the true Son did rise!" - and then she intensified her gaze at the miserable creatures and spoke very plainly to them both saying thus, "maybe I should just eat you now and be done with your nonsense once and for all!" - and smiled once again, revealing a colourful set of very sharp and dangerous looking teeth.

Feeling the heat of Moq's unfeelin' feline lasers and taking note of her toothy smile, and the obvious antipathy of t'other animals, *snitch* - egged on by *snatch's* fidgety manner and wide-eyed look of sheer terror, decided now would be a good time for him to scarper. And so, off they went at a scamper and sought out Buck and Ding-Dong - which wasn't too hard, and having found an all too willing pair of thick ears, they quickly set about to further distort the truth, as well as Veracity's (alleged) grip on reality.

Meanwhile, back at The Tree...

Shortly thereafter, Benny returned out of the blue ... and when the animals had once more settled, he addressed them so...

"A-herm" he began in his customary manner, "It is a painful and hurtful task you ask of me - for I already know what it is; now heed my words for in this, there can be no winner and no loser ... merely sadness, hurt, pain, humiliation, despair, embarrassment and unhappiness ... for all concerned..." - he paused to catch a breath and then said, "now, that shared my thoughts with you on that, I now ask of you - why do you pass this heavy burden to me; am I not one of you too?" - he asked, sadly.

The animals fidgeted uncomfortably, one or two of them gulped, then they murmured (almost) in unison "Of course you are!"

Then S'et said, "Yow know it already, Benny our-kid, so stop playin' yer games."

And Casey quickly added, "But aside from that..." - he turned and gave S'et a long hard look, "...you're the best qualified amongst us all to help resolve this mess; and it is You that must guide us - otherwise we'll all be lost."

S'et, feeling somewhat belittled then chided, "well, yer a judge aren't ya?"

"A-herm" - Benny coughed indignantly, and then replied, "you'd best let me be the judge of that!" - and then took a huge puff on his pipe which instantly materialised from beneath his cape, and released a veritable cloud of sweetly-incensed smoke into the air. And it was so thick it obscured everything for just a minute ... even the sky seemed to darken. And maybe it did.

Was anybody incensed? apparently not. Although - at the lower levels, a squeak or two was heard - it was *snitch* and *snatch*, who had just rejoined the line-up from their previous mischief to see what other mischief they could make...

"That'll cloud their judgement a little!" *snitch* chortled to himself with much myrrth.

When the smoke had cleared, Benny said, "You know, it is often said there is no smoke without fire. And this case, I would surmise, depends upon the answer to a simple question: which is more, smoke or fire? When we know this, we will undoubtedly have a greater understanding and maybe, all will be revealed. But, what I want to do now is to speak with Sandy, in private ... so why don't you lot toddle-off over there and make yourselves useful ... and stay put till I call you."

At this command, the animals did precisely what was asked of them. Only one complainant could be heard, but no one took much notice of *the commodore*, or his partner-in-slime.

Then, turning to Sandy, Benny quietly said, "Sandy, prey, come hither..."

Sandy, uncertain as to what to do next, simply shuffled closer to Benny, and to a casual observer - like the Ol Trout, who just happened to be casually observing, it would appear that Benny and Sandy put their heads together and whispered for awhile ... and that was that. But the Ol' Trout's mince-pies (eyes) weren't that good any more - puffy, obscured and thickly painted, so - instead of being a pain in the neck, she for once got a pain in her own neck and decided to flip over and disappear back to the cold greyness of her self-imposed obscurity once again.

Meanwhile, back to the inquisition...

Sandy said, "I'm glad they've gone ... what are they all on about - do you know?"

"Take a guess ... though I think you know already!" - Benny replied.

"If I knew already why on earth would I be asking you if you knew?" - retorted Sandy, quite miffed by the bat's apparent lack of logic.

And on hearing the gentle donkey's rising tide of impatience, Benny rubbed his chin, took a deep breath with his teeth showing and said, "welllllll..."

"Come on then, spit it out!" - snapped Sandy, somewhat impatiently.

"OK-ayyyy ... as you wish ... I am going to ask you to think long and hard about a recent event because I am going to ask you a very serious and possibly painful question. Think carefully before you answer because the truth is the only answer I will need, and I

believe it should be your first and true answer. Now - once again, think very carefully, don't answer until you are quite sure - do you understand?" - Benny said, matter-of-factly.

"Yep, but I think they've all gone barmy" - Sandy replied, and he let out a great eeeee-awwwwww in nervous relief.

"Welllll, OK - but they haven't, but listen now, what really happened?" - asked Benny, with a practised air and a somewhat judicious expression creasing his features - to which the little ol' donkey felt compelled to reply.

Feeling the pressure, Sandy immediately replied, "When?"

"What do you mean 'when'?" - asked Benny, quick-as-a-flash!

"Simply that, when what happened?" - replied Sandy, somewhat bombastically.

"Clot..."- snapped Benny, "... when you *know what* happened ... and I thought you were supposed to give it some thought before you answered me" - he said, with an air of practised resignation.

"Give '*what*' some thought?" - said Sandy, in his most officious manner.

Having much experience in dealing with the falling and the fallen, Benny patiently, if somewhat exasperatingly countered by saying, "OK, OK, OK - I'll ask you once again: did you or did you not do what it is alleged that you did, or did not do?"

Faster than a jackrabbit, Sandy said, "I beg your pardon?" But, seeing as Benny wasn't impressed with this fatuous reply and did not

bat an eyelid, he then said, "Errm, can you repeat the question please, this time in English?"

With the patience of a saint, Benny again asked, "Sandy - it is said that you were playing an "unfunny" game with Veracity ... my only question is this: is that the truth or is it not? And remember - *Ad Vertias Liberte*"

Sandy, instantly replied, "Certainly NOT! What utter nonsense ... what absolute piffle ... absolutely NOT!" - and stared directly into Benny's eyes, straight and true, and without flinching. After a rather pregnant pause, he continued, "OK - I may be a bit of an old ram on the odd sozzled occasion ... but I certainly am not one of *them old goats*, and furthermore, I'm not the one in a rut. And from where I'm standing, all that's missing from these 'ere proceedings is a bleedin' kangaroo! ... This truly is a bit of trial to say the least ... and it's doin' my brain in, I can tell ya!"

And after issuing this distressing outburst, Sandy felt compelled to continue, then leaned closer to Benny and said ever so quietly, "the truth is, I..."

Meanwhile, in the field yonder...

Whilst this little intercourse was going on, the other animals were wondering amongst themselves as to the outcome of the inquisition. And whilst they were pondering this, they could not rid themselves of the fear of that terrible din and wailing moan, which sent fear rippling down their respective spines. And shivering a little - now and then, in the rising fear of the unknown, their plight was not forgotten because over time - they were each given a sign by Benny that it was time for them to return to His presence ... and one by one, they did return. And once safely gathered...

"Now then..." - said Benny to the assembled, "...where are the others?" - and seeing there were still a few *lost sheep* out there in the field yonder, he said, "Casey, go and fetch Buck and the others over here ... and tell him from ME, to come in peace or not at all."

On hearing this command, Casey fired up a fresh cigar and growled, "Right-ho" and off he went in a flash. It was then that they all noticed that his yellow collar was indeed beginning to emit a faint hue against the darkening sky, which could mean only one thing...

Presently, Casey returned - followed by Buck, Ding-Dong and Veracity. When Buck saw Sandy, he immediately let out a wild and fearsome bleat, and charged headlong at him, without thinking or bothering about the safety of himself or any other creature present.

Upon seeing Buck's madcap charge, Sandy let out a mighty eeeeyaaaaw and said, "he's bonkers he is..."

But just as he was about to bowl Sandy over, suddenly, there appeared The Christmas Lights' - twinkling and chiming in all their majest ... and with *Juni* leading the way, they swooped and whirled in a gloriously coloured bow around the head of the enraged goat, and after a moment or two, it seemed to calm Buck down, and still surrounded by the presence of The Christmas Lights', Buck's charge came to an immediate halt. And there he sat, in no-man's land, his rage - for now, silent.

Then, *Madre* appeared; for it was *She* that harboured the outsider (prisoner), and treated one and all with unmatched piety and unreserved mercy. Then, as the animals gazed on in absolute wonderment - *Madre* smiled a smile a million times brighter than the brightest star. And with a voice that sounded like the gentle waft of

an angel's wings, *She* said to each and everyone of them, "Mavraun, mavraun ... remember, my children, the words on the tablets of old; Sandy is a silly little donkey - that's true enough, but aren't ye all ... at one time or another. Be kind, and most of all - be compassionate; and remember, there but for the grace of..." - and her sentence trailed off into silence - but each of them knew the ending by heart.

And then - as one great swarm of colour, The Christmas Lights' enveloped *Madre* like a well-worn cloak, forming an iridescent aura that shimmered in its dazzling brilliance, and then, music and all, they all ascended into the heavens, as one whirling and explosive mass of light and colour.

The animals sobbed with joy at the spectacle they had just witnessed, and all felt becalmed by the gentleness of the beautiful and calming words of wisdom they had just heard. Well, almost all of them; there were a few very stubborn animals that would neither listen to rhyme nor reason, in whom, common sense was evidently *in absentia*, but more probably as a direct result of too much absinthe. *Eau!*

Yet still, Buck remained still. Although in the distance, that terrible wailing seemed to be getting closer and even louder; and the sky was getting blacker and more ominous. For safety, the animals all huddled together in one group, and apparently at peace, they watched - silently, fearfully...

Sandy was the first to break the silence and said, "hello there *bun...* (for that's what he used to call him) - y'ur right are ya? what's going on then ... are you alright now then are ya?" - he enquired, genuinely concerned with Buck's fearsome countenance and his previous outrageous display of anger. Although this wasn't the first time that he'd been witness to one of Buck's outrages.

But Buck was unable to bleat a reply. He just saw, thought and heard darkness: a hideous black morass of morbid darkness was traversing his mind and it was all directed at poor old Sandy.

Benny spoke, "Buck, we all now know what has been the (alleged) cause of your anger. I want you to open your ears, as well as your heart and listen to His voice; the voice of reason. I know that your anger is not warranted. And despite what you think, you are wrong ... very wrong indeed. On this, you must trust me!"

But Buck would not hear a word of it ... maybe he didn't want to or maybe there was something else that was niggling away at his conscience - what could it be (one wonders) - *smoke or fire ... perhaps?* - but as he sat there, a rage like he'd never experienced was quickly rising within him. It was frightening in its intensity but what the heck, it felt better than any other thing he'd ever experienced, and it was so strong he could taste the thrill of darkness and the fear it generated in some of those around him. He relished it ... as the blackness *itself* enveloped him and smothered every spark of reason within his heart.

'Now, now was the time to strike, now ... do it NOW!!' - roared a thunderous voice from somewhere ... *it* was within him, so he did ... and he sprung, like a coiled serpent - for that's what he felt like, and aimed to strike Sandy in one foul blow that would rip the very life-force from within his rapidly ageing body; and as he was within an inch of ending the life of the sad little donkey, he was suddenly stopped in mid-air *b-a-n-g!* He came to a complete dead stop. And that was the last he could recall until much later, when he remembered thinking "*Eh?*" - and reflecting upon what had happened at that particular moment.

And what did happen at that moment?

Well, a split-second before that terrible lunge took place...

Tinker, fearing the worst and being experienced in such matters, had already begun to move his massive bulk to protect Sandy from Buck's imminent and vehement attack. Casey, being a sentinel, growled fiercely at Buck. And, launching himself at the black goat, it appeared to all and sundry that he was actually attacking him. He was not; he was attacking siD ... *its* dark presence was upon Buck's back.

Then, a fearsome wail came upon them all and made their blood freeze in their very veins. Still the sentinel battled fiercely on. Now bloodied - he stood his ground and growled the growl of the righteous. There was no moving him. Then in a flash of bitter darkness - siD revealed *itself* in all *its* horrible majesty. *It* was a truly hideous and shocking spectacle.

In a shaky voice S'et whispered, "what's dis?"

"Dis is siD, S'et" replied Benny, and then he said, "Greetings demon ... NOW - get thee behind me!"

And upon hearing Benny's rebuke, siD did as *it* was commanded; with a sharp bone-crunching *s-n-a-p*, *it* opened a pair of monstrous black wings and began rising effortlessly, gliding over their heads and settled on the ground directly behind Benny - who was all that stood between them, damnation and siD. Quickly, the sentinel ran to Benny's side and squared his haunches in defiance at the monstrosity now before them. Then siD hissed and said, "S-s-s-s-s-soooooooooo, once again, the batty little batsard and his curly little sidekick decide to cross me, eh?" - whilst raising a mangled claw accusingly at Benny and the sentinel.

And Benny, not without a little chuckle did precisely that: he raised his right wing bearing his chunky purple ring and made the *sign of the cross*, and immediately imparted a Paternal blessing over all the assembled animals; and given that he was directly in front of siD, siD caught it's all-powerful effect full-blast, and as a result, *it* shrieked loudly at the awesome pain directed at *its* hideous form, and immediately started spewing forth a phosphorous slime with a filthy sulphuric odour; in essence, *it* was dribbling poison and spitting fire.

The animals were paralysed with fear, no matter how brave they really were, in these circumstances - they were glad of Benny's presence, because they'd never heard a sound or seen such a ghastly sight like it in all their lives before.

After a few moments, siD settled down. A morbid mask covered *its* horrible features. A green slime fell in pained drops from *its* angry yellow-and-red eyes, and when it reached the ground, another terrible mournful wail was heard.

"Another lost soul" said Benny, answering the inquisitive animals' questioning looks.

Then siD said, "I suppose you think that was funny, eh Benny, Benny, Benny? And perhaps you think I too am not without my own brand of humour and righteousness? Think on ya bag of fur, because I'll make it a definite point to be getting to you later. And when I do, it will be fun, fun, fun ... for me, that is. And that's a promise. Oh, and fear me - do!"

"Oh, I fear evil all right, have no fear. But I fear HIM more. And I know you do too. But I fear HIM for a different reason. You fear HIM

because you do, and with every good reason too. So, why not just begone and leave these poor souls alone!" - said Benny.

siD just hissed and sneered some at this reply.

Benny continued, "Your actions have already caused enough grief and heartbreak. Scarring who knows how many and yet, still - they have a gift which you do not. They have the chance to repent; and to forgive, and they have that special gift of compassion. And even though you've done tremendous damage, it's not undoable." - and he then calmly took a puff on his pipe.

The demon erupted in a volcano of laughter and hissed, "What kind of a word is 'undoable' - and there was me thinking you were a clever little batsard?" - *it gloated.*

Benny replied in an instant, "Despite your rancour, you won't rankle me. Now, enough of your nonsense - what is it you want this time?"

This direct approach took siD a little by surprise and it hissed back right away, "Well, if we're getting down to business, for one thing, I want that pompous little donkey's soul. He's been sitting on his butt for so many years and dreaming about all his yesterdays. I reckoned to find a suitable place for him in my legions. An eternity of drudge, damnation and dirt ... and he's getting off lightly too. And I was thinking, if He could have his little pet, then I could have one too. And why not? And as for that silly little puck there - well, he's cast in my own likeness 'aint he, very admirable too I might say; and you must admit, he's got the makings of becoming a decent ol' demon - whaddya think?"

Benny calmly said, "Is that it?"

And siD replied, "Oh no, nein, non, niet, nix, mo-lah, nada, no. Definitely NOT. I also want that little minx, the young non-veracious one. She has real potential that one. Even better than that silly puck. Oh yes, I have very special plans in mind for that one - especially if she don't mend her ways ... she might even reign - in a relatively minor capacity of course, where the light never shines - in time, maybe. So, that's what I want. Of course, I really want them all. But for now, that'll do. How's that then?" - and having finished *its* dread demands, *it* then let loose a huge guffaw and a cloud of foul odorous gas from the nether regions which fouled the very air around them, and turned day into night.

By now, a growing mass of other-worldly dark forms surrounded siD's evil presence ... *its* dark hordes were gathering at *its* putrid rear in ever-thickening ranks, appearing out from the darkness of *its* own dark hole. This caused the sentinel to raise his hackles even higher - ready to leap at the monstrous appearance and *its* dread horde, and wreak ferocious havoc in HIS name.

Benny staid the sentinel, then said with a start, "Now then demon, I've listened to your foul demands and I am prepared to offer a barter!"

"Ha!" roared siD - "...you're prepared to do a deal with the devil? Well I never! Even you, eh?" - *it* roared again with an uncontrollable burst of the most ghastly laughter, and genuinely seemed pleased with *itself*!

"Come on then, what is it, what do you r-e-a-l-l-y want, eh, eh?" - *it* asked, a lewd expression appearing across *its* features, and a wicked gleam sparkled in *its* demonic eyes.

Benny replied, "Ah, not so fast now: I know the real story of what did and did not occur as far as Sandy and Veracity goes, but that is a paltry matter in the course of this negotiation. If I got it right and I believe I have, you want to lay claim ever more to the immortal souls belonging to Sandy, Buck and Veracity. And in return, you will ... *what?*" - he asked somewhat forcefully, looking directly into the demon's hideous features.

"Ha again! Me - *give what?* ... give nothing! Just consider this; they should consider themselves lucky I don't have an appetite even more voracious than Veracity's - a-haaa-haaaahar - *geddit*, voracious, veracity - no, oh well never mind, they do say my humour is a bit on the dark side, but that's just how I likes it. Anyway, my appetite will be sated with those three ... for now, that is." - *it* retorted. And for good measure, in deathly silence, *it* slowly spread *its* dark wings as far and wide as the eye could see. A fearsome feat indeed, and to the casual observer, quite impressive.

"Err, excuse me both, and pardon the interruption" interjected Moq, "but might you not consider taking the two horrid rodents instead? It would be a real catch, in fact, a right royal pair of rats" - chipped in Moq, hopefully, and with a big grin on her overly relaxed face.

It was obvious to anyone present that a somewhat overpowering and overly strong herbal aroma was emanating from her feline persona, in fact, it was so powerful it was positively intoxicating ... and much more preferable than siD's noxious odours.

Upon hearing Moq's suggestion, the rats just froze in stark terror.

"Ahhhhh, it's you is it, mon little *chat* - har har har, oh deary me, won't you ever learn. Sometimes, you're not half as clever as you may think you are; that to one side, everyone here already knows or

suspects that they're both already honorary members of my dark horde, and it's true too - and if you believe that, there you go!" stated siD matter-of-factly in reply.

"Yikes, the game's up..." thought *snitch*, "...best keep me head down and get ready to leggit". And he quickly communicated this intention to his malodorous sidekick, who needed no such encouragement.

"...but for now..." roared the demon, "...they serve a more useful purpose where they are" - and with that comment from siD, *snitch* and *snatch* relaxed and felt quietly confident in their rat-like selves. But as confident as they felt, their day of reckoning was coming.

"...and now, back to the trade. Let me think, what would I give when I never give anything, for something which I believe is mine anyway, to someone whom I can't stand and especially to One who has annoyed me from "light's on"; and one that I feel has no right to intercede on the behalf of the objects of my most special attentions ... hmmmmmm ... what would I give? Perhaps it would be better to say *what wouldn't I give* and my answer to that is - *I wouldn't give anything*. That's it. I give you nothing. Ha!" it shouted triumphantly, and wagged its great wings, stirring up a little army of dust-devils in the process, much to the dismay of those present.

"Ah, good-oh!" growled Casey, with his bright collar glowing neon bright, "perhaps you'd like to sit down for this next bit ya festerin' great paluka..." - and at this, he spat his old cigar straight at the demon, then hurled a fresh cigar into his ferocious jaws, then cheekily - fired it up from the burning tip of one of the demon's wings, grinned at the spectre, and continued, "Oh, and just for the record, I'm deadly Sirius. And no, this is NOT a dog-rocket, it's the real deal!" he growled, emitting a puff of sweet smoke, whereupon he grinned once again.

Well, most of the other animals couldn't make head-nor-tail of this outburst from Casey. The demon and *its* menacing horde couldn't either, and whispered anxiously amongst themselves; then Benny, laid it out thus...

"Now then, now then Casey, don't get too serious or ahead of yourself ... patience my lad, patience" - he said, directly to this staunch sentinel, who in turn - grinned and puffed some more, and wagged his ol' tail for good measure.

Benny then turned to siD and speaking in a judicious tone said, "Demon, you've really gone too far this time. I was quite perturbed at the damage you have caused in your unquenchable quest for soul mates however, Veracity - in this case, will NOT reign. And forget about laying claim to that tired old donkey. But, it might be the case - and I say *might*, that just enough has been done to lay claim to the one in your likeness. But that too remains to be seen. Anyway, call me a saint, call me a sinner - but have I got a deal for you... and here's the deal: You said, you will give *nothing* as your part of the bargain to close this trade. Now, I must tell you - it is impossible to give *nothing* as *nothing* does not exist therefore it is and must be non-existent. And if you consider that you yourself are *nothingness* itself, then in essence, you must be willing to surrender yourself in trade for the 3 souls you seek. If that is your offer which you made freely and without coercion and in full view of all these witnesses and your own dark supporters, then reluctantly, in His name, I will accept your offer. But what plans I have for you would make even you weep!" and then, Benny produced a curled-up piece of parchment from under his cloak and an ink-dipped quill held ready for siD to sign the pledge.

SiD's slaverling jaw simply dropped upon hearing Benny's deal.

"Aherm, kindly be good enough to sign here..." said Benny, his grin growing by the minute.

In eagerness, the animals looked on in wonder. Even the Ol Trout herself - spying from a distance, was impressed by this deal of Benny's. But even so, the Ol Trout's scales of justice were not as close to her bloated skin as she may have thought or they once were, and so - she maintained a cool distance from the proceedings, just in case. And besides, the thought of 'out of the pond, into the frying-pan' had great relevance for the Ol Trout, and the last thing she wanted to be was a fish out of water under any circumstances; certainly not in the cold grey circles in which she freely swam, along with the other bottom-feeders of her no too impressive coterie.

siD however, was altogether NOT impressed. Even as Benny was making the trade, the utter logic of *its* statement hit home in that unfathomable void beyond the mask where horror upon untold horror abounded. Then siD, in a most sardonic manner said, "I suppose you think you're very clever don't you, you verminous little batsard..." - and then it hissed, "...and yes, you are a verminous creature, in fact, you're nothing more than a flying rat - and don't you forget it. Now then, it seems you have outwitted the devil at his own game ... hmmm, very clever however, I must say, if I wasn't so darned mad at you I might have even congratulated you - 'cause there's not many who've got one over on ol' Sid y;know! But never mind that now ... it seems once again, you've employed chicanery and trickery to defeat me, the sort of trickery which others of your learned profession have all earned themselves row-9 ringside seats in the pit, i.e., in my house - but don't worry, this battle may have been lost, but the war is NOT!" it roared inhumanly.

And with that, it snorted derisively and issued forth a most ferocious wind of oily fire, then belched a great plume of sulphurous smoke into the air, and seemed to vanish into its very own centre. And when the air cleared, no longer were there any of siD's dark legion in evidence. But siD remained, and if possible, it took on an even more menacing and decidedly hideous appearance.

Unperturbed, Benny calmly replied right back at the evil presence, "Yes, yes, yes - that's the kind of retort I'd expect from such an unlearn-ed one - now, never mind all that, what's it to be - *itself* for themselves ... or the deal's off? Come on buster, stop messing around - let's hear it?" snapped Benny, rather too impatiently.

At this, siD opened its slobbering cavernous jaws and let loose a gargantuan scream accompanied by an awfully rude expression, "%*#\$*#^ !!!" - aimed directly at Benny, then it uttered at nobody in particular, "ha! The say the devil's in the details ... ha! - ain't dat de truth - Raaaarrrrrgggggghhhhhhhh!" - it roared, then it smote the earth and disappeared in a whoosh of smoke and sparks, back from whence it came - into nothingness once again.

Now, all that remained of that frightening manifestation was a lingering smell of sulphur and a roaring silence...

Shortly, the air cleared and the immense pressure was dissipated. The animals felt a sense of calm and order return, and in a gleeful outpouring, they heaped praise upon praise on Benny who, after a couple of seconds or so, raised his arm and quieted them all. He then spoke thus...

"Well, so now you all know ... let it be a lesson to you ... that siD is one very dodgy character; and I must confess, for a minute there, it was decidedly dicey - and I must say, a very narrow escape was had by

us all. You can now see what untruths lie behind such terrible allegations, and perhaps, some of the reasons why. You all saw "it" with your own eyes. And you were all rightly terrified. As was I. But, with His presence, we overcame our fears, and now in His name, let those amongst us reflect on their recent actions and see sense - before it's too late. Remember, *Ad Veritas Liberte.*"

And with that, Benny disappeared from their sight in an impressive flash of extra-loud thunder-an-frightenin' ... and it was later noted that he seemed to have a grin the size of the Milky Way spread across his celestial features.

...and as all traces of the darkness were now removed from *The Garden*, The Christmas Lights' reappeared and swooped and circled and haloed the sun, and hallowed The Son, which encouraged all the animals to gather once more together, as one, and sing His praise, and bask in His *glory*. Then they sang *Allelulia*. And they sang it with all their hearts. And they meant every word of it.

Epilogue

And what was Sandy's reply to Benny's soul-searching question?

Sandy, faltered in his reply and remained silent for a moment more, then replied gravely, "...x xxx xxxxxxxx!" - and that's the truth, the whole truth and nothing but, upon my honour, yer 'onour!"

To which, Benny replied, "Hmmm, just as I thought!" and then he took a confident puff on his pipe and exhaled slowly, very slowly indeed.

author's note: Sandy's reply - given in private confession, must remain a secret for now and until the end of time; that it remains a secret is another inviolate truth.

Question: was Veracity playing with the truth or was veracity lacking?

Judge for yourself ... but think carefully, and judge compassionately - if you must judge at all. And remember, youth is often prone to silliness and fits of wild imagination. However, where there's smoke ... *but first, one must determine its true source?*

As for Buck, he stubbornly hung on to the false notions that had entered his heavy head, for when the devil lays plans inside the minds of determined folk, it requires a powerful effort to remove them. To exorcise such thoughts completely and forever, Buck only has to take *those Tablets*, return to the compassionate path and call upon those truths -- a cornerstone of the *Lex Aeterna* -- that must be beheld for all eternity as a beacon of enlightenment for one and all, one of which is: *Honour thy Father and thy Mother*.

We rest.

Seven Steps to Perdition

Step III

Envy: the snake in everyone's grass

In no time at all, actually - within a week, all was mostly forgotten of this recent episode. But a few things came to pass: Sandy, the tired ol' donkey - finally gave up his struggle to clear his name in one quick stroke - and for all eternity, joined the celestial throng. It was noticed by those that were able to see, that he had a grin as big as ever on his calm countenance, and that his cool shiny pate was tilted at just the right angle - Heavenward, looking upward to his final place where he surely now enjoys life eternal. DV

Sandy's passing caused *Madre* - who did (seem) keen to bury the dead to shed many a tear; and many of the animals too lost themselves in their own dense jungles of thought - mostly about what they did or did not do, what they could have done yet did not. And more of the same. Soon enough, the time came to put the now-vacated shell of Sandy into the ground, a place directly under *The Tree* - where the chestnuts and other fruits-of-the-earth would be within easy reach, was where it was to be. Sandy would have liked that. And indeed, he did.

Not too long thereafter, things in *The Garden* pretty much returned to their usual pattern. "*Life's for the living,*" as Sandy used to say. And how right he is. It wasn't long before all of the animals dispersed into their many different directions ... all with their own thoughts carried privately and secretly upon their shoulders, some sloping more than others. Amongst those, were...

snitch

But the thoughts squittering around *snitch's* rat-like skull bore little resemblance to the reality or the enormity of his own great sorrow, continuously fuelled by his deep sense of guilt. The question foremost on his mind now was: how to atone? It had never previously occurred to *the commodore* that he had bled the little donkey almost dry over the years, or of the many mean-spirited things he'd done, of which only *snitch* was aware. Or so he thought?

But no matter how much pain he had caused to all and sundry, *snitch* could not let go of the final moments spent with the rapidly fading little donkey: "I'll tell ya later..." did Sandy say when - in those dying moments, he was asked about such pain as he might be feeling, whilst meekly holding-on to that sorrowful rat's clenched paw. And receiving this answer - *snitch* could barely take a breath; and at that very moment - if he could have, he would have given his right paw and more for that donkey to enjoy just a little more time; and *snitch*, just one more chance to make amends. But sadly, it was Sandy's time.

In one fitful and memorable final moment, which only the shadows witnessed, Sandy looked around and thought he saw all his loved ones, and directly addressing *the commodore* he said, "*In my book, you're definitely No. 1 ... but remember, you're the ninth No. 1 - and don't ever forget it!*" - and with that, happy at last, his indomitable spirit finally departed for that greenest of pastures new.

And it wasn't too long afterwards, maybe at D+? - that *snitch* realised he had just witnessed the true nobility of death; and then as now, he finally came to understand the courage and bravery of that gentle little donkey. '*Little donkey, little donkey...*' *snitch* cried, as the words of the long forgotten song flew around his pointy little head, he swore on all that was dear to him that he would make amends

for all the wrongs he had done to that little old donkey, and more. But, as is oft the case, as indeed it was in Sandy's case, it was too little, too late.

But Sandy understood, and where he is now, he understands so much more. But what Sandy would fail to understand is the blinkered path that *snitch* embarked upon; for in an instant before those final moments there was something else he said to *snitch* - but through the traffic of his tears, he didn't hear it: "*Live your own life and enjoy yourself ... it's time to move on ... and don't worry, you'll be alright!*"

Sound advice indeed.

Meanwhile, no such thoughts occurred to *snatch* - his partner-in-slime ... how could they? Whispering quietly about this and that to all and sundry, about all and sundry. No. Not even the most uneducated oaf would ever make such a gross *faux pas* as to cut-into that solemn parade as did *snatch* on that trying day. Absolutely unforgivable. But anyone who worships the likes of ~~mammoth~~ mammon is not about to feel an inch of sympathy for such a silly little thing like that. Oh no!

But *snatch's* actions were noted by one and all; all except *snitch* that is ... because he could not see *The Tree* for the woods. But now - with the realisation dawning on him of recent events; and that binding-spell seemingly cracked, and he being no longer brainwashed, bewitched or both - *snitch's* path began to diverge away from that of *snatch*. And deep inside, he knew it to be so ... but *snatch* didn't. Not yet at least. And *snatch* couldn't have cared less anyway, as *snatch* had an agenda all of *snatch's* own. And in time, all would be revealed.

But for now - as it ever was, if there was on thing which was guaranteed to make *the commodore* furious it was not being thought of as *number one* ... especially whilst in the august company of the other animals. It always turned him green with envy and oft made him furious; so now - for the first time ever, *snitch* is first in line. And in time, the realisation of this simple gesture would bring a grin to his whiskery little face.

Meanwhile, somewhat further afield...

The Ol' Trout

Whilst the misbegotten rodents pondered privately with their thoughts, the Ol' Trout herself was in the pink. It was too early in the day for anything less than a splash of the old mother's ruin, and once she'd soaked her gills with a gill or two's worth, she felt better than she'd done for such a long time (*hic!*), i.e., since breakfast.

The Ol' Trout missed Sandy; and on the day - in honour of his memory, she armoured herself with a tough coating of angst and bedecked herself in her finest: shimmering scales of an eastern origin (with matching hat) enwrapped in the skins of slaughtered creatures. *Poor creatures - what they might say about being slaughtered purely for their lustrous coats - just for the flighty fancy of the few.* Probably, nout, but, 'shame on all those who partake of these crimes against His creatures and the natural order, and of that which is beyond the bounds of common sense and decency'.

In her own little murky pond and impervious to such considerations, the Ol' Trout kept only the very best company, i.e., her own. But when she encountered any of the other animals, she felt unable to contain her iciness; or was it something else? Trout knew the things she said were meant to hurt and she delivered them with a rare

finesse borne of many hours of humiliation and of being on the receiving end of such stings from amongst those whom she perceived as being of her own [unwisely] chosen kind. So she knew full well their effect and how it made her feel when she was the target of all those spitting barbs and hooks. But then again, if one freely chooses to swim with *that crowd* ... so that is no excuse.

During her groundbreaking excursion to bid a fond farewell to the old donkey, Trout could not avoid running into her kith and kin.

"Yikes!" thought she, "all those horrid beasts. What am I to do?" ... and as ever, Trout did what she always did - she sparkled in her own luminescence. And during the whole event, what Trout fought more than anything else was the nagging doubt and the thought whether she was actually saying 'goodbye' or 'hello'?

And that bothered Trout so much in fact, that at the first opportunity, after acting out one of her finest displays of rudeness, and having cold-shouldered all others who were present and correct, she slipped away into the depths once more, upsetting just about everyone in her path. But once in the safety and seclusion of isolation, the thought prodding her subconscious would not go away...

That 'thought' uppermost in the dull greyness of her mind which was driving her to distraction with pure envy was - "how the deuce did Benny manage to have a brighter, bigger and more shinier star than mine?" - but no matter, she would dismiss it along with all other such considerations -- as was her usual manner -- in dealing with any of *that lot*.

But still, another more pressing thought began to trickle along her icy spine and it gave her the shivers, "I'm getting old now; my small fry has been caught by a bigger fish already and I am all alone

again. On my own. And nobody really cares. Oh, I know Jek von Sprat says he does - s.o.b. (she lamented), but he's almost gone now too. sniff.

Phew ... what am I to do when he does go? His lot don't particularly like me and I don't particularly care for them either. But without him, I have none of this. My *paradise lost*.

Oh dear ... oh deary me. What am I to do??? Perhaps I could ... no, that will never do; but then again, *Madre's* always been kind to me even when I was horrid to her - in fact, I've been horrid to her for most of my life but *Madre* would understand - even now; and of course, I've been absolutely beastly to ... Moll ... oh dear, too late to meeooww now. But what oh what am I to do?" she flibbered. Poor ol' bloat.

After this deep introspection -- a real poser for a real poseur -- Trout came up with a brilliant idea, one that would sound much better with another glass of mother's ruin under her puffy cheeks. And so, she headed out for her favourite tippie without causing as much as a ripple in her own private wake. And after downing several swift downers, Trout dived down deeper than she'd ever gone; and promptly sank into even greater depths of despair.

"*Sink or swim ... that's all you can do - isn't it...*" - as a little ol' donkey used to say. How right he was too.

Benny

Poor Benny. Sad Benny. Resplendent in his best bib and tucker and with a calm that belied the torment below; he was *the chosen one* leading the parade for that little ol' donkey. And unbeknownst to many, Benny and Sandy went way back. In fact, Benny oft sought the little donkey's counsel; and it oft proved wise counsel that came to pass from the little council *hass*. But now, flitting this way and

that with the raging emotions within barely held in-check, he was comforted only by the sure-fire knowledge of the absolute truth.

"*Amen to that!*" - as Sandy often softly said.

And now, gazing down at the supine form - still for evermore, and at those assembled, and although he'd done this more times than he could remember, this time, it was very different. It was a first for him ... a first for them ... and as a matter of fact, it was a first for Sandy too!

Benny performed the rite of eternal passage for the little donkey with such grace and compassion, and with the odd half-pint of humour thrown in for good measure! But only the few ever got it. Sandy did. His spirited form (*hic!*) was seen at Benny's shoulder enjoying the craic. But after all was said and done, and the earthen blanket was rolled over that little donkey's still form, lying in state in that box -- cut from the stoutest oak (as befitted the wishes of himself) - Benny began to ponder.

One rather noticeable and unsettling episode did rankle with both Benny and the other animals: it was a tradition at such times of passing that a simple spray of woodland flowers be placed around the earth-bound box, up until it was placed firmly into Mother Earth. But, the herd of jackasses from which Sandy originated, were so tight-cloven - they couldn't even be bothered to do that. Oh, such disrespect did they show in their affront ... the ignominy of which will never be forgotten. And it rankles still. And yet, this shameful herd of jackasses had the gall to bray the loudest. Shame on them.

However, the way the jackasses treated the little donkey prior to his crossing the great divide will forever be etched into the minds of all that knew; and those that knew did NOT care for it in the least: but Sandy was a gentle little donkey ... and though he knew full well

what was going on, through his gentle eyes - he saw it and them in a different light altogether. "*They're all right ... they just don't understand!*" - as that noble little soul often claimed in their defence. Sad but true. *Tsk tsk tsk* - still, shame on them.

But in one of those quieter moments, as Benny sucked away on his favourite old pipe, his mind wandered at peace amidst the whirls of perfumed smoke and recalled oddly enough that one or two of those present and correct often (irritatingly) made silly comments about his own preferences when it came to a nice puff: well, it was a fact that he had a penchant for the bent variety - yet he was always as straight as a dike when it came to his orientation ... especially when it came to choosing a new briar.

And after enjoying that amusing little aside, he was jolted back to the day's proceedings and thought, "...as that line is now broken, those present and correct can from this day forth, keep apace of that pace of jackasses who now have no reason to ever come near, ever again." And with that thought, and one final puff, he settled his aching mind to rest.

Some time later that night, whilst all were sleeping near Sandy's favourite old haunt, a loud banging and other odd noises, such as a box being kicked across a room, were plainly heard by those nearby. *Madre*, deep in solace and pitted by exhaustion, was seen with arm outstretched - appearing to pat the head of perhaps - an imaginary donkey? But was it imaginary? Probably not. For, shortly thereafter, the disturbance ended and peace came once more to that quiet little spot: message passed.

And with the days passing and time for flight rapidly approaching, Benny was fighting with his own sense of loss and deprivation.

"Who would he turn to now for advice and counsel? Who could he turn to? They didn't care; or those that did, couldn't fill the now vacant void. He was alone once more..." - he quietly muttered to himself.

When out of the blue, he plainly heard a softly spoken, "*Don't be so soft...*"

"... aherm - eh, what?" shocked, he thought he'd heard Sandy's familiar tones and gentle encouragement wafting their penetrating ways into the depths of his anxious mind. Benny was cheered and happily comforted by the thought, "hmmm, he would say that wouldn't he," he whispered quietly to himself.

And out of the shadows he thought he heard the wind whisper back, "*Ah ha! - how true!*"

And with that, Benny felt much better than he had during all the previous week or so. And a feeling of great calm enveloped him like a cloud of the sweetest smoke; and those empty thoughts which had tormented him were now banished forever. For he knew deep in his little batty heart that there was always a twinkling star or two in the great black emptiness, ready for him to call upon whenever, and if he ever wanted to get sirius' counsel.

And Benny knew without a shadow of doubt that he had nothing to be envious of or about, except ... he did have a particular liking for the colour pink; but that's an altogether different story! For now, the only bitterness he would cough-up to was the angostura bitters of his favourite herbal tippie. And a wee drop o' that couldn't do anyone any harm now could it.

And then, out of the blue, when all was still, he was convinced he heard two glasses *clink* followed by a cheery, "*Cheers!*" ... guess who?

Moll

For Moll, it was a slightly different affair. On the surface, she outwardly portrayed that sense of control and acceptance of death as nothing more than a natural part of the cycle of life, oft found in felines in *The Garden of Need*.

Her cattiness though, was not without real *felines* [sic]. Deeply saddened by the passing of Sandy, she strove as ever - to comfort *Madre*; wasn't it ever thus. And thereafter, Moll took a real personal interest in sorting out the little donkey's effects and affairs: which in themselves astonished even those within the closest circle of animals.

But not long thereafter, being close to the earth and Mother Nature, her tendencies towards her favourite herbs and other matters for dissection began to prey upon her once more.

But aside from that, if anything bothered Moll, it was the sudden and rude appearance of the Ol' Trout herself; and the resulting mayhem it caused. Not so long ago, Moll and Trout - although as different as a cheetah and a cheater could possibly be, they used to be the best of friends (- even closer than sisters); despite the recent inclinations of both to mutual aversion. It was only her fine pedigree and excellent breeding that prevented Moll from unsheathing and surgically applying her lethal claws upon the bloated one during her most vicious verbal assaults upon the most bereaved of all present and correct, i.e., *Madre*.

And despite all of the provocations the Ol' Trout managed to impart, Moll steadfastly refused to be drawn, especially given the solemnity of the occasion. And after the vulgar fish had left enough dewy eyes around the place and effected her equally rude departure, Moll was

left with some rather unsettling thoughts concerning the ol' bloat herself, none of which were of Christian origin.

In fact, one such thought drove her rancid with envious rage: ever since they were wee bloaters in boaters, Trout always managed to slip away and leave a big unsightly mess of her own making, for Moll - her pedigree chum, to clean up after her. And it still made Moll as mad as a catter.

But they do say that time heals all wounds, and maybe it does too ... we'll see. But, in the meantime, it is commonly known that certain cats can see things which others can not. And Moll did see something which others did not ... she saw Sandy, as clear as daylight itself hovering at Benny's shoulder during the sad and solemn proceedings. And whilst reflecting upon those thoughts in the darkest hours when all other animals are asleep or very *tired (hic!)*, Moll heard the thumping and muttering in that little donkey's hollow, clearly and without any misunderstandings as to its origin.

In fact, she pricked up her ears and listened intently - and to this day, she would swear she heard this familiar's voice direct a few comforting words directly to her, "*You're the cat's whiskers you are!*"

And with those few sweet words, she knew!

S'et

Meanwhile, S'et was playing a game all of his own creating and if truth be known, it weren't much fun - not now, not anymore; not ever. During the ol' donkey's final parade on *terra firma*, S'et was honoured with the shared responsibility of portering the hefty cask to its allotted spot. But as usual, S'et managed - even at such an emotionally sensitive time like that -- to create mischief.

He did NOT carry his load or shoulder his responsibilities during those final moments; no, he deliberately left the other animals carry his share (as usual) by feigning to carry it himself. Oh, how typical. And no amount of name-calling by any of the other animals bearing the heaviest of burdens could get S'et to admit to his liability or to take his fair share of the load.

"*Nothing new there then!*" - as Sandy would say.

When all was said and done, S'et - who thought so highly of himself, was standing around when the plot thickened, and Benny asked him to read a few words from the Great Book over the sandy ground but ... S'et - for once in his life was not up to the task because he had just realised the true nature of the passing event and was truly overcome.

And something else stuck in his mind at that very moment: words he'd heard from a little ol' donkey many, many moons ago, "*a prince among clowns?... certainly not - more a clown amongst princes!*"

These words would haunt S'et for the rest of his natural - like never before. As for now, he was definitely feeling less ennobled or honoured as the oft' self-proclaimed *earl of dorlish*, sole heir to the *Born-Broke Estate* - than ever before, but even so and in spite of his *heirs and graces*, he could not shake off the welling-up of his profound sorrow. Oh, such sweet bittersweet sorrows.

And as he watched the other animals, he hurt. And he hurt even more thereafter. For if truth be known he was envious of each and every one of them, and for lots of different reasons too, but when tied together, they were a weighty rope that was far too much of a burden for this much saddened soul to bear. Nonetheless, he was an old fox and new tricks didn't come too easily to the sad creature that he'd

become; forever slinking around in the lower alleyways and the back-roads of life.

So, despite all the opportunities presented thereafter ... and they were at least 200 put into his hand - and more besides, S'et steadfastly stuck to his old ways, where trickery and nonsense were the main order of business. And as far as is known, to this day, S'et has still NOT shared that load - because for reasons best known to himself, he has refused to honour that pledge. And in this regard, S'et stands alone and apart from the rest of the animals ... or does he?

"Nothing new under the sun then..." - as Sandy so adroitly used to say.

But perhaps, in time, this is one old fox that might brush-up his act ... by leaving behind the folly of youth and unrealised dreams; and in all likelihood - under the mellowing influence of age, he will too.

Tinker

Tinker, resplendent in this much-practised role, was as solid as a rock throughout the whole sad affair. Proud, strong, deep and silent ... Tinker's whole demeanour was most suited to this sombre occasion. As he trotted along, there weren't too many surface mysteries pervading his countenance. His solid frame provided a staunch support and resting spot for the weary; and especially needful that day, was *Madre*. Tinker, tailor, soldier - *why?... my darling bay* [sic] - as *Madre* did say.

If there was one thing about Tinker it was that there was generally not a bad bone in his enormous, though sometimes cantankerous body. Though solid through and through, there was one thing in particular which never failed to ignite Tinker's ire and make him go a splendid

shade of phlegmatic green - it was the rats; and one rodent in particular.

At any given opportunity, Tinker would dearly love to have a full and frank discussion with *the commodore*, but as he was now a commodore for sure, and not just a pretend one, poor old Tinker had to stay his charge lest he end up pullin' time in the stockade. But still, the temptation lingered - especially whenever he happened across *the commodore*, out and about on one of his many forays.

But, despite all the antagonisms, what neither of them realised was that *Madre* was only trying to protect Tinker from *the commodore* and *the commodore* from Tinker, and Tinker from himself. It was a known fact that *the commodore* banked on this, and in fact the rat's very survival depended upon it; but Tinker couldn't see further than the end of his proud nose - and with those shiny blinkers getting in the way, it was made all the more difficult. Still, one day, Tinker would sort out *the commodore* and show him the error of his ways ... "*I never spent 7 years in the commandos for nothing, y'know!*" - as Tinker, just like Sandy, was very fond of saying.

And every word of it was true too.

wuffer

What can one say about poor wuffer? Not much really, suffice to say that he carried on his proud shoulders much, much more than was a normal load, and that his reins were *held too tight* under the crippling reign of The Barren. Thus, trapped in a cycle of private pain, deprivation, restrictions, denial and emptiness - with no end in sight, he was envious of just about every cr'ature present. Why was this so? He knew why, because like all other hounds - he wanted to see some of his own little wuffers running around to experience

the *joi de vivre*. But instead of the fertile plains, it was the barren wastelands for him.

Unfortunately, this realisation didn't come quick - despite all his brightness, but it did make him go funny in the end. In fact, it made him go funny in the beginning too. And it was oft recalled by all the other animals - about all of the lost opportunities due to wuffer's weak back legs; failed *this's* and failed *thats' s* with nothing learned from any of the sad and repetitive experiences. wuffer's hefty burden in this unpalatable union, into which this once happy animal launched himself with both eyes open, and it appears seemingly unable to shake free of, to all other sensible animals - was nothing more than a bad case of the mange ... for which there is but one quick cure - *b l a m ! b l a m !*

Goodbye ma'am.

Loyalty can be a burden; but when it is so obviously one-sided, false and mismatched, it becomes a question of mind over matter: but as far as The Barren was concerned - The Barren don't mind, and wuffer don't matter. Under such circumstances, it would be enough to turn anyone green with envy. But then again, for this odd goose - there seems to be a dislike of the colour green - no true daughter here then. *honk!*
honk!

Over time, some things became as clear as daylight: one of which was the fact that this crazy yet loveable dog and a hissing spitting goose, do not good company keep, except maybe in a lopsided fairy tale. But who knows, geese do fly, and maybe one day, that particular bird will cook it's own goose and simply *fly, fly, fly!*

In the meantime, many of those present and correct thought that if only wuffer would throw that stone circle down the nearest well, well - all would be well; in a stroke, he could set himself FREE whilst

life still pulses through his embittered little heart. For one day - who knows when, it will be so heavily encased in such bitter mortar that it will remain imprisoned for evermore. And that will be a very sad day indeed.

And as a little ol' donkey used to say, "*There comes a time when you have to move on ... well you have to, don't you!*"

Maybe he was right too!

Casey

As ever, Casey was easygoing and supportive to all those present and correct, even though he had reserved a few pernicious growls for a couple of rats in particular. But, upon seeing the delightful wee ratlings, and *snitch* - overcome with grief and a hint of change (albeit of a temporary nature only) clearly visible in his demeanour, Casey's peaceful nature was restored once more. But one thing that did not alter was Casey's uneasiness about *the dark one*.

Whenever *the dark one* showed its face, Casey's orange collar would begin to glow. Casey would not yield to the dark one; nor any other - this he knew from experience. However, Casey would be very cautious when about *snatch* - especially since he noticed how such good companions did a dusky rat and a frigid goose make. Casey vowed to watch and wait on that score; after all, he was not a sentinel for nothing.

Notwithstanding that, Casey and that lovely ol' donkey had spent much time together over the years in private conversation amidst much hearty laughter and good ale. And it was good conversation with many things discussed. And not too long before that fateful stroke did Casey and Sandy bid their own private and fond farewell, when all were in rude health; it was one of the reasons why Casey had made a

special visit to that little donkey's hollow - fearing the worst would come some time soon. Which, in fact, it sadly did ... as it always does, like a thief in the night.

But not long before Casey's final visit, when there was so much raging dust swirling around that little donkey, Casey had sent a special message for Sandy's eyes only wherein he very clearly answered a vexing question concerning Veracity; and much more besides. So, in that regard, there were no stones left unturned or things, which were not already said and settled. No, they were very good buddies. And though both of them rarely proclaimed it, they both privately enjoyed and acknowledged the fact.

Still, this was a sad occasion. And although he had steeled himself, he was feeling somewhat melancholic, but after a few good jugs with his fellow creatures - it soon passed. Yet sadder still was the sight of such a fine body of animals, gathered under such sad and oddly happy circumstances - to see so many of them with axes ready to grind, at any given turn. So much hurt. So much pain. And yet, time was ebbing away before their very eyes - for each and every one of them; but still they grind on.

But, after much was said, and things were drawing to their natural conclusion, Casey learned something that that little ol' donkey had said to his learned friend, "*Casey - he'll never bend [to injustice]!*" - and for those that knew, they would understand it too. And for those that didn't understand, well - it matters not. For Casey, it was the first time that he'd ever heard it ... but sadly, never from the donkey's mouth. Notwithstanding that fact, it made Casey feel very proud. And finally, he too understood so much more.

And as that little ol' donkey used to say: "*To be continued...*"

As ever...

Buck

The big question on this sombre occasion (probably much on his own mind too) was - did Buck slip? It was a doubly sad occasion for Buck, his udder half and the "kids". But on this one sad journey, Buck could not help but mercilessly punish himself in the privacy of his own deep thoughts; because harboured in there somewhere was the realisation that he might well have been very, very, very wrong about some things.

"And he'd be right there - boy!" - as Madre did say.

But by now, Buck's wrath had abated slightly though not enough for him not to remain green-eyed about poor old Sandy. There is no doubt that Sandy was a ruined little donkey since that fateful day - the day his honourable little back was crossed and broken after that [alleged] affair. QED.

But, Buck - being a sturdy mountain dweller and sure-footed even on the slippiest of slopes, contained well his inner emotions. Though if one could read what lay behind those unblinking watery eyes, it was plain to see the realisation that truth brings.

Buck shouldered his share of all burdens when perhaps he was, of all those present and correct - least able; yet still, he managed to do so, and more. Even Veracity gave praise, which was indeed a very brave and welcome thing ... especially given all that had passed before. And Buck's journey of pain was only half over; but for him, the most painful part was over. Over forever. Now, he must carry the realisation of that wee donkey's burden upon his own back, and for the rest of time.

But, Sandy was a forgiving little donkey and as he oft said, "Now, now - gently bently!"

So now, Buck, buck-up, because Sandy knew the truth of it. And whatever it was - his involvement is now truly over ... *requiescat in pace*. So, you (let it) rest now too.

The Christmas Lights'

The poor wee darlings. Some of the littlest and less bright were too young to understand ... or maybe they weren't, but still they glowed - albeit less brilliantly. The older ones knew only too well the loss that was evident by the passing of that favourite ol' donkey. Tears were shed by all but the most stonehearted; and there weren't too many of those present.

Though one notable shoe-shiner (was - ?) swam in the shadow of the wake of the ol' Trout - lest she should be 'contaminated' by the *hoi polloi*, as was imagined. What a poor creature; alas - with a lively soul and yet so much down at heel, and with little or no evidence of any real commitment to reunite but a slipshod excuse built upon a last that will last ... and last, and last...

Howsoever, they came and they went, as do fireflies in the night. One minute you see them and the next, you don't. One minute they were there and the next, they were not.

Meanwhile, not too far away from all those present and correct...

Fuelling all these deep dark thoughts; reflections upon themselves - was a rather fat and ungainly serpent silently slithering in the damp long grass. With its forked tongue flicking this way and that, it chortled deep within its hideous frame at the private torments of

those assembled. And of the seeds of envy it so enjoyed sewing, and then harvesting ... at *its* leisure.

"Ha har, they don't call me 'issin siD for nothin' - do they matey?" - it hissed smugly to itself.

And feeling very pleased with itself, it slithered even deeper into the murky shadows from whence it came, satisfied it had planted more than enough new seeds to continue feeding on the innocent and weak. But before it got too far, it suddenly came upon a vivid spectre: Sandy - a mere shadow of his former self; and sitting astride him was *Madre* herself, cloaked in a gown of oh so blue, and a veil of the sheerest gossamer white.

To siD, this terrifying presence of *Madre* upon Sandy's back effected an impenetrable barrier through which siD could neither evade nor escape, no matter how hard it might try. And for once, it was truly mortified.

"Right, dats-*andy*, wot's dis? -- a-ha'sss-har'sss-har'sss (it vituperated) -- and wot does you all wont wid siD den?"- it hissed, nervously.

Madre never spoke, instead - her inflamed heart suddenly radiated an intense blood-red light that emanated from deep within her sanctified breast, causing the viper to suffer in an utterly unfathomable way, a pain like no other *it* had ever caused or experienced.

"Oh don'ts be so cruel to Dis liddle ol slitherer" - squealed siD, "just tell me wots wot and wots de matter now ... and turn off that *bloody light!*" it pleaded, as it continued to squirm and squitter in pure agony.

After what seemed to siD - to be an eternity of pain - on the receiving end of a super nova, one which effortlessly outshone the day-star, *Madre* said to the hideous beast, "Oh foul cr'ature that you are, such pain do you cause in your never-ending quest of evil; this day, there has been *poisson* [sic] enough, without any more poison being imparted from your evil fangs to infect and inflame these poor wee souls. Envy, is the burden of all mortal cr'atures but whenever a filthy presence inflames such, it becomes far worse and is but the first step down a very steep and rocky road; in fact, it's the snake in everyone's grass. Now, begone and leave these poor childer alone. If you but return this day, you will truly feel their Mother's wrath. Now, go evil one for I shall say it but once only."

And with that, siD didn't need a second to consider *its* position and so *it* coiled itself into a pyramid of hissing slimy flesh and started to disappear down a hole of its own making; in fact, it was its own hole. But before it had totally disappeared, it couldn't help but hear these final words ringing in it's serpentine brain, followed by a hearty bray which made it truly shudder to its very viperous core ...
"*Get out of it, or I'll skin ya alive!*"

Guess who?

Epilogue

And with the passing of one, a new era was begun. We are all envious of one thing or another but let it not eat into our hearts lest we become fodder for the hissing one. For *it* never misses a chance to envelop the unwary in its coils of hate.

Faith, love, honour and truth, and a child's simple belief are the most effective antidotes to the serpent's venom. Such things are best kept close at hand for all those little seeds that wish to thrive where the mustard grows best, beyond *The Garden of Need*.

Seven Steps to Perdition

Step IV

Lust: where thoughts do wander

In *The Garden*, new growth was evident everywhere; the passing of the old brought about an abundance of the new. And as the sun blazed down on the wealth of blooms, it caused them to release their potent perfumes into the warm, sultry air and to descend upon all the creatures of the forest. Such a heady combination led the natural instincts of certain animals to overpower their thoughts and emotions: tinged, with a base of sexual libido, as all mortal creatures actions are, as is natural - and as was intended. However, in certain cases and usually at inopportune times, this base sentiment can sometimes lead to some rather base activities..

Lying deep within the speckled shade of a large heady magnolia tree was Casey, who was feeling hot in the heat; and hot in heat. There were many interesting scents in the air, some of an undetermined origin - yet equally interesting, which only his refined nose could detect. Those sweet scents, emanating from way down - far off, wafted their way around and about, coming from goodness knows where? But they found their way to his now heightened senses. With his tongue lolling and his green collar emitting a faint hue, Casey couldn't concentrate on his normal activities ... and this perplexed him somewhat, but not too much in the enervating noonday heat.

Yet it was such an overwhelmingly powerful invitation that did stir certain feelings deep within ... nonetheless, having indulged in too much amber nectar, he, like many other weak creatures before and since - lost all sense of reason and control and therefore, decided to follow his nose and see where it leads him. And like all hot

hounds when on the scent, it wasn't long before he was chasing the tail; round and round and round did he go, until he collapsed in a heap on the fertile mound, letting rip no *howl* as he came into contact with something he perhaps shouldn't have.

"Yikes!" thought Casey, "...that was a bit ... *too close* for comfort!"

Which indeed it was.

Casey thought long and hard about keeping that particular djin in the bottle: now spent and exhausted, he slumbered shamelessly on the damp sedge, but - tired as he was, he couldn't help but notice that his collar was getting brighter by the second, and knowing what it meant, his sentinel being took control once more. Up he leapt and focused on a tuft of coarse grass across the way, and there he saw...

None other than siD, peering from amidst the undergrowth enjoying the poor hound's guilty confusion. And in keeping with *its* silent witness, this time, *its* guise was that of a hot, hot dog. A real bitch in fact. When *it* noticed the sentinel had located it, *it* sauntered out, bold as (a) brass and sat directly in front of the sentinel, wafting the powerful scents from its intoxicating form, tantalisingly close, just beneath the sentinel's hypersensitive wet nose.

Casey's collar was now neon-bright and he was about to answer his every sentinel instinct and pounce, when the realisation dawned on him that he was becoming not only agitated, but also - quite excited. Stopping almost dead in his tracks right on top of the beast, he glared at the monstrosity between his legs with utter dismay and an alarming sense of growing excitement. He growled a throaty growl and stood motionless, just enjoying the overwhelming strangeness of that most peculiar moment...

"Arrrrr now, feeling a little hot are we little one; not so much of a star now then, eh?" - the soft bitch that was siD, wheezed seductively.

At this, Casey pulled up short and inched his bristling frame ever so slowly backwards. All the time, the siD-bitch was moving in such a way as to draw him ever closer from whence Casey had just come ... but it was just too compelling, and his natural instincts simply got the better of him.

And just as he was about to take the final plunge, something small and very hard whacked him on the back of the head, and temporarily distracted, he looked up and saw the silhouette of a winged creature flitting heavenward. It was a nut for a nut. He looked down and saw a kernel; and then he looked up once more and saw that it was indeed the winged-one himself. It was enough ... and instantly realising the magnitude of his dangerous and precarious position, Casey stepped back from the gap ... and lay down, panting.

"You're a bad one you are, a very bad one indeed," growled Casey to the siD-bitch and to calm himself, he took out his briar from his pouch and proceeded to pack it, and once done, lit it and puffed away in silence ... contemplating his next move. All the time, the siD-bitch just lay there invitingly and watched him with a tempting silence, flicking *it's* tail to and fro.

Then, Casey broke the silent spell by saying, "I was almost taken ... in fact, that clever disguise was almost taken too, in the heat of the moment - so to speak. But now, I understand what you are and now..." - and with that, Casey gripped his briar between his awesome teeth and leapt to his feet, and was about to leap onto the poison

siD-bitch and tear it to ribbons with all his might when suddenly, it spoke.

"Now, just hold on there a second big fella, I knows your a big brave sentinel and all that, but before you takes such a final leaps into certain darkness, I've a proposition for ya. How would ya likes to come to my house to see whats you're really missing ... trust me, it's a world of infinite pleasures (*for me mostly, and mostly for me!*) - even for a big dog likes you" - it wheezed sardonically.

Not hearing the vile beast's secretive utterances, the sentinel - unable to stop, and with his curiosity aroused by the very thought of it all, stood there - on the brink once more.

Then, siD transformed itself from it's hound-like state into a shadow of the deepest black, it's true form purely visible in its shadowy invisibility, and taken aback by this sudden disappearance-cum-appearance and with the blood almost freezing in his veins, Casey couldn't help but let out an involuntary '*grrrrrrowl.*'

"Harrrrrrrr-aharrrrrr ... steady on my brave warrior. We means you no harm (*for now*), in fact, we wants to ask you something," said siD coyly. And despite the sentinel's abhorrence at the beast's audacious request, siD's sulphurous words wormed their way directly into the sentinel's mind.

This stunned the sentinel out of his stupor and brought him back to the here and now, whereupon he growled, "yeah, and what's that then ... before I tear your heart out, or whatever I can get my teeth into," - and just as the sentinel was about to launch himself into the void, the shadowy form let rip the most hearty roar, "Ahahaharrrrrrrr ... oh what a good one that was! Come now sentinel, let's not be hasty. Settle down a minute and answer me this: and let's be honest now --

don't you ever get sick and tired of always doing HIS bidding? Wouldn't you like to leave your very boring existence and come and sample some of the spicy delights of my dark empire; stuff of your dreams ... and of all the other mortals' too. Come now, be honest with yourself?" - it chided.

The sentinel remained staid, and stayed put.

"If we can be honest (QED) in showing you all that we have to offer, then what harm is there in that ... and at the end of it, if you like what you see we will let you choose your heart's desire - and not for a few brief moments either - but for all eternity. All you need to do is come see for yourself. Well, what's your answer sentinel?" And having said that, siD transformed itself from the hideous darkness into a youth of such attractive grace and beauty - resplendent in the finest finery of yellow and black, and with a seductive light as bright as the day star emanating from around its being. The sentinel was truly captivated, as would any mere mortal who beheld such a devilish apparition.

And as *its* silken words wound their way around the sentinel's every honest objection, and weaved their wicked way into his nether regions, once more, the sentinel remained transfixed, immobile and paralysed by the luminosity of desire, gazing into the nothingness. Before he knew what he was doing, Casey uttered, "why not!"

It was time to visit siD in *its* own domain. And with that, the fair youth put its oddly comforting outstretched arm around the sentinel and with a wave of its other arm, it just seemed to unzip reality - merely by raising it's hand; and like a set of curtains, the reality of *The Garden* parted just wide enough to reveal a darkness like no other Casey had ever seen. Immediately, a whining bloodcurdling moan was heard from within and a cacophony of odd whispering noises,

accompanied by shadowy movements and hordes of bloodshot eyes, peering-out from within the gaping rent, but not daring to step into the life-giving light of life in *The Garden*.

And enjoying the dramatic spectacle, the fair youth stepped into the gap and pulled Casey along with the moment, then *it* stopped, turned around and wheezed a loud, "Schhhhhhhhh!" - then all was silent except for a frenzied yelling from deep within the cavernous darkness.

"Must be a new arrival," said the handsome one, and then immediately roared, "Silence!" - what then followed was the most fearful sound of unholy terror and pain (being inflicted on some lost soul) that Casey had ever heard, and one which the sentinel would never ever forget. Once total silence was restored, the youth just as suddenly zipped-up the gap which it had just rent open, and like the curtains on a stage, *The Garden* slowly disappeared and the shadows reverted to the darkness once more. And now, it was pitch black. Casey was frightened, more terrified than he had ever been but even here, in this dark, smelly, cold place amidst the fearful silence, though he cowered, his collar glowed - and at the least, that blessed light gave him some comfort.

"Now, that wasn't so bad was it?" - said the fair youth in a mocking sort of way. But hearing none of it, Casey peered this way and that, not responding to the false succour of the beast, and what he saw made him shudder. It was the stuff of nightmares; in fact, it was *his nightmare*: it was a muddy and faintly chilly passageway that disappeared into the empty blackness. And it was down this passage that the fair youth beckoned the sentinel. After a short, squelchy walk through the mud, they came across an empty space about the size of a very small cupboard - though not half as deep or wide. It was (for now) empty.

Casey feeling a most curious and compelling attraction, almost a sense of belonging, couldn't resist putting his paw into the small space, and as he did so, he unwittingly thought, 'I couldn't squeeze in there, even if I were curled up tighter than Castor's Pollux!'

The thought of any creature having to spend just one minute under such cramped and terrible circumstances made him shudder involuntarily. And with good reason too.

"Aharrrr ... they say that every dog knows it's own hole and I see you've discovered yours!" chortled the fair youth, "never mind that just yet, but you may as well enjoy the moment whilst you at least have the chance to walk away from it ... because, if you ever come this way again, it will be your very own eternal hellhole," and with that, it guffawed like the beast it truly was.

This shocking untruth in this foul place shook the sentinel to his very core, and after a moment's reflection, Casey said, "So beast, this is (my) Hell then?"

"Awww, it 'aint so bad, if and when the time comes, all you gots to do is sit in that there crouchy little hole - with no room to move this way or that, or not even that way or this. Oh yes, it's guaranteed to drive you nuts, and more ... and it never fails you know. And, get this - that's one of the better parts. Before you (or any other unfortunate guest) even gets to relax in there, there are lots more little games of ours to be played out; but more about them later ... ahahahhaharrrrrrrrrr" - it roared, with such foul sounds that the sentinel wanted to hear none of it. But even in that rancid place, the sentinel knew he had seen his own worst nightmare realised; and that was a most unpleasant and quite sobering thought.

"Come on then me brave one, let's not dawdle, there's much to see..." - *it* chided, and with a slight nod of its head, *it* caused a portal to appear from seemingly out of nowhere, which revealed another short passage that led into a huge cavern with fire and brimstone much in evidence. More petrified than ever, Casey followed the beast into the crackling heat trying his best not to breathe in the foul, noxious fumes in the cave; nor the foul stench emitted in the beast's wake. Then, standing on a balcony overlooking a display of terror that even Hieronymous himself couldn't ever have imagined, Casey was rooted to the spot with sheer unbridled terror.

"This is where all foolish mortals who enjoy too many earthly delights in *The Garden* end up paying the price; but let us tell you - only bruised strawberries will you find on our ever so 'umble tableau - ahahahaharrrrrrrr!" - *it* guffawed, nauseatingly.

"... it hardly seems worth it, does it now?" said the beast, "...but as you can see, our work is nothing but a labour of true and painstaking love; and as there are a never-ending supply of foolish souls who indulge themselves in such wanton abandon ... tsk tsk tsk! ... if only they opened their eyes, then they would save us and the gang - oh, so much work. But, never minds, we enjoys it ... DON'TS WE LADS!" - *it* roared across the furnace. And in reply came a cacophony of hideous beastly sounds so horrifying and sickly, that Casey could do nought but shiver and shake.

Casey was now beyond being petrified, he was also mystified. And finding the courage to question the beast, he managed to growl, "what sort of misbegotten creatures end-up in your gang, in this deep infernal place?"

"Ahr, well now, let's see ... we're very glad you're taking an interest in our work sentinel because we don't have many opportunities to show

such a special guest around, but anyway, let's see: over there, just behind those steaming cauldrons - there's *bad* - which is that putrid bunch over there; then, if you look into the lava pits you can see there's *badder* - which is that scurvy bunch there; and then, see where all those 'orrible bits are, them's the *baddest* of the lot - which is that unsavoury bunch skulking over there; and then of course, there's the *baddest* of the *baddest* - and well, that's me of course!" - and with that, the beast burst into titters of outrageously exaggerated laughter which was echoed by all but the very *baddest* in the dark recesses of this terrible place - and then, the beast just as quickly stopped.

And because *it* had stopped, and hearing no letup to the cacophony of noise, it glared into the darkness and quietly spoke, "Oh I do so hates it when they laugh so insincerely at me own jokes ... *BACK TO WORK YE MAGGOTS!*" - it roared; and then silence - apart from the fearsome moans of those poor unfortunate souls, fell once more upon that desolate place.

Privately, Casey was reviled and relieved at the same time, as he had recognised quite a few of those dark denizens; miserable encounters from bygone days. In fact, he couldn't help but notice how many *real rankers* there seemed to be amongst the shadows in the darkest of dark brigades.

'Talk about corporal punishment!' - he allowed himself the amusing thought. And his thoughts continued, 'he'd met one or two of them before - some more than once in different places, and now, by the look on their astonished countenances, he knew that they knew too.'

A general buzz, like an updraught in a chimney began to course throughout the infernal place. Casey could see by the big sickly smirks on the ugly, misshapen and putrefied faces of that dank horde,

and by the little bows of their beastly heads - each misbegotten creature acknowledging the recognition of his gaze, aghast.

'So, I was right all along then,' he thought; and that perked him up a bit, because when last he met those hideous incarnations of evil - they had bested him ... trammelled him once before - and boy, did he suffer - and how. But that was a lifetime ago and in another life; and even though he felt sorry for them, the sentinel was now quietly satisfied with his new found knowledge. So, he just grinned back at those irksome beasts and mouthed the words, "I'll say a prayer for you ... all of you!" at which, they screamed as one and gnashed their badly decayed stumps of teeth so madly, that they experienced pain where they least expected to ... it was as if someone had poked a sharp instrument into their fractured stumps or poured boiling oil into their very gullets.

Quick as a flash, the cruel youth turned to the sentinel and said, "Now now sentinel, let's not be too cruel to those poor unfortunates, remember, they are only doing our biddings." And with a single *hiss* from the beast, as suddenly as it had started, the shrieking stopped.

Then the fair youth turned to them and roared, "Fools ... we shall deal with you later, now ... BACK TO WORK BEFORE WE SKIN THE LOT OF YA!" - and even whilst it was roaring those very words, it turned to the sentinel who couldn't help but notice the beast's face screwing-up in pain (as it recalled those were the very words shouted at *it* not too long ago by a little ol' donkey); which *it* did. After a few moments, the unbridled terror streaking across its dark features - revived once more, after that forgotten painful memory, *it* became once more relaxed - and now bearing a putrid grimace on its enticingly beautiful face once more, it turned to Casey and said...

"But y'know, it's not all work and no play, oh no. Come now to one of our playpens and we'll shows you what we mean."

And so, the beast left the lake of fire and brimstone and led the sentinel into a side chamber bedecked and resplendent in all earthly finery - as fine as you'd ever see in a rich man's house. You name it, it was there: gold a-plenty, dazzling crystal, beautiful paintings (mostly of the Martyrs - each one depicting them meeting a terrible end); and of HIM - in HIS most painful moments. (A real tragedy in the beast's eyes, because as the beast well knew, without such a sacrifice, *it* would have been guaranteed nothing short of a *full house!*).

Beautiful vases overfilled with hemlock were everywhere. Furniture and sculptures, crowns of sparkling diamonds, treasure chests beyond counting, and the finest jewels - an ostentatious abundance of wealth so fabulous, it simply bedazzled the beholder and made him squint. And Casey squinted very hard; for something in particular had caught his eye - it was...

Meanwhile, back in *The Garden*...

Benny - knowing instinctively that something was amiss and fearing the worst, was flitting hither and thither seeking out news of the strange disappearance of the sentinel. He sought high and low, approaching each of the animals in turn to find if they had any knowledge of Casey or of his abrupt departure. Benny had heard for some time now of the sentinel's growing interest in *that* foreign legion; and from *The Garden*, that could mean but one thing. Spurred on by *Madre*, Benny left no stone unturned in his unremitting efforts to locate and retrieve the sentinel from his most perilous venture to date. He travelled to all corners of *The Garden* but still was unable to locate Casey.

Buck did give out a hint of where the sentinel might have gone but was unsure himself - which was true enough, he said, "he just had a feeling in his old bones".

It was at Tinker's where Benny finally discovered Casey's whereabouts. And after partaking of Tinker's generous hospitality, they got down to talking about the missing sentinel.

It came to light that whilst the sentinel had been squaring-up against that demon bitch, Tinker had been busying himself plodding through the open part of the forest looking for interesting things to look at; one of his favourite pastimes.

And whilst he'd been busy looking at some very ordinary stones near the boundary of *The Garden* - to which he exclaimed "*'pon my soul - how simply extraordinary!*", he'd noticed an obnoxious stench coming from where the sedge grows thickest. And being an inquisitive horse by nature, he decided to investigate. Quietly, he trod through the undergrowth - as much as a mighty shire horse might skip over a bowl of cornflakes, and when he finally came upon the spot where the stench was most foul, he saw something which he could neither understand nor explain. And because it was so perplexing, he did what he always did in such situations and remained silent.

"But now is not the time to be silent...", Benny gently chided the behemoth, knowing full well that pushing this gentle giant too quickly or too far would only result in a more profound silence; and that wouldn't do, not under these circumstances.

"Tinker, just do your best and tell me everything that you remember ... and leave nothing out, no matter how silly or strange it might seem to you. Now, come on, let's be 'aving you...", said Benny.

"Ooooooh aarrrrrr, well now, let me see ... what was that now..." and after an imponderable pause, the great horse continued, "...ah yes, that was it! Now then, let me tell you ... it was like this ... or was it like that?" - and so he dithered.

Well, this to-ing and fro-ing proved too much for Benny's patience and although he tried hard to remain silent, this wooly-headed horse would waste so much time by saying everything and nothing at all, so...

Benny snapped, "Come on buster, get on with it!" and quickly jerked Tinker to reality.

And this seemed to do the trick. For it jolted Tinker into the present, whereupon he said, "Ahhhhhhh now then, yes, that's it, oh - just wait a second ... ah yes, now I know ... well now, are you ready - good! Well then, when I reached that foul spot, I caught a glimpse of Casey standing before a black hole - but it was a funny kind of hole because it wasn't a hole at all, but it was black and it did smell terrible; it made my nostrils twitch so ... in fact, the last time my nostrils twitched like that was, oh when was it? Ah yes, it was back in the summer of..."

At this point, Benny sent a cloud of his favourite shag directly into the face of the ol' nag and the effect of the whiff of baccy instantly cleared the horse's sinuses and removed the clouded vision into which he was rapidly being obscured.

"Oooooer, I say ol' boy, that was a bit ... you know, I mean, well, you know, eh what, not good form ol' boy, oh no," whinnied Tinker.

But Benny knew it had shaken the horse into the present and now that he was back, Tinker continued, "Ah yes, where was I ... " glancing a

long, slow, sideways look down the length of his equine face at Benny, and after a resounding snort, he said, "...right, this is what that black hole that was not a black hole looked like: imagine, there was Casey and with him was this very nice looking mutt, in fact, now I come to think of it, the mutt turned funny a bit - don't ask me to explain it, just to say that it turned funny ... and then it had its arm around Casey and seemed to be egging him forward into the gap! By JOVE yes, that's it ... it was a gap! That's it, that's exactly what I saw - the black hole I saw, it wasn't a hole at all, it was just a gap. A black gaping big ol' smelly old dark gap. And into it, with the mutt's insistent assistance - went Casey."

Astonished, Benny said quietly, "Did you notice anything else?"

"Ahhhh yes I did, now you come to mention it, " replied Tinker, "...besides the awful smell, there was also very odd noises coming from that gap. And some strange looking spectres indeed, but I can't tell you anymore other than that it was a frightfully odd noise and not the sort of thing a fellow of my standing likes to see or hear. I didn't particularly care for it myself, but anyway, as I was watching, I noticed the gap began to close and just as suddenly as a cloud passing overhead, it appeared just like normal in that spot once more; almost like a whirl of smoke - ahern [followed by another long, slow, glance at Benny] disappearing ... yes, that's the best way to describe it, it was just like they disappeared in a puff of smoke. One second it's there, the next - it isn't. Astonishing stuff really, now that I come to think of it..." - and Tinker pondered some more on that very thought.

"Ahern - OK Tinker, very good, very good. Now then, just one more thing, did you notice anything else - say, about Casey's collar?" - enquired Benny.

"Ah yes indeedy-dooddy ... I'm glad you asked that," said Tinker "... because, if there was one thing which I did notice it was Casey's collar. I have never seen it glow so brightly as at that particular moment. Now then, very strange that ... what could it mean, I wonder?" - mused the big-hearted gentle horse.

But Benny, saying nothing, knew exactly what it meant. He had just had his own worst suspicions confirmed and it bothered him greatly. What was he to do? What could he do? What could any mere mortal creature do now? It seemed like the sentinel was lost; because once inside that formidable fortress, there was little chance of escape - sentinel or no. But whatever it took, Benny would try to effect the sentinel's early release from that dreadful place. And thanking Tinker for his hospitality, Benny once more headed off into the blue yonder, leaving Tinker alone with his thoughts ... and none the wiser for what had inadvertently been revealed.

It was not for any other reason than to protect poor Tinker's mind from the awful consequences of the truth that Benny never told him of his grave suspicions. And that was probably the best thing knowing how such things affected such a simple and uncomplicated mind as Tinker's ... for if told the dreadful truth, he'd only worry himself sick, and that wouldn't do now would it.

Back at the inferno...

Casey gasped as he realised what exactly it was he was seeing. Besides a coven of comely-wenches revealing their lusciously tantalising forms (to a mere mortal, that is), at their centre was none other than that malodorous bitch *snatch* - calm as you please, nibbling on a mandrake - her favourite pastime.

When the festering little rodent clapped eyes on the sentinel - she let out a shriek that would have woken the dead. And in fact, it did. And, unrepentant as ever, the shameless little rat leapt off the devil's candlestick and rather mistakenly, onto a very sharp three-pronged fork belonging to a plain-looking skinny witch with a goose's head and enormous flappers for feet - upon which she impaled herself to the tune of an ear-piercing F#.

The cavorting mass of wretches suddenly came to a grinding halt to see what had caused one of their very own to howl so ... and when they saw that it was the sentinel, they too began to shriek in an ungodly manner. For they never expected to see the sentinel in this dark hole ... and certainly not with his collar a-glow or his weapon bared!

Casey took all this in his stride and was actually enjoying the spectacle when he said to the impaled furry *snatch*, "mind that prick, ya little rat!" - and he chuckled to himself as he realised he'd just seen justice served in a place without justice.

"Ohhhh, very droll sentinel, very droll. But, you're missing the point, unlike that little rat - hehehehe ... hold yer osses and take another look around and tell me what you see?" - the beast asked, quite unconcerned as to the mayhem the sentinel's appearance had caused *its* little band of dark disciples.

And so, Casey did just that: apart from the witches just mentioned, he saw every single one of his dreams, wants and desires. And there they all were ... each and every one of them, and his for the taking - for all eternity. 'But where was the catch?', he thought to himself.

"It's so marvellous that you now get the point, and just by looking at you - you certainly do have a point! - ahahahahaarrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" sneered the beast, "...but as you so rightly ask of yourself, what's the catch? Well, let me tell you: it couldn't be simpler - just

remove that thing from around your neck and all that you see will be YOURS - for all eternity. And that's how simple it is ... just throw down that damned collar and you're FREE for evermore. So come-on-come-on-come-on - what's it to be, an eternity of sheer bliss and all your [mortal] desires fulfilled or back to the Te Deum of your tedious way of life? - ah, ah, well wots is it ... quick now, lets us know???" it said, impatiently goading the over-excited sentinel.

Just at that very moment, back in The Garden...

Benny, sitting, beside himself beside a beehive amidst the ambrosia and nectar, and at his wits end about what to do about the missing sentinel, suddenly sat up as *Madre* suddenly appeared from out of the blue, her blissful form surrounded by a halo of The Christmas Lights', and she spoke...

"Dearest Benny n'og, as you now know there is one among us who is now a prisoner in that most terrible place. Now you must free your mind so that we can tend to his most urgent need. Benny, sing, and sing with all your heart!" - and with that, *Madre* and *The Christmas Lights*' melted once more into the pale cerulean sky.

So, Benny being an obedient little bat, cleared his mind of all things, then cleared his throat with a loud '*a-herm*' and began to sing: the sweet Ambrosian Hymn.

Why that particular hymn - he knew not why, because he much preferred the Gregorian chant but nonetheless, he knew it was for a very good reason, and so did he sing. The sweet-sounding melody found wings on the gentle breeze and was carried to all corners of the universe where it also found its way into every nook and cranny, and down every dark hole too, ... down it went, down every recess, down, down, down, down...

Into the nether regions...

Where the sentinel sat, staring wide-eyed at the hideous beast which had just transformed itself into a slavering ape; for none save Himself could remove the sentinel's blessed collar, though only he himself could cast it aside. And before he answered the leering beast's question, and with his neon-bright collar half-off at the very thought of an eternity of debauchery stirring his loins, and driving his overwhelmed senses to the point of ruination of his mind with the thought of a lifetime's pent-up passion being his for the taking, this brave sentinel was less than one hair's breadth from taking that final plunge into a darker abyss than he could ever have possibly imagined, even in his worst nightmare. But, just before he ripped the collar off in its entirety, the beast and all the rats and snails and puppy dog tails that made up the stuff of the coven in

that forlorn palace, all began to squeal in unison, in an agonizing and deafening din; and for once, the agony was all of their own making.

This sudden change in the atmosphere steadied the sentinel's hand. And in that brief moment, it dawned on him just what he was about to do. Quicker than you could say "Salve Regina", the sentinel had replaced his collar now glowing brighter than the light of Sirius, and getting up on his haunches, the sentinel caught wind of the honeyed sounds as they gently wafted over the now-terrified horde. It was the sweetest of music to his lonely ears, and it stirred other passions within him which gave him renewed strength, vigour and fortification, and the will to overcome!

"Arrrrrrrrraaaaaaggggggghhhhhhhhh!!!!" screamed the beastly ape, "...make it stops. Makes it goes away ... its horrible and its hurtings our ears" - but the sweet sounds did not stop.

At this point, Casey's natural instincts took over, and with renewed vigour, he turned and leapt at the hissing spitting goose and split it from beak to tail with one viscous snap of his mighty jaws. He then rounded on the rest of the coven, slashing this way and that with all his might. Putrefying remains - bits of witch, splattered the cave of delights in which they were held captive and he - previously captivated.

Running at full speed, the sentinel - guided by the searing light of his collar - slashed, snapped and bit his way through whatever came within reach, until nothing came within reach ... then finally, he came upon that impaled demon - *snatch*, who by this stage was not only mortified, but with eyes darting hither and thither and nerry a place to hide, meekly looked up at the fearsome sentinel and pleaded in

that very irritating rat-like squeal, "ohhhhhhh
plllleeeeeeeaaaaaasssssssssee ... it wasn't me ... it was 'im, honest!"

But seeing the sentinel's gaze unfazed, the filthy rat continued, in desperation, "I didn't mean it ... it was all a mistake, honest ... don't hurt me, I will do anything you ask - honest, just let me be."

"yeah, right!" - replied the sentinel. And being disgusted to his core by the very sight of one so evil, the sentinel continued, "You foul creature. Your kind spread nothing but disease, hatred and evil. Y'all deserve justice, your just reward. And for all the evil, hurt and bad things you've ever done, this now is your ultimate reward - enjoy!... *thy will be done!*" - and with that, the sentinel ripped the festering squealing rodent asunder with such ferocity that that was one rodent who would NOT bother any decent folk ever again ... *one scratched snatch!* - so to speak.

And so it came to pass ... The End of *snatch*.

Then, as the sentinel faced about, he came eye-to-hideous-eye with the beast.

"STOP RIGHT THERE, MISTER!" - snarled the beast, transforming itself once more - now into the form of a luscious young maiden.

"You have gone far too far now; just look at the mayhem you have caused in my lovely room. Look at all my gals. What a real oirish terrier you surely are. Well, now then ... because of this, the deal's off, and you're staying here ad infinitum, so now, we shall simply have to take that 'orrible collar off you ourselves, and then buddy, your sentinel ass is most definitely inessential grass!" - said the unfair maiden, tittering, and then it moved to carry out its dread threat.

But, just as defiantly, the sentinel bared his teeth -- now covered in the slime of the misbegotten -- and instantly tore off the unfair maiden's arm at the elbow. The beast-maiden screeched in such a horrible manner that Casey let it drop from his jaws in surprise, whereupon it became a shadowy form and then like mercury, became one with the demonic host.

"Ohhh, so you want to play dirty is it now?" - roared the beast-maiden, and immediately transformed itself into a huge three-headed monster, with the snapping, snarling and bleating heads of a crocodile, a leopard and a goat.

Astonished by the dread monster before him, Casey growled, "*ad nocturn*, for you cocker!" - and without waiting another second, he leapt at the leopard-head and ripped it from the beast's body - immediately, a steaming stench poured forth out of *its* gaping wound, and from every other orifice imaginable. Yet still, the remaining heads continued to slash and gnash, hiss and bleat.

But, the stench poring forth was a stench so foul that the sentinel roared with but a single sniff of it. Yet still, he drove on the attack, and leaping beyond the reach of the beast's two remaining sets of snapping jaws, the sentinel tore at the very heart of the black beast ... only to find that there was no heart present at all; which meant that all his efforts had led to nothing more than a dark gaping hole in the beast's body, which was quickly becoming unwholesomely whole!

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrryikes!" - howled Casey.

"Fooled ya!"- the beasts' heads sneered in unison.

And then, unable to contain itself any longer, the beast laughed uproariously until finally it roared, "ENOUGH! STAND-STILL-THAT-MAN. STAND PERFECTLY STILL!!" - and then, the whole of Hades fell silent.

At this unseemly rude but unmistakable command, the sentinel stood his quarter and glared at the two-headed beast before him. The beast then transformed itself once more - this time into a peacock. It deliberately cocked and ruffled its magnificently iridescent display at the sentinel and then said..

"You're just too much trouble to have around, and we for one do NOT want you in our dark legion. You're nothing but a troublemaker. Just look at the damage you've caused. What's more, you've definitely got the wrong attitude for this outfit - and something else too, we don't like you neither, so there. So, we is going to kick your sentinel butt out o' here, yer bugger ... but before we do, just answer me this - when we almost had that damned collar off your neck and your mortal soul in the grasp of our claws, that is, just before that infernal syrupy racket descended on our poor unprotected heads, we noticed the glowing letters "A.M.D.G." on the inside of that collar - tell us, what's that all about?" - it asked, followed by a malodorous shake of its brilliant tail feathers.

By now, the sentinel had understood it all and how close he'd actually come to joining the darker side of dark; and in reply to the beast's question, he growled, "OK demon, but first, even though I tore at your heart I knew that you have no heart. For how can there be a heart in one so dark and devoid of light ... there is nought but emptiness, a true empty vessel. And as for the letters, well, it means **Ad majorem Dei gloriam**".

And upon hearing those words, siD exploded in a squeal of raging agony and shrieked in the loudest sound the sentinel had ever heard - just two words: "GET OUT!"

... and with that, the sentinel was instantly and violently expelled from the nether regions, finding himself hurtling upwards along a shaft of the brightest light, and within an instant - he felt the cool clear air of *The Garden* upon his Heavenly-favoured brow. And with the soft rich earth beneath his paws, and now totally spent - he sucked in as much fresh sweet air as he could to cleanse his body of those ghastly noxious odours. And then, totally exhausted, he settled down in the comforting earth to rest his weary bones. But just then, before he fell into a much-needed deep sleep, he heard...

"Welcome back, my little one!" - spoketh a gentle voice behind him.

The sentinel turned around and saw *Madre*, surrounded by *The Christmas Lights'* - then, in all Her Glory *She* ascended into the glorious heights surrounded by a celestial chorus ringing-out the purest song across the heavens, "Salve Regina! Salve Regina!"

Immediately, the sentinel's eyes filled with tears of thanks and sheer joy upon seeing such a holy and wondrous sight; they cascaded ceaselessly down and along every fibre of his brilliantly golden and wiry coat. And then in the ultimate expression of his happiness, he let out a most joyous howl - a howl that could be heard across the universe and beyond.

And indeed it was.

Epilogue

Down in the depths of darkness, siD was more than usually furious with all those poor souls below; and to show its displeasure, it

turned up the heat somewhat, much to the consternation of the unending ranks of invited guests. SiD also made every attempt to breathe new life into a worn-out *snatch* - but not even the fetid breath of The Evil One could restore life into such a useless form, now as ever it was, of no good to man nor beast. The sentinel had done his work too well; and this made siD very angry indeed - as a *snatch* of that nasty calibre didn't come along every day. But in time, *it* might get another chance to trap the lot of 'em; for that was siD's unrelenting mission.

And back in *The Garden*...

Benny relayed the story to the assembled animals of all that had occurred. He praised Tinker's important role in saving the sentinel from a fate worse than ... and then, he presented Tinker with a shiny new brass medallion - one to match his big honest heart. Then as one happy band, they all sang the sentinel's praises. And together, as happy a bunch of critters that ever existed, they all burst into song and began singing one of their favourite hymns, *Da Lord's Ear*.

Da Lord's Ear! ... Dat's HIS Song!**

And they sang...

I got da Lord's ear,
I got da Lord's ear,
I got da Lord's ear,
I-said-I-got-da-Lord's-ear!

Yes I do,
Yes I do,
Ye-ya-ye-ya-ye-ya-yes I do,
I tru-ly do!

'Cause da Lord's 'ere,
He's really 'ere,
Yes He's 'ere,
HE IS HERE!

Repeat...

And Casey sang...

The sky's clear
He's near,
Have No Fear -
'Cause HE IS HERE!

*Jus' pray, Jus' pray,
Dat's-all-ya-gotta-say,
Ju-us' pray!
jus' pray, jus' pray!
Dat's-all-ya-gotta-say,
Ju-us' Pray!*

Here comes da moon,
And not too soon,
So don't you swoon -
'Cause dat's HIS Tune!

Chorus...

Dem's His Stars,
Be-yond Mars,
But that ain't far -
Jus'-open ya heart!

Chorus...

Dem angels' wings,
Wanna make ya sing!
Dat thing,
Dat love-'o-HIS thing!

Chorus...

So op-en dem eyes,
An' you'll be sur-prised!
It's Para-dise,
In Para-dise!

Chorus...

HE IS RISEN!

Dat sun is up,

HIS Son is Up,

An' He's forgivin'!

Chorus...

The sky's so clear

An' He's, so near,

So, don't You fear, 'cause -

HE'S ALWAYS BEEN HERE!

Chorus...

It was one of the sentinel's favourites too, because he knew it by heart, and in his heart of hearts, he also knew that whatever the danger, however dark the dread, the repentant sinner will always have Da Lord's Ear.

Much later...

The sentinel - now rested, enjoyed hearing the story as much as the next creature - for he had created a new legend that would stand for all time. And with the writing of these words, so it was to be.

Epilogue

So remember, the next time you find yourself with an itch, say a prayer instead for all those lost souls who didn't.

* Latin - To The Greater Glory Of God (motto of the Order of The Society of Jesus)

** Author's note: This Divinely-inspired song was especially written to honour the Blessed Virgin Mary - HIS Mother; and is dedicated to Bids - my mother; to Bon - the mother of our son Kevan; and to every other mother - in honour of Himself!

Seven Steps to Perdition

Step V

Greed: overdoing the stuffing

After all the recent excitement in *The Garden*, it was decided at an assembly of the animals that a big feast was called for to celebrate all that could be celebrated, and all that should be celebrated. And there was much to celebrate, so in true form, they celebrated, as only they knew how.

Each of the animals was tasked to bring along a dish to the great feast, which was to be held on the eve of the next full moon. For 'twas on the full moon that the lunartics [sic] of this animal community were at their very best ... or worst, depending in which light one viewed their antics. And before much else had happened, the day of the grand feast itself dawned ... and as the day progressed and eventually drew to a close, there was a hustle and bustle to prepare for what promised to be a good night.

And it wasn't only night, which cast its darkening shadows across the length and breadth of *The Garden* ... for in the twilight, there lurked the ominous presence of the blackest of all shadows, siD. For now, it was content to silently observe the feverish activities of the animals as they busied themselves for the coming feast. And siD, ever watchful and hungry for a soul's moment of weakness, was looking for any opportunity to exploit its dark and mysterious power over any unfortunate creature that might come to its beady-eyed attention.

And it wasn't too long before one did. Buzzing around the beautifully adorned table siD spied one of The Christmas Lights' - a bright,

plump little thing which seemed to be paying an unhealthy amount of attention to several dishes of the sumptuous spread.

Just then, Casey wandered by and placed a flacon or two of his choice porter on the table, which was already groaning under the combined weight of the magnificent spread. The little firefly did not want to attract Casey's attention so he lay concealed behind a large pot of beautiful fuchsias. Meanwhile, not a million miles away, another not-so-casual observer couldn't help but notice the sentinel's blue collar - which was now emitting a faint hue, but this observer certainly didn't want to attract the sentinel's attention to the fact either. And then, just as quickly as he had appeared, Casey went off about his business. Both the little firefly and siD heaved a sigh of relief, but each for a different reason.

"Ahaaaaaa good, now that that curly haired little git has gone - I can get back to me business..." - grizzled siD to itself, "dis is wot's I likes to see - hehehehehe ...a rather plump little twinkler all on its own - tsk tsk tsk - silly little blinker it is too - heheheheheeee, and there's the greedy little beggar - just gobbling everything it can see whilst nobody's around ... or so it thinks - hehehe. Now then, methinks me's found me nexts victim!" - and with that, siD's darkness spread like molasses over the short distance to the table to get a little closer and stick to its prey.

That prey was oblivious to all and sundry. Earlier on, he had unwisely separated himself from *Madre* and the other Christmas Lights' whilst on their unrelenting mission to feed the hungry, when he greedily feasted his eyes upon the fabulous range of delicacies and delicious dishes set before his wings. The temptation was just too much!

"Oh isn't it a dainty dish", he hummed merrily to himself, "tra-la tra-la tra-laaaaa!" - and then, thinking no one was watching, or

perhaps he didn't care whether they were or not, he busied himself at each and every dish, undecided upon which one to sink his little teeth into first. The trouble was, there were far too many lovely things for his very large eyes to take in. So, he decided he would take a nibble out of each one in turn, 'just to taste what it's like', he told himself ... and, 'no one will mind, not when it's little itsy bitsy me - a-har a-har' - he thought, chuckling confidently to himself.

And so, starting at one end of the spread, he took a nibble of this one, then a chunk of that one, only to be followed by another nibble of this and a peck at that. And if that wasn't enough, he quaffed a great quantity of ale at every given turn, interrupted only with a sip of this wine, a guzzle o' that, and a draught of anything else he could lay his chubby little mits on. Before too long, he had bitten off far more than he could chew. His belly was overstuffed and he was feeling quite dizzy, and his cheeks were covered in cream and gravy, and custard had splashed all over his now-fading silent light; but he was too stuffed to care anyway.

In fact, it never entered the little blighter's mind for one minute that he was doing wrong or that he was spoiling the dishes before everyone else could get a chance to sit down and enjoy them - no, he was a greedy little beggar whose thoughts were fuelled only by his own greed ... and not by his need.

And siD ate the antics of this colourful character up with relish. For the more the little beggar scoffed, the heavier and plumper he became - until, the bloated little firefly could fly no more, and unable to even stand on it's own little legs, he just sank down on his overloaded derriere - to rest, and prepare himself for round two ... or so he thought.

It was at this point that siD made its presence known to this dim little firefly ... in the guise of a duck.

"*Quack* - hello there munchkin..." - *it* said.

And, startled by the duck's sudden appearance at his side, the terrified firefly just blinked and immediately tried to fly away, but try as he might, the greedy little beggar couldn't move an inch.

"wha - what-t-t d-d-do y-y-y-you w-w-want?" - he said, in a very shaky, squeaky little voice.

"*Quack* - ahaharrrrrr - that's a very good question little one - *quack*", replied siD, who felt in no need to rush this deliciously enticing morsel at all, and decided to play it out a bit longer before it became the main course on siD's unholy diet.

"I-I-I've got to go now ... home for my supper!" - said the little firefly, trembling at the very thought of staying a moment longer within beak range of this horrible, beastly duck.

"Oh deary me, *quack* - I reckons that was your last supper me little darlin'" - sneered siD right back at him.

At this, the poor wee mite began to blubber in earnest. Ignoring him, siD continued, "*Quack* - you see, me's been here for quite some time, watching you take a bite out of almost every dish on the table here - humphs! - me's even saw you eat that burger with relish - you greedy little thing you, and with each bite, you've got plumper and plumper until here you sit, all ready to be gobbled up. In fact, I can'ardly wait - so that is precisely what I intend not to do. And if you can pardon my little joke - which weally quacks me up, I think you are

getting your just deserts - aaaa-haaaaaa-haaaaa-haaaaaarrrrrrrrr-harrrrrrr - *quack!*"

And having quacked on long enough, the monstrous duck waddled forward to where the blubbering, bloated, fat fireless-fly was now shaking uncontrollably. And as he sat there, stewing in his own juices and awaiting the inevitable last bite, he wished very hard that he could have just one more last chance to mend his ways and he would never ever be a greedy little pig of a firefly any more. Promise.

And with the dreadful duck drawing ever closer, the now-howling firefly's light began to rapidly blink on and off, and in sheer desperation - fuelled by absolute terror, he cried out at the top of his squeaky little voice, "Fatherrrrrrrrrr" - into the darkening wilderness, hoping his plea would be heard or maybe - some one would see the light of desperation and come and take pity on this utterly distressed soul.

And with the foul creature just a waddle-and-a-*quack* away, and the gutsy little firefly seemingly resigned to his doom - a sudden *whooshing* noise accompanied by the sweet smell of a burning briar wafted over the firefly's head and landed with an impressive bounce and a bump, right before his very eyes ... it was Benny!

Benny quickly recovered his composure then turned about and faced the demon, raised his right paw and commanded, "Be still Demon!"

"*Quack* - whassaaaaamaaaaaarrrrraaaa - whoay, oh no, not you again ... you batty little batsard" - quacked the foul creature, "can'ts you minds your own blinkin' business for once?"

"Now, now - there's no need to get all personal like that. Just stay your ground till I see what's going on here" - said Benny, unmoved.

And so saying, Benny turned around to look at the terrified firefly whose many knees were knocking so loudly that Benny felt inclined to say, "...and as for you you clot, be still, be quiet and say nothing - got it?" - to which the rotund little fellow could only nod his head meekly in reply. That done, turning once more to face the demon, Benny was about to speak when the ugly duck snapped its vicious, salivating bill together in a sharp *c-r-a-c-k* that made the very air quiver - then *it* spoke...

"Now listens to me you furry little beast, this gomben here is definitely on my menu as the 'tonight's special' - I mean, jus' look at him - he's just so very plump, and ripe for the taking - and he's such a greedy little fellow too ... just be looking at him, how can you not agree with me ... I mean, I'd be doin' everyone a favour - right!; so why don'ts you just shove off and lets him to his fates - huh, huh, huh - whaddaaya say, huh, huh? - *quack!*"

Benny remained silent and pondered for a moment, then said, "we-l-l-l-l-l, before I answer that, let me clear one thing up first: I don't for one minute agree with anything you might say, have said or might ever say - are we clear on that point - yes? Good!" - and before the beast could stutter a sound in reply, Benny continued thus, "...and for another - who amongst us is beyond temptation? Certainly not YOU and certainly not this little innocent here, no. Not one of us."

Taken aback, the beastly duck replied, "Oh, I seeeeeeeee, that's yer game is it - thens wots abouts you, you-you-you thing you ... how comes you never includes yourself in that little lot then, eh, eh?" - its eyes now glowing ... livid *it* was.

"Ah!" replied Benny - ", you're forgetting, I am not the one under discussion here. No, besides - do I have any guilt? - sure, some guilt-

edged securities, a nice pair of gilt slippers, I do live in a bit of a gilded cage and I too have a few gilt insecurities - hah - do I need to continue? No. Like I said, not one of us mortal creatures - 'cepting *Madre of the Veil*, that is, is beyond temptation. And by the abomination of your very existence, you are the reason why this little fellow has put himself in harm's way."

"Ha! I thought so. Every time I hear this lame duck excuse. Wot a load of ol' malarkey it is too. How is it that every time someone falls by the wayside it's my fault? I didn't force them to sin did I? NO! ... they did it of their own free will. Answer me that mr clever-bloody-batty-batsard-clogs?"- retorted the ghastly duck, who was by now getting more than a bit steamed up.

Ignoring the beast's outburst, Benny continued, "In fact, it's all your fault - everything is really! ... whatever they did was indeed to commit sin, but such a notion could only find its genesis from your evilness, and only an evil one - such as your bad self, could ever foster such thoughts in the minds of the weak-willed, most often in times of great stress and confusion; but I digress, getting back to the case before me: yep, it's partly his fault too - for not listening to what he's been told a thousand times before; and for being a gluttony little fellow when so many childer out there are without even a crumb to put into their tiny bellies - so bloated with emptiness ... more of your evil doings, no doubt. But, if he's guilty of anything it is of being unthinking and utterly selfish; and for carrying the burden of two little souls in that one fragile form. But you, you evil beast - you know all about that one, don't ya. However, *unthinking* is not the same as deliberately sinning. I mean, he did not for one moment think about any other poor unfortunate creature whilst he was busy stuffing his face - no, there are many like him. No, no, no, no - for all intents and purposes, he is a harmless little fellow who belongs to a very special group indeed; and who I

am sure, after this experience, will be a greedy little fellow no more. Am I right little one?" - said Benny, taking a big puff of his pipe, turning to the now-glowing little firefly - who beamed a big, if somewhat thin-lipped and timorous smile in reply.

"Ohhhhhhh- I do 'ates you when you goes on and on likes that..." - quacked the duck, irritably, now with an even more fearsome and fiery glare in its eyes, "...you's really thinks you's the clever little bag of fur doesn't you...but ain't you forgetting -- Him", it sneered.

"Fool!" - roared Benny, "Duh! He is NOT of this world and He is BEYOND ALL TEMPTATION. But you know that already, don't ya - fallen one", grinned Benny in reply.

"D'urrghh, ohhhhh yessssss, buts I almost had Him. Anyway, never minds Him ... you marks my words - your day of reckonings is coming. And I will have my revenges on you and then we'll be seeings who's got the biggest smuggest grins then - oh yes, we'll sees. Of thats you can be sure." - quacked the duck, with evil intent plastered all over its hideous mask of naked hatred.

"Yes, yes, yes - no doubt. But, just for the record and your edification - regarding Himself: you weren't even close! And, furthermore, these are two little souls that are definitely OFF tonight's menu - for they shall be spared the torment of your infernal barbecue. Are we agreed on that?" - said Benny, staring directly and without falter into the black pits of darkness that burned painfully back - directly into the core of his very being.

But the mucky duck just got angrier and angrier and angrier at the very cheek of it. And the angrier it got, the more inflamed its hideous passions became. "You's is a very very tricky fellow, that's for sure - a typical bloody lawyer ... and I really doesn't likes you

neither - not one little bit. No I does not, not one little itsy bitsy bit. But, apart from that, suppose I doesn't agree with you about greedy guts over there, what's to stop me just gobbling up the pair of you right here and now ... I mean, you're all alone, aren't you now - heeheeheeeheeeheee - and I'm game!" - it guffawed, leering intently at Benny and the frightened little flasher.

"Oh what a fool you are ... and yes, game you are, you rancid creature. I would have thought you'd have learned by now - WE'RE NEVER ALONE!" - retorted Benny sharply, making His sign...

"Oh yea, well lets just see shall we..." - and with that, the now-smouldering duck made a huge lunge, hissing terribly, with its bill gaping wide at the fearless emissary and his charge - when all of a sudden...

B-L-I-N-K - The Lights' came on!

In a swarm of colour so bright and dazzling, The Christmas Lights' descended and raced around and about the two Holy creatures, creating a vortex of iridescent light so impenetrable, that the smouldering duck - which was still in the final stages of its viscous lunge - *its* beak, barely touching the outer rim of Glorious Fire - it immediately burst into flames hotter than *it* had ever known existed, even in *its* own temporary domain - and with a roar that shook the very heavens, it transformed itself from being an overcooked duck into the inky black spectre that *it* truly is, and then it yelled at the top of its voice, "I seriously, seriously, seriously, abso-chucking-muckin-ducking-well 'ates you, you 'orrible little batsard ... and those *ducking* little flash harries too!." And then it roared again, "I will have my day - you don'ts forgets that, I will have my day!" - then in a black fit of rage, *it* became one with the darkness once more.

Upon seeing this, the dazzling carousel of rainbow-lights came to a gentle halt, and the myriad colours of The Christmas Lights' danced gently upon the faint breeze, following Juni's lead hither and thither, to the twinkling-chiming sounds of their tinkling little wings of gossamer, and soothing the fevered brows of the two exhausted escapees.

Benny stood and enjoyed the peace that was once more; then he turned to the now fully-charged firefly (who had actually *lost his lunch* during the awesome encounter and was now a much slimmer and wiser pair of souls for the experience) where, once more, the True Light burned bright, then he said, "Aherm - well now, aherm - you alright?"

"A-ha. Yep" he replied, squeakily.

"Aherm, aren't you forgetting something?" - said Benny in astonishment, a frown now creasing his perplexed brow.

"Oh, sorry - yep ... thank you for saving me and I am very sorry for causing so much trouble and I won't ever be greedy or so unthinking or selfish ever again, honestly I won't!" - replied the little innocent(s) in all innocence. And from that day forth, he was true to His word. And that was his saving grace.

"But, there's just one question I have - what happened to the duck - I know he's quackers, but what happened to it?" - he asked, gazing up in awe at Benny.

"Ohhhh - ahar ahar ahar," - chortled Benny, "... I suppose you could say - *its* goose was well and truly cooked!"

And so it was too.

At which point The Christmas Lights' danced merrily, and laughing gaily - they rose as one in a spectacular *Gloria Aurora*. Then the little innocent(s) joined the host once more - together again -- as one unified body, and they whirled away into the heavens in a spectacle of dazzling luminosity - and within the blink of an eye, they were gone.

And now that the air had cleared, Benny remained where he was and pondered for awhile, in silence until... (see chapter VI)

Epilogue

So remember, the next time you find yourself tempted to overdo the stuffing - spare a thought for those who are really hungry and in real need of help.

Seven Steps to Perdition

Step VI

Avarice: for want of gain

Shortly thereafter...

After all that excitement, Benny was ready for a bite to eat; and a glass or two wouldn't go amiss either. And as it happened, the brethren had just started arriving to enjoy the feast. A few moans were heard about little things here and there that were missing - a bottle of this and a quart of that, but being good-natured animals for the most part, well - at least 66% of them, not much was said thereafter. And none of them were any the wiser of the fierce battle that had just taken place or that it had even happened at all. And so, Benny, now at peace, took his place at the table and the feasting and merriment began in earnest.

After saying *grace*, the assembled creatures all happily and enthusiastically set about the delicious fare. A few of the more eagle-eyed amongst them noticed the tiny teeth marks in almost every dish, but said nothing. For all were welcome at this feast. And as the fruits of the vine flowed freely and in equal measure, it wasn't long before laughter coursed gaily through the warm night air. With pleasant conversation a-plenty and a full plate, and a regiment of empty flacons neatly lined-up 3-deep in a heap, out came the cigars and briars, and it wasn't long before the air was thick with clouds of the sweetest smoke and the pungency of burning 'erbs. And under the full moon, a more perfect picture of contentment could hardly be imagined - when all of a sudden, up jumped the rodent...

"They're the blinkin' lunatics, not me," shrieked *the commodore*,
"...they seem to forget, I'm the one with the commission, not them" -
he squittered, nervously.

This outburst was the rat's rather tedious and defiant defence against the other creatures, who would as often as not, dare to offer an opinion contrary to his own. And quite right they are too. And even though the rodent knew he was causing a scene, he did not care one jot. For now, as on every other similar occasion, Commodore P.R.Atty (now, single and FREE) had decided he had had quite enough of the other animals' company - well, for one night at least, and so instead, he looked around for something to nick (old habits die hard, it seems) - just as a little going-away present, and as a *reminder to watch* his eating habits from this moment forth. For as he knew only too well, he'd scoffed and quaffed so much - that he'd nearly bust a gut.

So, with thoughts of increasing his immediate wealth in-mind, and spying one of the Ol' Trout's shiniest pieces of silver - kindly donated (on temporary loan only) to enhance the setting -- he quickly tucked it away into one of his many secret pouches. And deciding that there was indeed room for more, he made an executive decision to finger the lot. And that is precisely what he set about doing, in an organised, systematic and efficient manner - as befits one who reached the dizzy heights of the proud office of *commissionaire! Corps - what a cheek!*

But it wasn't too long before the ol' bloat's fishy eye spied the growing denudation of her much loved faux silver. And not seeing it, made her gulp her gin far too quickly and caused her to splutter out, "where's me silver ... where's me precious silver gone? I've been robbed, robbed I tell you, oh dear, me poor precious silver."

And saying such, she immediately looked over at S'et and screamed at him, "You. I know it was you. Don't deny it now. It was YOU wasn't it ... come on, admit it here and now and I won't punish you. Quickly now, it's your last chance. Hurry now, I mean it, you'd better own up or that's it, I'll call an officer of the law and your game's up my good man. Last chance. Quickly now. Quickly I say...."

She continued to flip and flop as her over-sequinned self, scattered bodies, plates and saucers and more, in her efforts to catch the eye of ...

"Oh commode-dear!" she yelled, in the rodent's general direction.

"That's *Commodore* - you ol' bloat", muttered *the commodore* indignantly.

Ignoring his mutterings she continued, "Come here this instant - quickly - come quickly. We have a vagabond in our midst and I know who it is. It's that fellow there. Come now and arrest this foxy-fellow, lock him up right away, that is, after you've retrieved my silver, of course - then, once that's done, you may throw away the key" - she slurred in her best BBC (Birmingham-Bred Citizen) accent.

Astonished by this insult, S'et's equally foxy partner chided, in reply, "wot chow say-in' now then. Ooooerr - yower [sic] forever at it you are. You'd better check your own bleedin' pockets first before you start sayin' fings like that about my S'et." And then she fell back into her chair, squashing the packet of cheese and onion crisps on that nice little ashtray she'd always fancied (the little silver one that previously resided at the other end of the table) which she had somehow managed to 'fall' into her bag.

But *the commodore* - his whiskery cheeks all aglow underneath with stark embarrassment and the prospect of being caught red-handed, daren't move. For if he did, he would have made such a tremendous clanking sound with all the metal now securely embedded about his commissioned self, that the game would have been well and truly up - and that wouldn't do now would it. So, mute, he remained frozen in the icy perplexing glare of the blinking blustery Ol' Trout.

S'et, never one to miss an opportunity, squeezed his partner's paw under the tablecloth and then, after passing her a lovely little silver fruit bowl *sans* fruit - he abruptly leapt to his hind quarters and said, "How dare you say such a terrible thing. Me, take something that does not belong to me - how could you even suggest such a thing. I think you'd better get into your rusty ol' fallen star and go back to that cold pond of yours and check again ... you probably left it all there. Besides, I think you've had far too much of the gin - a g'in a'gin - hehehe - and it's obviously sent you '*funny*'" - and then he sat down abruptly, and impaled himself on top of the silver salt cellar that fell out of his waistcoat pocket - the one that used to belong to a more refined, if somewhat chilly individual. *Ouch!*

"*Oooh!* - and another thing...", said S'et, quickly recovering his composure, "why is it always me that gets the blame when anything goes missing?" he said dolefully, and continued, "...but, I don't care 'cause I'm used to it by now" - and so saying, and with an audible sniff and a heavy sigh, he sat down once more ... having first of all skilfully brushed aside the offending article from likely contact with his now-bruised ego, lest he inadvertently get (any more) salt on his tail.

Then, Benny proclaimed, "cum grano salis, eh S'et" - and gave the blushing fox a weary all-knowing kind of look which the fox

understood only too well. But the fox being a fox, just brushed it aside and remained rock steady and as bold-faced as ever.

Tinker, who was puzzled greatly by all the events unfolding before his quizzical eyes - their gaze currently fixed upon the unmoving form of *the commodore*, now returned them to the long table where he said, "Ahhhh now then, what's all this eh? Salt! Salt of the earth, that man. Now then, errrm - what was that ya said, 'cut gran's *sallee*' or am I barking up the wrong tree? - eh, very confusing that, perhaps it's time for me to bough-out I think. But - never mind all that now, what I can't understand and what I want to know is - *where's all me brass disappeared to?*"

There was an instant snort of laughter from *ZIM* and it startled Tinker, who still didn't get it. So he just fixed her with a patient stare, and looking down at his best showpiece leather & brasses (minus the brasses) - he was now even more confused than ever.

Unfortunately, from somewhere over the other side of the table, a loud sniggering was heard. It did not go unnoticed by Tinker who immediately zeroed-in his twitching ears to the most likely source.

"Aha! It's you then is it lad? Come on - hand them back now before I get cross," - said Tinker, who by now was beginning to visibly shiver and shake at being so upset at the thought of anyone even contemplating parting him from his lovely brasses - his pride and joy.

And what none of them could possibly understand was what it felt like to be rudely undressed and feeling so ashamedly naked in front of their fellow creatures, especially since *Madre* did clothe his (spiritual) nakedness with her most wonderful gift (of *The Golden Keys*) - his most precious adornment. Nonetheless, and even though *The*

Keys themselves never left his side, the other trinkets were dear to him too, and as much a part of his fine attire as were his big brown-green eyes.

Tinker's steadfast gaze then fixed upon none other than Benny.

"Not me you clot, him!" Benny said, nodding his head at Casey, who by now was laughing so hard he was in real peril of splitting his sides open. But, with his bulldog clamped tightly between his jaws, all he could do was laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh. This was so deliciously infectious that everyone else bar the ol' bloat, started to laugh too. And on it went, getting even louder and ever more outrageous. Finally, having spent a good few minutes guffawing their merry little hearts out, Casey - wiping his eyes took a big puff on his briar, sent a cloud of sweet smoke into the air and then said, "Oh Tinker ... you're so funny. There's only one of you and that's for sure!"

And even though he tried, he couldn't help but laugh some more. Eventually, they all managed to calm themselves down, and order was once more restored. Even Tinker himself couldn't help but laugh too, even though he knew it was at him they were all laughing. And when that thought finally penetrated his equine brain, Tinker felt more than a little annoyed, "now then, now then, what's the meaning of all this laughing business ... and why are you all laughing at me for?" - he asked, somewhat hurt, and then for good measure, he whinnied loudly.

Casey immediately shot back, "Oh Tinker, we're not laughing at you, we're laughing with you, you ol' nag!"

"What does that mean?" - replied Tinker. But before anyone could answer, he shot back, "I know what you're doing, you're all having

big-grins at me simply because I said some crafty blighter had whipped me best brasses whilst I was still in 'em" - and then he snorted, and shot a long stare right back at Casey, accompanied with a heavy stamp of his hefty hoof, which reverberated like a minor shock wave underfoot and rattled the crockery and a few old bones in the process.

"Yep, you'd be right there boy," - said Casey, "...absolutely bang-on ol' boy. But, you must admit, it's a funny old world when you can't even come to dinner without having your best brasses robbed off your very back ... oh yes, that's very funny indeed!" - and once more, he fell into a fit of the giggles. And so too did everyone else - including this time, the Ol' Trout herself.

Whilst all the animals were too busy enjoying the moment, the rodent quickly took the opportunity to divest himself of his ill-gotten gains by hiding them in the nearby undergrowth - only to be retrieved later. But one creature had kept his eyes on the rodent all the time. And as *the commodore* -- his stash now stashed -- turned round, he found himself staring right into the twin-barrels of Benny's laser sights.

"Gulp!" was the only sound the rat could make, for he was well and truly caught, red-handed, in the act, finally. The bat and the rat just stared at each other across the great divide, and neither spoke or moved.

When the other animals had finally calmed down from their uproarious laughter, Tinker - who had by now temporarily forgotten about his missing brasses turned to S'et and said, "Absolutely right old boy, absolutely right. You're always getting bagged for every little misdemeanour that happens in our great and divided family..." - and then as an afterthought he added, "...it wasn't you was it?" -

whispered as quietly as any great shire horse can, but loud enough to be heard by one and all.

S'et just looked at him straight in the eye and replied, "Tinker, my dear, how could you even suggest such a thing?" - and left it at that.

And in reply, Tinker said, "Ohhh dear, oh no, no offence meant old boy, just asking a simple question that's all ... oh erm, and errr, I mean, well, it's just as a matter of form, you see - no hard-erm err-feelings what? Eh, good oh!"

But by now, S'et's mind was fully concentrated on another matter, i.e., escape. But there was a problem: his swagbag was so full of swag that he couldn't possibly squeeze another troy ounce into it even though the desire was there. So, whilst he was pondering the complexities of his situation...

All of a sudden, the ol' bloat shrieked, "WHERE'S MY SILVER?" - and the very noise of it shook everyone into a total silence. Then, to each of them in turn she pleaded with a fishy kind of pout, "where's my silver?" - but despite all her oily pleadings, she was only met with a wall of silence, whereupon she could but sob once more, "where o' where's me precious silver?"

But no one replied.

Benny coughed - and broke the silence, "aherm - well now, perhaps the subaltern there can help answer that, eh commissionaire, oops - sorry - 'commodore'?" he said, inviting *the commodore* to reply.

Which he did, instantly, "Of course, Sir, you're absolutely right!"

"I know." said Benny, matter-of-factly.

And with that, in sheer desperation borne out of necessity, the rat leapt upon the table and went straight for the fox.

"J'accuse!" he screeched, "I accuse this scoundrel here with the offence of taking or attempting to take an item or items not belonging to his or any of his household without the proper authorisation or express permission of the rightful owner or owners namely the venerable and dear Lady von Trout, and therefore, with the power vested in me I hereby do arrest the rogue - S'et, and Mrs Fox too, for the alleged crime or crimes as stated."

And just as he was about to feel the fox's collar, Casey said, "Arrest yourself, rodent - and stay that claw there otherwise I'll wrench it from your grubby little spineless self" - and noticing the glow from Casey's brown collar and fearing the worst, *the commodore* did just that - for he wanted to be an old 'dore, and not a bold 'dore ... *or should that be an old bore?*

Benny, said nothing.

And seeing out of the corner of his squinty eye that Benny did nothing and remained silent, the rodent went on to say in his best bluff-and-bluster voice, "Explain yourself sir, before I arrest you too as an accomplice or accessory to the fact, aiding and abetting this here criminal in his petty larcenies" - even though the rodent was trembling all over with fright, and in fright of Casey's fearsome jaws, and most of all -of being exposed by Benny for what he truly was - a first class rat.

"I won't stand aside again and let you spoil the proceedings simply to satisfy your lust for power and self-proclaimed glory" - replied

Casey, "...in fact, I met plenty like you when I was down below, and there was one in particular that caught my attention - in fact, it was your (ex-)partner-in-slime, and if you don't change your niggling ways pretty soon laddy-buck, your future, like hers was - is guaranteed. Now then, I'll say no more on that - for now; but if you can't behave yourself and let us enjoy ourselves in peace, you'd better pack it in or go back from whence you came. Understand!?" - growled Casey, followed by a long and throaty grrrrrrrrrr! - full of the promise of impending threat.

By now, the rodent was shaking, not so much with fear, although he was scared - but with rage, at being dressed-down in full view of all of every creature in such a forthright and unquestionably frightening manner; and then - more as a knee jerk reaction he squealed, "how dare you speak to me like that, ME - the commissioned one, just WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? Why, you're nothing but a..."

"But a what?" - interjected Casey, with a hint of real menace. His collar was now beginning to emit more than just a faint hue, it was positively radiating.

And still, Benny said nothing.

Tinker, who like all the other animals could see Casey's collar glowing decided it was about time for him to intervene, "now then, now then, brrrrrrr-brrrrrrr - lets have no nonsense here then. Come on, settle down Casey lad, calm those whiskers ... settle down now and don't rise to the rat-bait, it just isn't worth it, trust me! And as for you there rattus, well - you sir, you'd better calm down and not be in such a hurry to arrest anyone ... as it might be detrimental to your health, and that's for sure."

In reply to Tinker, *the commodore* simply squealed, "And as for you, you can shut up as well or I'll chuck another brick through yer winders!" - and went on to say, "You're all forgetting, I am a Class 1 Rat, a commissioned rat no less, a Rat of The First Order - and don't none of you fer-get it neither. All of ya ... or I'll lock the lot of ya up! I will too!"

Still, Benny remained silent.

S'et feeling he'd had just about enough and wanting to very much butt-in said, "come here yow ya little rat and I'll nut ya!"

This only incensed the rodent and his anger piqued, and he screeched, "You, you're lucky I didn't arrest you before ... this time, I intend to crack your nuts. And I can tell you this, this time, you ain't getting away with it neither, this time - there's no escape. You're finished and there is absolutely no way out of it!" - so saying, he shook his fist and warrat card at the smirking fox.

The situation came to a climax when a loud metallic clanking sound was heard to 'thump' on the ground beneath the fox's chair - the swagbag had toppled over under the weight of the 'fallen' metal. The sound of gilt was unmistakable. Everyone around the table knew it. The foxes knew it and the rodent knew it too. And now, for once, he was right, this time - there was NO escape.

"Ya see, d'ya see - I was right all along. It was him. I just knew it. Come now commode-dear, arrest that scoundrel and be done with his nonsense; then you can carry me lovely silver back to my abode ... and be *hic!* quick about it too" - sloshed the ol' bloat out loud.

The swagbag was quickly lifted onto the table and its contents spilled out. First, the silver and then - Tinker's brasses, which

clunked heavily onto the pile, denting a few bits of the ol' bloat's alleged silverware in the process, and then a variety of other items fell out too... all of which were now in evidence; and plain for all to see beside the Ol' Trout's gilt - was S'et's undeniable guilt.

But S'et wasn't an old fox for nothing and quick as a flash, he quipped, "who put that *tat* in me bag?" - whilst looking sheepishly at Tinker.

But no one was having any of it. The rodent took out his manacles and marched up to S'et and squealed, "Gotcha!" - in sheer delight, and in as resounding a voice as a squeaky little rodent could.

And he had too.

But then, Benny spoke...

"Aherm - Mr Christian, a word in your ear if you'd be so kind?" - beckoning *the commodore* to come to his side. And fearing the worst, i.e., of being exposed in the full glare of his hypocrisy, *the commodore* timidly obliged - handing charge of the chief suspect over to the able administration of Tinker, who, bound by duty, duly obliged - however hesitatingly ... and whilst no one was looking, accidentally-on-purpose removed the foxy character's shackles, much to S'et's satisfaction and obvious relief.

Casey saw it all and grinned, and uttered a loud "gerrrruffffff!"

The rest of the animals muttered amongst themselves as they watched *the commodore* saunter over to Benny. They watched in near silence as he spoke quietly at the rodent, who in turn, feverishly nodded his head at every turn, then the rat did a sharpish *about-turn* and marched smartly back to take charge of his prime suspect.

Upon reaching him, he attempted to uncuff the fox but was astonished at their being no cuffs about the fox at all, and a look of sheer befuddlement crossed his pointy brow ... but recovering quickly, he promptly proclaimed, "good news everybody: as nearly all goods have since been recovered - save a few, and as no real harm has been done, and as the dear Lady von Trout will no doubt kindly - though unadvisedly, in my opinion -- decide not to press charges, this here suspect is free to go about his business - with nothing more than another blemish in his copybook"

This was met with a resounding cheer from all those assembled, save himself.

Then, turning to S'et, he said quietly, "your card is marked my son - you were lucky this time and don't you forget it. I'll be watching you from now on. And don't you think otherwise. Now, YOU SCRAM - before I put some nuts-and-bolts back around those sticky paws of yours!"

At which, S'et just laughed right in his face and said, "Yow's a real first-class prat, *pratty* - and there's no mistake about that."

And then with his vixen two steps in front, he departed the scene of his (alleged) crime in a rather hasty manner, before their luck changed for the worse. And in a matter of moments, all of the other animals had collected their belongings and went on their separate ways too.

The Ol' Trout, befuddled by the excitement, and the gin, and happy at last to have her reclaimed bag of silver tinfoil clasped firmly to her breast, flipped and flopped as fast as she could, to put it all away - back in a safe place, never to see the light of day or night

in such company ever again. It was with some relief when she finally managed to squelch her bloated clamminess back into the dull greyness of her cold pond.

Tinker, astonished at the recovery of his brasses, was a happy ol' horse heading for his stable - with only one thought running around his horsey-head brain, "brrrrr - very strange that, who on earth could have put my brasses into S'et's bag ... the little blighter who ripped them off me back, I'll be bound ... whoever it was, shame on him ... hmmmm - very strange that, very strange indeed?"

Casey, briar burning, disappeared into the night sky, chuckling to himself as he went on his merry way, sirius as ever.

Benny - having flown already, was heading home to his favourite roost, to ponder once more on the imponderables of life.

Which just left the rat ... and now that everyone had gone, he furtively made his way over to the spot where he'd stashed his stash earlier on, and under the bright moon and free from prying eyes, he retrieved it, lifting it once more to where he could best appreciate his deft handiwork and check to see if that flying fox was telling the truth.

He carefully inserted his monocle into his one good eye and squinted hard in the low light looking for the hallmarks on his misbegotten pieces of silver. But there were none to be found. And no matter how hard he looked or how often he turned each piece this way or that, he still couldn't find that mark of respectability he so desperately sought.

"So, that flying fox was right after all ... the git!" he snarled.

And sure enough, the tarnished silver which the rodent had gone to such pains to steal was not silver at all, only silver-plated tat - meaning it was all virtually worthless. Nothing but shiny rubbish, tacky tinfoil, glittering garbage ... nout but tat! - that's that then ... and so typical of them," he said mournfully. *Yet another deception: a deceiver foiled by an even bigger deceiver. What a telling revelation into the life of those who seek and lurk in the cold depths of the murky world of avarice.*

"That blinkin' bat; that mare - the ol' bloat ... batsards - the lot of 'em!" - and feeling that he'd been hard done by, the rodent minced his whiskers in fury and tore off into the night towards his dark damp hole to plan his next mischief and figure out a way to avenge himself of his deep and almost very costly misfortune.

And as the moon's beams faded and dawn's early light caressed *The Garden*, all animals that should be - were sleeping off the night's activities, and those that weren't, wished that they could.

Epilogue

So, what did Benny whisper to the commodore?

Simply this: "mark my words ... those 30 pieces of misbegotten silver just add another layer of tarnish to your gullible culpability; and if you are wise, you will understand."

But as you and I know, the rodent was neither wise nor did he understand. And now, we know the truth of it, don't we, dear reader.

Seven Steps to Perdition

Step VII

Sloth: just take it easy

After the amazing revelations at the previous week's celebratory dinner, the whole tempo of life in *The Garden* took on a more leisurely pace. Now, whether this was to give the creatures a chance to slow down or whether it was simply a foreboding of things to come - none of the animals knew or cared, what they did understand though - was that from now on, things should be taken a lot easier than before. And so they were.

But there was one creature in particular who was not inclined to sit still, even whilst the others were, and it wasn't because he played *mein host* to fleas and other creepy-crawlies the size of throat lozenges-on-legs - no, it was because he - *the commodore*, had his own vile agenda, which, by its very nature, was causing him much agitation. The furtive little rodent was not at all pleased with his last brush with humiliation, and whilst he was fuming and foaming, a dastardly new scheme was fomenting in his torrid little mind.

"When will they ever learn that I am the one with the commission - not them, and I'm the one who will win, no matter what ... I will win!" he ranted, as his whiskers drooped with dew and something else too yukky to mention, in the gloom of the dank fetid hole he called home.

And, ever present where evil thoughts do surface, was siD - lurking in the gloom of the gloam, silent, patient, cold and vexed; ever ready to participate in his verminous little disciple's next venture...

the commodore had devised a devious new scheme: cunning it was, dastardly for sure; certain of its outcome - questionable; would it cause major problems within the animal community - possibly; will it upset all right-thinking animals - bet your rocks on it; so - what was it?

In the deep canyons of the rodent's sewer-trained mind, *the commodore* hatched a plan to end all plans, and one that would once and for all show his own unnatural superiority over all of the other creatures in *The Garden* ... or so the dingy little rat imagined.

To achieve his end - unknown to all abettors but himself, the rat 1st class, armed with the lowest degree of intelligence so far awarded, needed to rope in a few unwitting creatures to help him carry out his latest and most dreadful venture. There were only one or two suitably woolly-headed creatures who just might fall for the rat's *graw macree* - they were, the Ol' Trout herself, who - after losing and then recovering her precious pieces of 'silver' was game for anything tainted with a smidgen of revenge; unaware that her new tinpot accomplice was in fact - the real villain of the faux silver piece.

They say, there's no honour among thieves ... and they're right too.

And then there was wuffer - who, it was commonly reckoned, was not in complete control of his faculties. Poor wuffer.

Poor wuffer indeed ... this senseless gadabout, who was most at home skipping and romping through the majesty and beauty of His bounty, amidst the glorious flora and fauna of *The Garden* - was most susceptible to the silvery-plated words of the rodent, and to the ill-founded suggestions of the rat's other ungainly ally - the Ol' Trout herself. Together, this rabid trio would do *the beast's* work,

proud in their united efforts to bring chaos - where none had previously existed.

Some time later, as the triumvirate met at the gates of *The Garden*, they stood there motionless, basking in their unclothed contempt of all the other animals, obvious in their naked hatred. Flapping, snarling, vicious and vapid. But it was not enough to simply sit their and enjoy their imagined sense of grandeur and self-importance, there was evil afoot and there was work to be done. So, taking the lead, as befits one of the lowest degree, *the commodore* let loose his terrible scheme to his more than willing co-conspirators.

It was the Ol' Trout herself, impatient as ever - who broke the silence, "now then commode-dear, what's all this about?" - she asked, her fishy eyes glaring over her stubby nose at the pair of them.

"wuff wuff" - yelped wuffer, for that's all he could do, and once wuffer had wuffed his most intelligent wuff, he pranced this way and that at *all sixes and sevens* to the utter bemusement of the rodent and the ol' bloat, standing there like a pair of tatty old bookends - the sort that might be purchased for one-and-ninepence, and grinning idiotically at each other.

"Ohhh - aharr harh harhhh - don't worry about him, he's harmless enough" chortled *the commodore*.

"Quite." retorted the ol' bloat, in her most imperious tone.

Unperturbed by this icy reply, *the commodore* continued, "my plan is a simple one, but one which will tear *Madre* - and the rest of 'em to shreds".

"Hurrah!" squealed the ol' bloat - "Hurry, hurry, commode-dear - tell me more ... I must know simply e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g!"

"Not so fast, oh bloated one," - snapped the rodent, enjoying his moment, "...all in MY good time. Now then, where was I ... Oh yes, - hang on a minute, where's that damn mutt got to - ah, there he is - 'wuffer - heel, ya varmit!'" squealed *the commodore*, and like a good little lap dog, with a wag of his tail and without a whimper of discontent, wuffer did precisely just that.

His master's voice doth call.

And now with the ol' bloat quivering frantically in anticipation, her scales falling off her distended body in ribbons, the rat decided he'd better hurry up and spill the beans (before more than just his wicked plan might fall apart), otherwise, he wouldn't be able to control the daft dog and the old codpiece, for much longer. And so he began again...

"My plan - is simply this: to put a rock across that patch of old sandy ground so nothing can get in and nothing can get out, and also, so the flowers will never ever grow there neither!" - and so saying, he waited for their reply.

With baited breath, the Ol' Trout said, "Ooooooh commode-dear, it's simply wicked, but you can't do that, that's sacred ground ... aren't you scared? Besides, it would cause ever such a big fuss and upset absolutely everybody ... and it's not proper, not yet at least..." - and her icy voice trailed off into thoughtful silence, pondering on what she just said.

"wuff-wuff, wuff wuff wuff!" - wuffed wuffer. Then, he too went silent, broken only by his final comment, "wuff!"

Upon hearing wuffer wuff, the ol' bloat shivered her massive frame, girded by her raggedy coat, she then said, "I don't know what the hound's all about but to me, it sounds simply deliciously dastardly and an idea worthy of my support. Excellent. Carry on *commodore!* " - and with that, she did an about flip and waddled off to the nearest watering hole to refresh her never-ending thirst for *mother's* ruin, and to take delight in her own mind for dreaming-up such a despicable scheme. And like much about the ol' bloat and her tinselled existence, everything about her existence was either fake, faux, hocus pocus or just another red herring: what a truly cold fish she really is.

Meanwhile, wuffer just went "wuff" and then simply pranged and danged and bounced and leapt and continued on his merry way, going hither and thither through the undergrowth and into the sunlight, with no particular direction or destination in mind, and seemingly oblivious to what he had just agreed to be an accomplice to ... because for one minute his thoughts were of chasing rabbits, and the next - a dark cloud obscuring his mind - his thoughts turned to mayhem and chaos, and just as quickly, the cloud (of chemical change) passed (once more) from his mind and he was again back to chasing rabbits in the sun again. And so it was ever thus, for that was the way that it was for just about every waking minute of wuffer's miserable existence. Poor wuffer.

But the rodent's job was done. He now had his allies in tow and he would organise this most heinous of plots on the plot where no stone should remain ... at least, for the time being. And, by dastardly, cowardly and devious means, *the commodore*, in unison with the ol' bloat and wuffer (whether he acknowledged it or not), launched their final assault on *Madre* with devastating and calculating precision.

She was easy to find. And even easier to harass. For she was to be found often, near the sandy ground, with the tears of many summers cascading down her beautiful and serene face. Melancholic to the extreme, *Madre* realised now - more than ever, just how much she did truly love; and even though that love was (for the most part) unrequited - she never once failed to slake the dying thirst, by simply pouring the odd glass over thirsty sandy ground. And she forgave - as only *Madre* can; and she remembered - but only the fondest of recollections, which brought tears of joy to her contemplative features.

And late one afternoon, while she was tending the flowers, she was harangued by a two-pronged verbal assault by wuffer and *the commodore*. It was so spiteful, painful, sinister and hurtful, that all she could do was to give way to their wicked demand and give her consent to allow them to put a stone across sandy ground, the way that they themselves demanded and thought was best.

When news of this reached the other animals, they were either nonplussed or angered. But, despite all the pleadings to halt the antics of the nasty triumvirate, they were petitioned - each in turn by *Madre* - to let things be; even though it was mortally painful and severely distressing to herself ... '*for the sake of peace and harmony*', was her much vaunted and plaintive cry.

Benny - when petitioned, kept his thoughts to himself and would only say, "HMMMMM ... leave it on the back burner, for now". And so it was (left).

Moll was equally thoughtful and would only say, "...if they're not careful, they will be getting a visit from *you know whom*, who would be most upset if "things" were changed - which in turn, might effect change to the natural order of things!"

And, *she'd be right there, boy.*

S'et - who had lately become *an island amongst the many* by retreating within himself, had evolved for a short time into a more caring and less foxy fox; but over time, it proved to be nothing but a short-term spike on a rather unimpressive chart: and he would only say, "let 'em gerron with it". And nothing more.

Tinker - who seemed to have had his blinkers permanently on the wrong way round would only say, "Ohh, don't worry, it's all part of a master plan. It's a game she's playing and they don't even know it yet". But for once, this gentle giant was out of step and possibly off his trotter. C'est Tinker.

Casey - well Casey was furious. His black collar issued shards of intense light brighter than the corona of the morning sun when he heard the pains to which this wretched trio had put *Madre* to. Now, His sentinel being could only react in one way to such a vicious, premeditated and despicable assault on all that was dear to Him. But, even after a long chat with *Madre*, he too finally acquiesced and agreed to abide by her wishes, but he pointed out to *Madre* very clearly that although he would support her 101% - as he always had in the past, he did not necessarily agree with her latest decision. And that's the truth of it. And the only comment coming from the sentinel was a throaty - "Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" - pregnant with the threat of menace.

And at *Madre's* express request, the sentinel agreed to stay his hand. And so he did (- for now).

Buck - enigmatic as ever, would only procrastinate, obfuscate and prevaricate or offer an opinion lying somewhere betwixt them all; and

as he was the only conduit between the ghastly trio and the community of animals, and as possibly the only other force for change, he jumped right off his favourite perch on the fence and firmly planted his stubborn head deep into the sand. And there it remains.

The Christmas Lights' - these little darlings knew little of what was going on. They were to be found, as always, wrapped like a rainbow veil of light around the being of *Madre*, where they continue to glimmer and glitter as is their nature ... and from whom did *Madre* receive much comfort - in fact, she positively basked in their loving glow, and unbeknownst to them - the peaceful warmth and silence of their unquestioning understanding.

But siD was at it again, in *its* deadly slothful guise, unseen and unheard, skittering amongst the shadows of the hearts and minds of the weak-willed - this was siD at *its* most dread.

The soporific shadow of the evil spectre in the guise of sloth did surface and overcome all right-minded animals once again - against which there was little or no defence. And no matter what they did or attempted to do, for want of any other description, a slothful malaise overtook and overshadowed every creature. Hampered by their binding agreements with *Madre*, *the few* were outmanoeuvred by *the many* ... so they few simply did nothing ... for there was nothing they could do.

Sometimes, it is easier not to fight the good fight and let evil have its way. It could be said and it often is, that one is simply 'obeying orders', but in truth and with hindsight, it is an easy 'out' and is therefore, no excuse whatsoever. The Good Fight always demands sacrifice; and sometimes, a little bloodletting is necessary. It was necessary on this occasion, no matter the outcome.

And with siD basking in the full glare of yet another triumph of Evil over Good, and because of the animals' slothful attitude to every hint and warning given - even though they thought they were simply 'obeying orders', *The Garden*, and the animals, like this story, reaches it's final and inevitable conclusion...

Because there was a mightier power to answer to...

Angered at this grave insult to His Mother, *Madre*, The Son appealed to The Father to bring forth that Day of Final Judgement. And so, He sent The Lion that was The Lamb, and unleashed His terrible fury. His first port of call was to go visit siD in *its* dark domain ... who in the constant undoing of all that is, was now *itself* - finally undone.

siD's fearful wailing cries could be heard throughout the universe and beyond, as *it* trembled in His presence once more. It was fitting perhaps, that siD had a claw in *its* own destruction, as *it* received *its* final payment for all the evil *it* had done or had caused to be done over the millennia; then - *it* fell silent, as *it* was smote by the awesome power of the Almighty and cast into a gloom from which *it* would never escape: *ad nocturn* siD.

And as it was written, for siD, this truly was The End.

And then, came the second big bang: in one Almighty explosion, everything came to a full stop. A final singularity. Now and for evermore, the circle is complete. And therefore, dear reader, it is, without a shadow of doubt, truly...

The End

Epilogue

For it is written: *In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. It is now written: It will be the same in the end and after the end, ad infinitum.*

Remember these words. Ignore them at your peril.

And now that you know, dear reader, maybe you too might consider it prudent to change your ways before you continue on life's great journey, and take maybe one too many ... steps to perdition.

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