

Bubbles treated him to the fish-eye treatment, then turned back to Mr. Stencil. 'As I was saying,' he stressed, 'I trust you will do better than this.'

Mr. Stencil shook his head.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'It's out of my hands.'

'Now you look here,' hectored Bubbles, an unbecoming flush spreading over his famous but unprepossessing features, 'Are you or are you not an employee of this company? I am a member, an important member of the cast of the play,' (they had been rehearsing 'The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire' for the last few months, Bubbles was to make a telling entrance in the second act as a Conspirator). 'Are you or are you not going to replace this thing, or do I have to go to Front Office? I advise you,' here Bubbles was turning sinister, Act III 'An Inspector Calls', 'to think very carefully before you answer.'

Barry returned to his *Plays & Players*, an unwilling gleam of admiration in his eye. That's the way to treat 'em, he thought, forgetting that he was the 'em' referred to. Mr. Stencil turned to his terminal for comfort.

'Really,' he said, 'nothing can be done. Nothing in stock at all.' He entered the code on the terminal:

HELMETS, ROMAN, STOCK STATUS  
RPT. PLS.

Instantly it responded:  
ROMAN HELMETS, READY.

It ruminated for 20 or 30 milliseconds, then:

AVAIL STOCK: NIL  
200 UNITS IN USE FOR PROD 2976 RS  
FL RMN EMP

Mr. Stencil turned back to an impatiently foot-tapping Bubbles.

'It's as I thought,' he began, but was interrupted by the renewed clicking of the printer. He studied the onrolling piece of paper as it came off the machine, then carefully tore it off, for he was always a careful man.

'There is just one possibility,' he said hesitantly, 'One of the helmets has just returned from the prop mender's workshop. It may not be quite suitable. . .'

'I think I shall be the judge of that,' said Bubbles, 'Hurry it up, please. I haven't got all day. I am expected at the Beeb,' he condescended, 'for some Telly interview or other. One must keep up one's obligations I suppose.'

Mr. Stencil once more consulted the printout. 'Yes,' he said, 'I won't keep you a moment.'

He left the room, leaving Bubbles and Barry to out-nonchalant each other. He was back in a very few moments bearing a brand new gleaming helmet with beautiful feathers.

'If I were you, I wouldn't put it on. . . .'  
began Mr. Stencil.

'Well, you're not me, I'm glad to say,' snapped Bubbles putting it on his head. 'How am I supposed to know if it fits if I don't try it on, you silly little man. Really!'

He buckled it firmly under his chin and cast about for a mirror, something not found in Mr. Stencil's office.

'It feels about right,' he grudged. 'I shall take it to my dressing room to see properly.'

He swept out grandly, his plumes waving in the wind, and stalked down the corridor, Charlemagne the Great, Act IV.

In the ensuing silence, Mr. Stencil looked once again at the printout in his hand. It read:

LOOK MR S IF THATS THAT BURKE  
JONES-LEATHERBY AGAIN GIVE HIM  
THE ONE THATS JUST BACK FROM  
THE WORKSHOP. THEY USE SUPER-  
GLUE ON REPAIRS WITH ANY LUCK  
ITLL STICK TO HIS STUPID HEAD. LET  
ME KNOW IF YOU WANT ME TO FIX  
HIS TAX CODE HIS N.I. CONTRI-  
BUTION AND HIS WAGES. ITLL BE A  
PLEASURE.

As Mr. Stencil turned to his terminal there came an unfamiliar noise in the room, so unfamiliar and alien it made Barry look up in fright. It was a sort of creaking, cackling noise. It was Mr. Stencil laughing.

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