

Good King Wenceslas and the Smart Devices

Good King Wenceslas looked out. It was not yet the feast of Stephen but 'it must be somebody's', thought the king. 'Page!' he called. 'Listening!' came the slightly tinny sounding reply. 'What saint's day is today?' 'In this church jurisdiction it is St Viridor's Day,' page responded, 'but in the Amharic Coptic church it is St...' 'Page cease!' ordered the king, realising that a litany of saints or sinners adored on this day by the world's denominations was about to ensue. Yes, the digital smart age of voice assistance, of doors that opened by phone, thermostats that responded to messages and the national anthem played on demand had come with a vengeance to the palace. 'St Viridor,' the king muttered, 'how appropriate.' He turned to his table with a stack of cards for his personal signature. 'Happy Recycling and a Carbon Neutral New Year'. Not exactly Christmassy, sighed the king, as he took up his pen. A thought struck him. 'Page!' 'Listening.' 'Do we have any stamps?' 'I shall investigate,' came the reply, then after a slight pause 'the royal collection contains an example of all stamps ever issued in this country. Do you wish me to show them on the screen?' 'Emm, yes let's have a look,' said the king, who had never seen the collection before. 'Displaying' replied page, as pages of stamps appeared on the screen, over 160 years' worth, different heads of departed monarchs as well as his own, different colours, shapes and sizes, but he was surprised to find page after page of blue 4p stamps, all, for all the king could see, exactly the same. 'Page!' ('Listening') he inquired. 'Why are there so many pages all of the same 4p blue stamp?' 'Investigating: I have no information on that matter. I shall ask the Postmaster General.'

Page went silent and the king returned to signing the cards. Eventually page reported back. 'The postmaster general will come here personally to explain the reasons. It was felt inappropriate to discuss over the phone. The postmaster general will be here this afternoon.'

The door opened at the appointed time. 'Ah welcome, postmaster?' the King's voice rose with surprise on the last syllable as a well-dressed young woman entered the room.

'Yes, postmaster', she said. 'It is an ancient title that is still retained. I just look upon myself as a technical example of temporary gender re-assignment.'

Now I believe you have found the infamous fourpenny ones. ‘Infamous! Why so?’ asked the King. ‘They were issued at a time when society was eager to try novel ideas,’ explained the postmaster. ‘The post office, keen to be up with the times started to experiment with different flavoured gums on the back of the stamps. Fruit flavours mostly. Banana was regarded as the best I believe. But then some bright spark in marketing thought about a gum that was mildly addictive, as a means of encouraging repeat purchases. The fourpenny blue was the stamp chosen. As was the norm some were sent to the palace for the royal collection. Either the king or perhaps more likely one of the princes discovered the special qualities of the stamp by accident, but was hooked and went about buying all he could. Because it was experimental only one other post office had them. All of them were bought by someone here in the palace. When we realised what was happening the stamps were withdrawn, and the ones you see here are all that have survived. I think you will find that they have all been licked! It was all hushed up of course, and very few people know of this, but you are entitled to know the story sire, but it was one that I felt should be told personally.’

Good King Wenceslas looked out. It was the day after St Viridor’s , but the king did not feel inclined to enquire whose it was.

Suddenly the phone rang – not the normal one but the red one. The king picked it up. ‘Security here’, said the voice at the other end. ‘Sire, there is something strange we want you to be aware of. There are reports appearing on social media of palace drug-taking parties using the gum on the back of stamps. It seems too far-fetched to be true and of course we have issued denials, and pooh-pooed the story, but we are still investigating. Meanwhile have you any engagements today?’ – ‘Just the usual regular meeting with the Prime Minister’, replied the king, ‘but there’s normally nothing contentious in those.’ ‘Even so, just be careful in what you say sire’, the voice advised. ‘Better safe than sorry.’ ‘Of course and thank you’ said the king.

‘Prime Minister!’ cried the King, ‘Welcome. But you look worried.’ ‘Yes indeed your majesty, I am not at ease,’ replied the PM. ‘Why so, after your victory in the election by er a stonking great majority is I think the official description, surely your way ahead is clear?’ ‘If only it were that simple,’ the PM groaned. ‘My party has a lot of new and politically naïve MPs. They are all expecting me

to deliver on all the promises I have made.’ ‘Is that unreasonable?’ asked the King. ‘Of course it is’, came the agitated reply. ‘They should know that we make promises to win the election, and of course we aim to meet them more or less over time..,’ – ‘so aspirational rather than actual,’ suggested the king. ‘Precisely, but this lot don’t understand it and want everything to happen now. And there is absolutely no way that the country can afford it.’ ‘And what about Burrexit?’ asked the king. ‘Well yes, that’s part of the problem, - in many ways it is the problem. We’re not going to make anywhere near the savings we outlined when we began the Burrexit campaign, and most of this additional money we shall need is because we are leaving the Burrunion. The truth is,’ the PM dropped his voice at this point, ‘the problem is parliament, which I could well do without, and the most sensible way out is to temporarily pause parliament and actually remain. But I can’t say that to my party, so I’m coming to you sire on bended knee to seek your help.’ The king thought for a moment. ‘Prime Minister’, he said slowly and carefully, ‘it is not my job to solve your problems for you. You have made this bed and you must lie on it. Good day to you.’

The king was not too surprised when a little while later there was another call from security. ‘There’s been a very serious leak about the PM’s audience with you, sire. He’s up the proverbial creek without a paddle. Fortunately you came out of it very well sire. We think we have traced the source. This paging device you have – it listens to all your conversations and either has been hacked or designed to be accessed by someone else. You must switch it off now.’

The king did so and smiled. Poor PM he said to himself. Well, let’s make him an offer he can’t refuse. He picked up the phone....

‘So we’re agreed, and it will be this evening. I’ll make the arrangements here. Thank you PM. Good bye.’ The king spent the next few hours busy on the phone and late afternoon the TV and media crews began to arrive to prepare for a special event – the King would address the nation.

‘A crown certainly makes you look regal sire,’ commented the producer, as she surveyed the preparations for the broadcast, ‘but the sceptre and orb as well –

a bit OTT perhaps?’ ‘The necessary accoutrements of kingship.’ explained the king. ‘You’ll see.’

‘Ready studio’, called the producer, ‘going on air in three ..two.. one ..live.’

‘My people,’ the king began genially, ‘the recent election campaign has unfortunately created too many divisions within our country. We are in danger of seeing our proud united nation break up. Foreign powers are spreading rumours about the integrity of our democratic system. Your prime minister is aware of these dangers and has asked me to help get things done, and so I shall.’ He solemnly placed the crown on his head and holding the orb and sceptre looked straight into the camera. ‘Under the 1374 Act of Total and Perpetual Supremacy which has never been repealed, We hereby make the following declaration: Parliament is abolished as from this moment. As your sovereign Lord and King We are sole ruler of the country. We alone make laws and deliver justice. We shall choose such people as we see fit to be our advisers. Nevertheless,’ the king continued in a more conciliatory tone, ‘I am aware that as a nation you voted in the referendum to leave the Burrunion. I respect that vote. I have spoken with the president of the Burrunion and agreed that our country will cease to be a member of the Burrunion from 1159 tonight. This demonstrates the efficiency and effectiveness of monarchical rule.

However I also consider that the heavy task of ruling this nation should pass to younger shoulders. I am therefore abdicating in favour of my second grandson, as he appears to be the most popular member of the royal family. My people, meet your new King!’

A young bearded man appeared and sat in the seat the king had just left. ‘Wow,’ were his first words, ‘thanks Gramps, that’s really cool. But look guys, I can’t do this on my own. I’m in partnership with my wife, your queen, and we shall rule jointly. Here she is now.’ A chair appeared and an immaculate young woman sat on it, and gave a winning smile to the camera. ‘As our first act together we want to promote the parental rights of men and women,’ she said, ‘so everyone will have to right to take paternity or maternity leave for up to three years. And now your majesty...’

‘As you know,’ said the new king ‘the Queen and I believe strongly in unity and the world working in harmony. The idea of our nation going alone in this world is just not right.’ ‘So,’ said the queen, ‘we have spoken to the president of the Burrunion and I am pleased to announce that our nation will achieve Burrentrance at midnight tonight. In this way we have already shown our commitment to becoming part of a wider network of nations and shall be working to extend this to a world-wide union.’

‘And now,’ said the king, ‘it is only right that the Queen and I take advantage of the provisions for leave her majesty has just announced, so we shall both step down for this period and we hereby appoint my grandfather to be king regent in our place. Guys – your King Regent.’

Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the feast of Stephen. When a poor man came in sight...

‘Hither page!’ cried the King. The former page had been reinstated and page had been ceremonially recycled by the king by means of a large sledgehammer. ‘Yonder peasant – isn’t that the former Prime Minister?’ ‘So it is,’ said the page, ‘it looks as if he’s coming here. Shall I let him in?’ ‘I suppose you’d better,’ replied the King – ‘let’s hear what he has to say’.

‘Sire,’ the peasant doffed his cap and bowed before the king. ‘Your majesty will surely remember that when we talked a few days ago, the agreement was that monarchical control would only last for a very limited period, after which you would reinstate parliament and myself.’ ‘My dear sir,’ replied the King, ‘there is some political naivety here. Promises are aspirational to gain consent.’ No doubt we shall see fit in the fullness of time to restore a reformed parliament, but until then I have to say that the country is being Godly and quietly governed, and quite frankly I am enjoying myself. Good day to you sir. and may you enjoy a Carbon Neutral New Year.’

Therefore Christian men be sure
The technology you’re possessing
May open some unguarded door
To curses or a blessing.

Keith Walton Dec 2019