

## Good King Wenceslas and the Big Society

Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen. The palace grounds were swathed in bright sunshine, but then he was looking out on Google Earth. In fact the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even. If he switched to the CCTV cameras he would have seen it was starting to snow again, which would account for the late arrival of Melissa, his current page.

Should you be wondering why our good king has a female page, some explanation is needed, and even if you're not wondering, here it is nonetheless.

Back in October he had been visited by the Prime Minister. 'We've never had it so good, your majesty', he beamed, 'but officially the country is in a financial mess. It's the banks' fault of course, but we're blaming the last government. It's going to mean lots of cuts in public and personal expenditure to deal with this, and you will not be unaffected, sire, WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.' He said the last sentence in capital letters, thought the King, who could not help wondering why it was that successive prime ministers had always taken great pains to insist that monarchy was divorced from government and running the country. This sudden desire for inclusion seemed rather out of keeping. However he knew what to say in these circumstances. 'Thank you, Prime Minister, I shall discuss with my advisers the points that you have raised and will communicate my response to you in due course.' 'Of course your majesty,' the PM smiled affably, 'and you may like to see the press release I have prepared for tomorrow's papers on the subject.' He handed over a piece of paper with the heading: You too can be a Royal Guard.

'What!' cried the King, as he skimmed through, 'you're getting rid of the Royal Guardsmen!' 'Not at all, sire,' replied the PM, 'your guards will march up and down outside the palace as they always have done, except they won't be trained soldiers. The duties are entirely ceremonial, and we just can't afford trained troops to do this when their expertise is needed elsewhere.' 'So who will?' asked the king, aghast. 'I have a vision of a Big Society,' said the prime minister 'and it is my mission to make it happen.' 'I feel a mission action plan coming on,' thought the king, as the Prime Minister continued, leaning forward earnestly. 'Our

research has shown that there are thousands of people who would love to be royal guards, and it will give them self-esteem, develop new skills, help them step up into new jobs ...’ His face started to radiate at this point and his eyes glazed as his vision of the Big Society engaging with the monarchy poured forth.

So to cut a long story short, this is why the king found himself being guarded over the twelve days of Christmas by a local paint-balling group, the larger rooms at the palace were let out to anyone who was willing to pay (Strictly Come Dancing final from the Royal Throne Room – the king shuddered at the thought), and his current page was Melissa, on a community service order (‘We was just hackin’ into some computer network to send stuff on to Wikileaks’). And she was late.

He looked at the CCTV pictures. It really was snowing heavily. It’ll be travel chaos today, he thought grimly. He hoped she would arrive. He needed her to get his latest Christmas present to work. This was a Blueberry Y-Pod J-phone with Apps (whatever they were), and was sitting somewhat forlorn by the computer screen.

Suddenly the door opened and in came a strange figure, which from a muffled ‘Sorry I’m late!’ followed by ‘Bloody paint-ballers!’ he guessed to be Melissa. A black full-length overcoat with hood covered her completely. Three yellow paint ball blotches were visible down one side. A swathe of scarves covered her face leaving just a pair of eyes blinking out. He wondered if she had converted overnight to Islam.

However these wrappings were quickly removed, revealing a young girl well in tune with contemporary western dress code. She stamped the snow of two enormous Ugg boots and replaced them by fluffy mules (nice aren’t they!). ‘Here I am,’ she said, ‘now what’s on to day?’ She went over to the computer. ‘Ooh you’ve got a Blueberry Y-Pod J-Phone with Apps too – cool,’ she said. ‘Er, I wondered if we might be able to download the programs from the royal computer onto it’, the king ventured nervously. ‘Right on, Sire’. Her fingers flitted over the key board – ‘and here you are, so let’s see what’s on to day’. A matrix appeared with the heading Room Letting for Today, Feast of St Stephen. ‘Ah’, she said ‘the Banqueting Chamber’ is being used by... Oh what’s this?’ A pop-up had appeared with the heading ‘Information up-date: Feast of St Stephen replaced by Feast of St Viridor. ‘Who’s he?’ asked

the King, 'sounds like a computer virus.' 'No he must be some righteous guy,' said Melissa, 'his name's on all the waste skips at the courts. Anyway the Banqueting Chamber's in use by RBS.' 'RBS!' cried the King, 'the Royal Bank of Silesia, they were the ones that got us into this mess in the first place, goodness knows how many peasant folk have had their houses repossessed as a result, and they're here today having a feast, well that really takes the biscuit – which is about as much as we'll get.'

'Not just a feast.' said Melissa, 'it's being prepared by the Masterchef finalists.' 'So the bankers will get a slap-up meal supervised by Michel Choux and Drudge Wallace, and we'll be down for a takeaway from Pizza Express. It's too much. Find something different'

Melissa tapped the keys and they were back looking at the snow falling. 'Hold on,' she said, 'what's that over there?' She tapped the keys again and a figure came into view, struggling through the snow, clutching onto trees for support. 'Yonder peasant,' said the king, 'who is he, where and what his dwelling?' 'We'll need a close up of his face first,' said Melissa – 'ah that's it, and freeze, now we need to compare that with records on the National Data-base.' 'I didn't think we could access that,' said the king. 'I thought that was all very confidential.' 'It's easy enough,' said Melissa, when you know how, and you're king and you want to know, so what's the problem? Here we are: his name is Lord Clawz and he lives at The Fountain, St Agnes. That's a good league hence, isn't it?' 'I know who he is alright,' said the King. 'Clawz was chairman of the Financial Services Agency when all the trouble with RBS began. He did so little to regulate the bankers they all called him Santa Clawz! But what's he doing here?' 'Wait a sec,' said Melissa, cutting back to the Room Letting screen. 'Yes, he's the Guest of Honour at the RBS banquet. Somehow he's got lost. She flicked through the screens – look, there's a Range Rover abandoned with paint balls all over the windscreen. He's trying to find a way round the paint-batters and got lost.' 'Serves him right' cried the King. 'He can stay lost for all I care and any other BRS bankers too.' 'You can't say that!' Melissa was getting upset, 'he's a human being too, and he'll collapse if we don't get help to him soon. I'll use this to track him down.' She picked up the Blueberry, quickly pulled her boots back on, surrounded herself with overcoat and scarves, and hurried out of the door. 'Wait!' cried the King. 'Don't go yourself! Get someone else!' Then he remembered there was no one else, and with a curse, he found a jacket and rushed out to follow her.

'Page and monarch, forth they went, forth they went together, through the wild wind's rude lament and the bitter weather.'

It was snowing too heavily for the King to see his page, but her Ugg Boots had left clear tracks in the snow and he found that by stepping in his page's footprints, he could make easy progress. He felt strangely warmed by this.

He found Melissa and the banker. 'Sire!' he cried, 'how good of you to come looking for me. You've saved my life I'm sure. How could I possibly reward you?' A number of intriguing possibilities swept through the king's mind, but he settled for, 'Well, you might let us share in this banquet of yours.' 'Done!' came the swift reply. He took the Blueberry and called a number. 'Bring more flesh and bring more wine, bring more pine logs hither. You and I will see them dine when I bring them thither.'

And so it was that the king and the page enjoyed their banquet on the Feast of St Viridor, and joined in the loyal toast and even one to the Big Society.

'Therefore Christians all, be sure,  
wealth or rank possessing,  
you who help the mega-rich,  
shall yourselves find blessing.'

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