

*A FAMILY BUSINESS*



Trevor Hughes

“I’m sorry, it’s just not acceptable,” he said. “How am I to work? How am I supposed to earn the money to keep you in the style to which you have regrettably become accustomed?”

Marjory Simpson looked around, at the tiled walls of the tiny kitchen, the plastic table at which they took breakfast, through the window to the rotten wooden fence which stood at the end of the miniscule back garden. Yes, it is indeed a certain style in which you have kept me, she thought, but she knew better than to make any adverse comment, so she kept silence.

“The baker had no wholemeal left,” she said, for the third time. “I thought you might like to try something a little different for a change.”

“It is nothing but idleness,” he said. “If the baker is out of wholemeal, which, by the way, I do not believe for one moment, then your duty is to purchase it elsewhere rather than serving me this..this...” his head shook, his lips moved but he could think of no words with which to convey his disgust at the two slices of toast which lay before him.

“I shall leave now, for the office,” he said, “hungry and in a bad humour. The fault is yours.” He walked into the hallway where he took his coat and hat from the wooden stand, and picked up his umbrella and his briefcase. Then a ghastly thought occurred to him. He turned to stare at his wife. “My sandwiches,” he exclaimed in anguish. “Please do not tell me that my sandwiches have been prepared using that awful, that foul, that monstrous French confection.”

She said nothing, but her eyes betrayed her.

Herbert Simpson opened his briefcase, withdrew the package, shuddered and dropped it onto the carpet. "You have not heard the last of this," he said.

He walked into the street and inspected his watch. Why, another minute and he would have missed his bus.

### **Memo to Personnel**

*Once again, and despite my many previous memos the cleaning lady has, in dusting the top of my desk, moved from its proper position the pen stand, has failed to return the blotter squarely to the middle of my desk, and has pushed the telephone to the extreme right hand top corner of the said desk, a location where it could be reached only by a chimpanzee.* He paused over the word 'chimpanzee', wondering if the *mot juste* may not have been 'gorilla' but eventually he settled for 'chimpanzee'.

*It is high time that these abuses were curtailed,* he wrote, in conclusion.

He then signed: Herbert Simpson. Senior Accounting Assistant.

Satisfied with his latest missive he selected a fat ledger from the shelf behind his desk and prepared to spend his morning checking the expenses claims of the criminals, robbers, thieves and highwaymen who the company unaccountably appointed as sales people.

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Simpson inspected his watch. It was five minutes before the hour of one. Normally his lunch consisted of a cup of camomile tea and his sandwiches: potted shrimp between two layers of wholemeal bread. Not French bread: wholemeal bread, he reminded himself grimly.

There was however, one ray of sunshine in the gloom which surrounded him.

Today was the second Tuesday in the month and on this day Simpson went for a haircut. He had to leave the office in any case, so that buying himself a sandwich would not inconvenience him quite as much as would otherwise have been the case.

He donned his coat and hat and strode forth into the crowded city streets.

Simpson stood fretfully in the queue at the counter of the sandwich shop. He had been forced to buy his lunch here on several previous occasions when his slatternly wife, for dubious reasons such as illness; a broken arm (sustained by falling off a ladder while attempting to repair the roof); or death of a close relative, had failed to prepare his lunch.

“Potted shrimp on wholemeal bread,” he said wrinkling up his nose at the greasy-haired young man behind the counter. “Sorry guv,” said the young man. “No potted shrimps.”

Simpson recoiled in horror. What was happening? It was as if the whole of civilization were breaking down around him. What was he to do? He couldn’t possibly forgo lunch: this might well bring on his heart palpitations.

“Why not have the daily special sir. It’s very popular.”

“Oh, very well,” he said. It was, he realized, all his wife’s fault. He wondered if it was a deliberate conspiracy to ensure that he died of a heart attack, thus enabling her to inherit his money and cash in his life insurance. He decided that very evening he would amend the terms of his will leaving everything to Reginald, the son who hadn’t spoken to him for ten years. At least he wasn’t trying to murder him. Simpson placed his sandwiches in his briefcase and slowly made his way to the barber shop.

Simpson had been using the same barber for twenty-six years. He had, these days, almost no hair left, yet still Simpson could not possibly allow the grey fringe which ringed the back of his head to become long and straggly and unruly. Gently he pushed the door of *Terence Small & Sons, Barbers to the Gentry*. Nothing happened. Again he tried: again nothing happened. His eyes were drawn to a white placard on the door. *Closed for Renovation*.

It was, thought Herbert Simpson, like one of those never-ending nightmares; like the sufferings of Job. First breakfast, then his sandwiches, now this. In a daze he walked back along the street. He imagined people laughing behind their hands as they looked at the hairs peeping out from beneath his hat, giggling as they surveyed the grey tendrils creeping down towards his collar. It was enough to drive a man to drink. Then before him, next door to the sandwich shop, he saw a pole. A pole striped in red and white and above it a sign: *The Barber Shop*

Gratefully Herbert Simpson hurried up the staircase. By the time he pushed open the door he was quite out of breath. "Is this the barber shop?" He asked.

"Certainly is sir," replied the man who stood before him. He had mutton-chop whiskers and a blue striped apron, looking thought Simpson, not like one of those supercilious young men who spend their whole time thinking only of girls and sex and drunken orgies, or worse still those mincing types who wanted him to have a shampoo or dye his hair in some hideous colour. No, this young man looked like someone from Victorian times, like a proper barber. His heart warmed. Perhaps for once today something would go right.

“Haven’t seen you here before, sir,” said the young man, handing Herbert a hot towel. Gratefully Simpson wiped his face and the back of his neck. “Probably because I haven’t been here before,” he replied primly.

“Ah yes, that would explain it,” said the young man. “Now how would you like it sir?”

“I would like it short, yet visible,” replied Simpson.

“Short yet visible it is sir,” replied the barber.

He took out a pair of hair clippers and busied himself at the back of Herbert’s head.

“Have you been here long?” asked Simpson.

“Oh me sir, been in the business man and boy sir. And my father before me and his father, and his father before that. Hairdressing’s what we do sir. It’s in the family.”

Simpson nodded in approval. “Yet I don’t recall seeing you before,” he said.

“That’s because we only opened up here recently sir. Came from London. Couldn’t pay the rents you see.”

He held up a mirror to the back of Simpson’s head. “How’s that then sir?” he asked.

Simpson inspected his haircut in the mirror. “Absolutely perfect,” he said. So his day hadn’t been totally ruined after all.

“Right then sir, just to finish it off,” said the young man. Simpson watched approvingly as he whipped up soap into a lather with a shaving brush and applied it to the back of his head. He took a huge razor stropped it on a leather belt and carefully shaved the back of Simpson’s head. “There’s a bit of fluff here could do with a seeing-

to as well sir,” said the young man He applied a dab of lather to Simpson’s throat.

“Now, eyes closed and head back, sir,” he said.

Simpson closed his eyes. “And what did you say your name was?” he asked.

“Me sir. Todd sir. Business has been in the family for generations.”

Herbert Simpson’s eyes bulged as the razor slid expertly across his throat. His chair tipped backwards and his body disappeared down a shaft in the wall.

Below, in the sandwich shop the daily special was selling exceptionally well.