



A HARD LIFE

‘Lunch-time, Cassiel!’ shouted Jegudiel.

‘And about time too,’ muttered Cassiel, wiping a wing across his brow. ‘I’m knackered.’

‘Yeah, we’ve put in a tough shift, right enough, comrade.’

Cassiel and Jegudiel swooped off to the Gathering Place. It was on a pin-head. Several dozen angels were already there, sitting down at long benches. A team of cherubim scuttled about, serving up great plates of sandwiches, setting down bottles of wine. At a table slightly higher than all the others sat a row of grave-looking archangels.

‘Look,’ said Jegudiel, ‘management’s here.’

‘Bout time too, if you want my opinion,’ grunted Cassiel, as the pair of them sat down. ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake – look at this! Woodcock sandwiches again! That’s what – the third time this week!’ He grabbed a passing cherub. ‘Here, chum, see if you can’t find me something else in the kitchens.’

‘I’ll go and see, master,’ squeaked the cherub and he flew off in the direction of the serving hatches.

‘Fat chance,’ said Jegudiel. ‘But no harm in trying, I suppose.’ He downed a glass of Chardonnay and smacked his lips. ‘Still, I’ll say this – the wine’s chilled to perfection. Nine degrees, I’d say. Spot on.’

Cassiel grabbed a bottle for himself and sat sideways on the bench, waiting for the cherub to come back. ‘Hey, Muriel,’ he called over to a host of angels dressed in lilac, ‘got any news from above?’

Muriel got up and floated across. ‘Nothing new,’ she said. ‘Same old, same old. You know the rap: there’s a big crisis down below, we all got to do our bit to help them through it. Why, I ask them? What’ve the human race ever done for us? That’s not the point, they said, the point is we’re angels and they rely on us.’

Cassiel snorted and nodded. ‘Rely on us when the shit hits the fan, certainly. Do we hear from them when times are good? I think not.’

‘I think not,’ agreed Muriel.

‘Ah,’ said Cassiel. The cherub had returned with a plate of something. ‘Smells good. What you got there, young ‘un?’

‘That’s sourdough and rye, spread with red pepper houmous, red cabbage and apple,’ said the cherub, lisping slightly.

Cassiel ruffled his hair. ‘Off you go, then. You done well. Now that’s a feast fit for an angel, eh, Jegudiel?’

‘Sure is,’ said Jegudiel, swallowing a mouthful of wine. ‘So, Muriel, what’s with all the suits today?’ He waved a woodcock sandwich in the direction of the top table. ‘What are they doing down here? Come to lend a hand?’

‘Doubt it,’ snorted Muriel.

Just then, one of the managers stood up and blew a blast on his trumpet. The noise was ear-shattering. Wine-glasses cracked. Several cherubim were blown straight out of the windows of the Hall of Angels. When things settled a bit, the manager announced himself. ‘Most of you know me, don’t you now? For those who haven’t met me before, I’m the Archangel Michael. Big Mike, if you will.’

There were some catcalls at this, which Michael acknowledged in good-humoured fashion.

‘Right then,’ he continued. ‘So, up in Heaven, we all know you’re doing a great job down here. Much appreciated. Tough times, but we’re all working as a team.’

He was interrupted by someone wanting to know why management wasn't doing some of the dirty work.

'Oh, believe me,' said Michael, 'we've all got our sleeves rolled up and pitching in. You wouldn't believe how hard we're working.'

'Too right!' yelled someone from the back. Great gales of laughter swept over the gathering.

Michael smiled patiently, and waited for silence again. 'The thing is, though,' he said, 'that this thing is serious. Really serious stuff down there amongst the mortals. What they're going through, eh? Covid, global warming, plagues of locusts, Brexit, Trump – you name it, they've got it. I personally haven't seen worse since the early days of Egypt – the seven plagues and all that.'

'Serves them right,' said someone in a low voice. But it was a voice that could clearly be heard.

'Selaphiel, isn't it?' said Michael quietly. He had good ears, had Michael, say that for him. 'Serves them right? Maybe so. But they've asked for our help, my friends. Who are we to deny them? Aren't we the angels?'

The great crowd of angels muttered, one half of them nodding sagely, the other half frowning.

'They asked, so we set up Heavenly Track and Trace, to help them out of at least one of their jams.' Michael nodded. 'One of our world-beating achievements,' he said. 'We can track who's got Covid and then trace all their contacts, all in the blink of an eye.'

'Yeah,' called out Muriel, 'but that just gives us more work, doesn't it?'

'That's right!' shouted several of Muriel's group supportively. 'We're working flat out as it is!'

'And we've run out of PPE!' shouted Tamiel. Tamiel was a well-known trouble-maker in his earlier days. Still liked to keep his hand in by stirring things up whenever he could. 'Can't do nothing if we ain't got PPE, can we, brothers and sisters?'

There were great roars of approval at this. Michael glared at the assembly. Then he blew another blast on his trumpet, a long one, practically bursting everyone's ear-drums.

'Silence!' he commanded. 'We'll have none of this. You listen to Tamiel? Why would you? Don't you remember that he's one of the Fallen? Shame on you. No PPE? Does that matter? We're angels after all. Can't catch anything. Social distancing? That doesn't matter either. I've heard a few negative reports about some of the lesser angels, keeping a safe distance and losing some of their charges as a result. Not a good look at all!'

An awkward silence fell over the gathering. Michael still looked fierce, but he knew he had them beaten now. He waited for complete silence.

'Listen, team,' he said in a still, sweet voice. Everyone strained to hear him. 'We're calling for one last push down there. Let's get Covid out of the way. Then the rest is up to them. Global warming, plagues, locusts, extinction – that's down to them to sort out. That's what we've decided. You can hold us to that.'

'That's not what you were telling us last week,' interrupted Muriel.

'You're right, Muriel. But that was last week, my friends. Management has reviewed the situation, we've listened to the science, and we've taken a decision that protects all of us. Get Covid sorted, then we leave them to it. Brexit, Trump, whatever. Climate emergency, locusts, whatever – down to them. Time for mortals to face up to their sins.'

As the scale of the management U-turn began to sink in, there were exclamations of surprise, sighs of relief, then a heavenly chorus of cheers. And then the top table ascended slowly into heaven, taking with it all the Archangels.

'What's for afters?' demanded Cassiel.

'Just the usual,' said Jegudiel. 'Two Choco Leibniz and a glass of Bailey's.'

'Oh well, I suppose,' sighed Cassiel. 'Then back to work. It's a hard life.'

