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Knees Up Mother Earth

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It was only yesterday and the weather, it seemed, was good.

Mahatma Campbell put his best foot forward.

This foot, the left, was bandaged somewhat about the second toe and encased within an argyle sock, darned at the heel by the mother who loved him. Foot and bandage, sock and what-have-you lurked within a boot of the seven-league persuasion.

On his right foot the Campbell wore a slipper.

The knees of the Campbell were naked, as indeed were his arms. The loins, trunk and chest of him were clothed respectively in a kilt with ample sporran and a vest with room for improvement. The face of the Campbell was redly bearded, the head of him heavily turbaned.

Had he not been so unevenly shod, the Campbell would most certainly have strode, but given the inequilibrium of his footwear, this was an impossibility. And so Mahatma Campbell limped. And as he limped, he sang a song of lochs and byres and bonny banks and braes. And when his memory failed him, he whistled the refrain.

Mahatma Campbell limped the streets of Brentford.

The time was six-fifteen of the early morning clock, the day was a Wednesday, bright and sunny, but with that ever-present fear of precipitation the Campbell had come to live with.

The month was that nippy one known as November.

Mahatma Campbell limped along Moby Dick Terrace, Victorian artisans' cottages sheltering beneath slate roofs to the left and to the right of him, a post box to his rear, a pub rejoicing in the name The Four Horsemen in the near

distance before him. Clipped box hedges confined fussy front gardens, hanging baskets of Babylon hung and a tomcat snored on a windowsill. And the Campbell, in song and in whistle, limped on.

As he reached the Ealing Road the Campbell turned left and limped past Bob the Bookie's and Peg's Paper Shop.

Norman Hartnel*, husband of the abundant Peg, numbered the daily papers, a sprightly whistle issuing between his lips. He viewed the Campbell's passing through the shop's front window, which was sorely in need of a clean. Norman momentarily ceased his whistling and crossed himself at the Campbell's passing, for Norman feared the Campbell as surely as the Campbell feared precipitation, but Norman had not yet come to live with *his* fear. Upon this particular November morning, Norman wore a shirt that was in need of an iron, a shop coat that was in need of throwing away, trousers that were in need of a crease and a pair of black brogues that were *never* in need of a polish. Because Norman had once been in the Navy, and those who have once been in the Navy *always* polish their shoes.

When the Campbell's passing had passed Norman by, Norman took once more to his sprightly whistling, and once more to the numbering of papers – although now incorrectly, and in a less steady hand.

'Norman,' came the voice of Peg, bounding from the kitchenette and striking the shopkeeper in palpable waves that travelled through his wig and rattled the back of his head. 'Norman, have you finished yet?'

'No, my dear, not yet.' Norman chewed upon his bottom lip. She hated him, that woman, Norman knew that she did. But Norman didn't hate her in return. He still loved his Peg, his little Peg, his pretty little Peg. But she was no longer the Peg of old, with whom he'd shared kisses and more down beside the canal. She was no longer little, and nor was she pretty. But her Norman still loved her. In his way.

* Not to be confused with the other Norman Hartnel.

'Get a move-on, you lazy sod.' Further sound waves struck the shopkeeper and Norman got a move-on.

Norman always enjoyed the numbering-up of the papers. He enjoyed being the first in the borough to read the news of the day. He enjoyed the responsibility of sending Zorro the paperboy forth into the borough, bag upon his shoulder and bicycle saddle beneath his bum, to spread the daily news.

Most of all, Norman enjoyed the numbers of the numbering-up. Norman had a preoccupation with numbers. Numbers were Norman's current obsession.

'Everything,' Norman had told Neville, the part-time barman of The Flying Swan, during a recent lunchtime session when Norman should have been at the cash-and-carry purchasing bulls' eyes, mint imperials and party packs of Fisherman's Friends, 'everything is dependent upon numbers. Everything can be explained numerically. Everything can be reduced to a numerical equivalent.'

'Everything?' Neville cast Norman a quizzical glance with his good eye and continued his polishing of an already dazzling pint glass. 'Surely not every single thing?'

'You name it,' said the numerate shopkeeper, 'and there will be a number to its rear somewhere about.'

'Cheese,' said Neville, as he so often did when stuck for something sensible to say (which wasn't so often as it might have been, as Neville was noted for the wisdom of his words).

'That's too easy,' Norman said. 'The entire cheese-making process, indeed the very protocols of cheese-making – formulated, if my memory fails me not, by the Elders of Zion way back in the year known as dot – depend upon numbers. It's all weights and measures and time-spans, not to mention the number of holes.'

Neville chose, upon this occasion, to heed Norman's words and not mention the number of holes.

'Chickens, then,' said Jim Pooley, who had once owned a chicken, having been tricked into purchasing it by a gypsy who had assured him that it was a goose. And one that laid golden eggs. Sporadically.

'Chickens, eh?' said Norman, who knew the gypsy in question and had briefly considered running away to join the Romanys for a life of romance and rheumatism. 'Chickens are a prime example.'

'Steak is a *prime* example,' said Old Pete, whose half-terrier Chips was rumoured to have once been an accountant named Trevor before he had been transformed into a dog by a gypsy curse. 'Prime rump steak. You'll never get a decent steak out of a chicken.'

'Doesn't matter what,' said Norman, 'feathered fowl or four-legged friend. The numbers are there in the DNA. It's all been worked out by mathematicians on computers. The entire universe is one big mathematical equation.'

'How big?' Pooley asked.

'Very,' said Norman. 'Same again, Neville.'

'So, what is the point?' Pooley now asked.

'It's a kind of mathematical full stop,' said Norman, informatively. 'Its technical term is the *decimal point*.'

'That's not what I mean.' Pooley made to sup ale but found his glass empty. 'Same again for me, Neville,' he said. 'Norman's in the chair. His number just came up.'

'It didn't,' said Norman.

'It did,' said Jim. 'I've been counting. But what I'm asking you is this: what is the point of trying to reduce the universe to a mathematical equation?'

'For the thrill of it,' said Norman, and he meant what he said.

'You can see that he means what he says,' said Old Pete.

'I do,' said Norman.

'Then tell me this,' said Old Pete, 'can you reduce to a mathematical equation the beauty of a young girl's eyes filled with the first light of love?'

'Well—' said Norman.

'Or a baby's smile?' continued Old Pete. 'Or the scent of a rose with spring dew upon it? Or—'

'Stop,' said Norman, 'you're giving me a crinkly mouth.' And he dabbed a tear from his eye.

As did Jim Pooley. 'Golly, Pete,' said Jim, 'I never knew you had such feelings in you.'

'I don't,' said the oldster, amidst immoderate chucklings. 'I'm just winding up this buffoon.'

'Thanks a lot,' said Norman. 'But numbers *are* everything and I firmly believe that *everything* can be reduced to mathematics. Everything.'

'Life, the universe, and everything?' said Jim. 'The number you're looking for is forty-two, is it not?'

'Don't you start,' said Norman. 'But I repeat: I sincerely believe that there is a mathematical formula behind *everything*. And whoever discovers this BIG FIGURE would not only *know* everything, he'd be able to *do* everything also and I'll prove it to you one day.'

'How?' Jim asked.

'From small beginnings come great things,' said Norman, who favoured a proverb. 'But the lion never roars until he's eaten.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Jim.

Norman got a round in. 'I will succeed,' he told the assembled company of doubters and he raised his glass in toast. 'As surely as one and one make two for most of the time, I will.'

And indeed Norman would – well, he almost would – and with the most alarming consequences.

But Norman's quest would not be an easy one. Mathematics had moved beyond the blackboard and the abacus. These were the days of the computer. And Norman did not possess a computer. He had considered purchasing one, but even the cheap ones were, in his opinion, expensive . . . which was why he had decided to construct his own.

Norman was no stranger to the do-it-yourself kit. He had purchased more than a few in the past, before it had dawned upon him that it was hardly 'do-it-yourself' if all the pieces had been pre-constructed by someone else. Real do-it-yourselfing was *really* doing-it-yourself, from the ground up.

You needed certain components, of course; you couldn't be expected to mill every piece of metal and hand-carve every screw . . . which was why God had granted man the ability to create the Meccano set. And with the Meccano set Norman had proved, time and time again, that all things – well, *nearly* all things – were possible.

And if you happened to pick up a few other little bits and bobs from here and there along the way, well, that wasn't *really* cheating.

So, upon this bright and early morning, Norman continued with his incorrect numberings of the daily papers and, once done, he sighed a certain sigh and took to leafing through the uppermost *Brentford Mercury* on the pile.

A pre-leaf perusal of the front page found Norman viewing the day's banner headline: COUNCIL TO VOTE ON CLUB'S FUTURE. Norman knew the tale behind this well enough – the sad and sorry saga of Brentford's football club. From its golden years in the 1920s, when Brentford had twice won the FA Cup, and Jack Lane, the now-octogenarian landlord of The Four Horsemen, had captained the glory boys and hammered home the winning goals on both occasions. Through the many years of hurt, with the team slipping down and down the divisions, until this very day.

With the team having so far failed to win a single match this season, the club in debt to the tune of millions and property developers circling like horrid sharks seeking to snap up the ground, tear down the stands, rip up the sacred turf and build executive homes upon the site.

Norman shuddered. It was a tragedy. A piece of the borough's precious history would be wiped from the map. It made Norman sick at heart.

'It is an outrage,' cried Norman, with fire in his voice. 'An outrage and an abomination.'

'What was that?' Another sonic shockwave struck the shopkeeper's head, this time nearly dislodging his wig.

'Nothing, dear,' said Norman. 'And I'm almost done with the numbering.'

The numbering.

Norman viewed the figure upon the front page of the *Brentford Mercury*. The figure of the debt. The millions owed by Brentford United Football Club – surely such a sum could be raised if everyone in Brentford dug into their pockets. They'd only need to fork out . . . Norman's Biro moved about upon the blank area of newssheet where the theatre review would have been had the *Mercury's* inebriate critic, 'Badger' Beaumont, got around to filing his report. Norman's Biro moved and many figures were written (many, too, were crossed out and rewritten). Many more were also crossed out. Norman, for all his love of numbers, wasn't much of a hand at sums. He really *did* need a computer. Norman flung the now defunct Biro aside.

And Norman took to leafing again.

Page two had little to offer Norman, other than an advert announcing the arrival of Count Otto Black's *Circus Fantastique*, presently pitching its big top upon nearby Ealing Common. This at least had Norman doing so-so movements with his head, for he harboured some fondness for the circus.

There was also an article penned by local guru and self-styled Perfect Master Hugo Rune, extolling the virtues of Runesthetics, a spiritual exercise programme of his own conception that promised, for a fee, to enlarge that certain part of the male anatomy which teenage boys generally sought to enlarge through methods of their own, sometimes with the aid of tapes rented from the video section of Peg's Paper Shop.

Norman raised an eyebrow to Runesthetics and then lowered it again. He had once invented a system of his own to further that particular end. It had involved Meccano. And, later, several jars of Savlon.

Norman leafed on. It was, as ever it was, and ever it most probably ever would be, the same old, tired old news for the most part. And for the most part Norman took as ever he

had, and probably ever would take, a certain pleasure and comfort in its same old, tired old sameness. Flower shows, fêtes, functions and funerals. And car-boot sales.

And Norman leafed on until he came to the page before last. And there for a while he dwelt, amidst the small ads.

And there Norman's right forefinger, its nail sorely in need of a nailbrush, travelled down column after column . . .

Until . . .

It stopped.

And the shopkeeper took from the top pocket of his brown shop coat, a pocket that was in need of some stitching, a pencil which was, as it happened, *not* in need of a sharpening. (Norman's spell in the Navy had taught him, in addition to the importance of a well-polished shoe, to keep his matches dry, his underwear clean and his pencil sharp, for obvious reasons.)

And Norman took up his pre-sharpened pencil and encircled an advert with it:

I HAVE A LARGE COLLECTION OF UNWANTED COMPUTER PARTS AVAILABLE FOR DISPOSAL.
FREE TO FIRST APPLICANT.
TELEPHONE THIS NUMBER FOR DETAILS.

Norman read the telephone number to himself and his hand moved in the direction of the telephone upon the shop counter.

'Norman, come!' bawled the voice of Peg from the kitchenette.

And all of Norman moved in the direction of this bawling.

Mahatma Campbell's limping, which had carried him past Bob the Bookie's and Peg's Paper Shop, carried him further up the Ealing Road, past The Star of Bengal curry house and The Flying Swan.

Neville, ever an early riser since that morning when he'd

once risen late and felt certain that he'd missed *something*, viewed the passing Campbell as a shadowy form through the etched glass of The Swan's saloon bar window panes.

Neville, a practising pagan, demurred the crossing of himself, but said *blessed be* and ventured to the whisky optic for a measure of golden breakfast.

Of the looks of Neville, what might be said? In the favour of him, much. He was tall and lean and scholar-stooped, with a slim and noble head, the hair of him a-brilliantеened and the good eye all a-glitter. Dapperly decked was he in the habit of the professional barlord: white shirt, black trews, black weskit and clip-on dicky bow, plus a very dashing pair of cufflinks whose enamelled entablatures spoke of a Masonic connection. Classic 'Oxford' footwear was well buffed, though through personal fastidiousness rather than naval training. A certain spring was normally to be found in his step.

And Neville was the part-time barman of The Flying Swan.

True, there were none who had ever known him to miss a session, or take a holiday, or even a day off. And Neville lived in, above the bar, in the humble but adequate accommodation. But *part-time barman* was his job description; it was the job he had applied for and the job he had been given. And it was the job he did, and the job he did well.

And the job he loved.

Yes, loved. For Neville loved Brentford. The borough, and its people, and this pub. *His* pub. Not that it really was *his* pub, it wasn't; it was the brewery's pub, and every so often the brewery let Neville know it, in manners that lacked for subtlety and finesse. They organised things for Neville to do. Theme nights. Promotions. Pub quizzes. Neville weathered these storms. He pressed on, and persevered. He knew how things should be, and how things should be done. Things *should be* as ever they had been, and things *should be done* to keep things that way.

Neville tended the beers: eight hand-drawn ales upon

draught, the finest in Brentford. And the finest of the finest being Large.

Neville tended the bar, an elegant Victorian bar with a knackered dartboard and disabled jukebox, a row of Britannia pub tables, a mismatched variety of comfy seating and stools at the polished counter for regular stalwarts. There were Spanish souvenirs behind the bar. Ancient pictures of indeterminate things upon walls of faded paperings. A carpet that had known better days, but appreciated those of the present, which weren't too bad at all.

And the whole and the all and the everything that made a real pub a real pub caused a pause in the step of those who entered The Flying Swan for the very first time, who breathed in its air, soaked up its ambience and said, as many before had said and many yet to come would do:

'*This* is a pub.'

Neville tossed back his golden breakfast and shrugged away the shudder that the Campbell's daily passing always brought him. Today was a new day, another day; hopefully, it would be much as the old day that it had replaced had been, a pleasant and samey prelude to the one that lay beyond.

And so on and so forth, so to speak.

Although it did have to be said that today *was* going to be slightly different for Neville the part-time barman.

Hence the shoes.

Hence the shoes? one might ask. What meanith this?

What meanith this is this: the shoes were an anomaly. Bright and shiny, yes, as was the norm for these shoes, but not at this time of the day. At this time of the day, Neville was normally a carpet-slipper man. Monogrammed were Neville's carpet slippers, his own initials woven in cloth-of-gold upon a brown felt surround, with soft India rubber soles. The pair a present from the mother who loved him. But he was not wearing these today. Today Neville wore the classic Oxfords, those brogues that, in their unassuming, understated way, had helped to forge the British Empire.

The creation of Lord Oxford, who is now remembered solely for his shoes.*

Not that Neville was wearing the *actual* pair that had helped to forge the British Empire. But his *were* of a similar design.

And they *were* upon his feet at this time of the morning.

So, why?

Because Neville had an appointment this morning. One that he did not wish to keep, but one he knew that he must keep. It was an *official* appointment. Not one of brewery business, but of *other* business. It was a matter of duty that Neville keep this appointment. And Neville was a man of duty.

The classic brogues pinched Neville's toes; the certain spring that was normally to be found in his step had today deserted him. Neville limped from the saloon bar of The Flying Swan and returned to his humble yet adequate accommodation above.

Mahatma Campbell limped on. And on he limped until he reached the football ground, Griffin Park. And here he ceased to limp, for here he stopped and, bending low, removed his seven-league boot and shook from it a stone. And then he replaced the boot upon his best-foot-forward.

And then he reached into his ample sporran and withdrew a ring of keys. Selecting one of these, he presented it to the padlock that secured the gates of the football ground, unlocked same and swung open these gates.

And then, a-singing and a-whistling the portions of the song that he could not remember, Mahatma Campbell entered Brentford Football Ground.

And the sun rose higher in the heavens. And the birdies sang and the folk of Brentford slowly stirred from their beds and, as is very often the way, things began to happen.

*And his dictionary, of course. And his bags, although not so much nowadays. As they've gone out of fashion.