

Wassail Hassle

By Don Walker

I looked up from the page and realised that the room was empty. This huge, bustling centre of human sweat and hysteria had finally fallen silent and I was alone. But with a mountain of work before me.

This was not the time of year to be chief copy editor of a large newspaper. Not that there *was* a right time of year—the wearing of the cloak of what was laughingly referred to as Authority meant you had to give up the right to be a full-time drunkard and hell-raiser, comport yourself with a serious mien, arrive on time and leave after everyone else. Oh, and do all the work on this benighted Christmas Feature issue complete with artful balloon borders, graphic mistletoe, pretty gals in Santa hats and a television programme section the size of a lending library.

The copy editors and the art desk had finished their work with suspicious haste and, already cheerily red-faced, sped off to the pub, trying to get my good favour with: “We’re in The White Hart, boss. Give us a ring when you’re coming and we’ll set you up a beer.”

Their work was done, but I was left behind to make sure they hadn’t missed an ingredient and the merry festive fare was wholesome and cooked at exactly the right temperature with lashings of brandy butter.

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I was more elated by promotion than I ever thought I would be. Up to the day I made chief, I had been a leading copy editor in the Feature section of the Daily Blade. This meant I got the best stories and pages to supervise and all the praise from passing executive editors when a headline sparkled or the first paragraph of a story sang. And among my blessings was the fact that I could moan right along with the lads about management, the pay, the work-rate and the dreadful standard of reporters and writers they were sending us these days.

After the first rush of shameful euphoria faded, I realised with cold horror that the very supporting columns of pub discussion and complaint that I had leaned against only yesterday in The White Hart pub I now had to defend. Sure, there was more cash and a company car. But the taxman got most of the money.

The striking benefit I hadn’t known about was the slight elevation in my importance. Barely noticeably at first, copy editors and pretty girl reporters started to make sure they caught my eye in the corridors and in the bar. They would offer me drinks with a strange, direct look that said: Remember me.

There it was then, the car, the money, the status...and...ah! the sparkling jewel...the annual Editor's Christmas Lunch. *This* was the crowning glory of my vaulting ambition.

To get an invitation you had to have put your head above the parapet—along with the brickbats came that crisp white card headed: “The Editor of the Daily Blade and his executive management team request the pleasure...”

It was set in the city's oldest, grandest hotel The Cleremont where the great statesmen dined and, it was rumoured, oil-rich Princes took their mistresses. You knew you had arrived when you climbed the sparkling granite steps between the gleaming brass rails and were greeted with effortless charm by an imposing doorman in a top hat. A top hat for goodness' sake.

On in to the ballroom and principal dining-room and here among the hubbub you would see the famous faces. The great writers, the puissant politicians, the dazzling glamour of the TV newsreaders and the leading reporters of the media's upper class. Oh, the dresses, oh, the décolletage, oh, the fine talk and witty asides.

“God, Alistair, are you still here?” The voice of my deputy aroused me from the reverie I had fallen into over a proof of the advance edition of our Christmas short story by a prize-winning author.

“Yes,” I said, “this stuff has to be checked.” I looked up into the ruddy face of Robert Keith. “You, I see, are full of seasonal good cheer.”

Bob winked a glassy eye at me and dipped into his jacket pocket. “Brought you something to cheer you up, guv,” he said and produced a small bottle of whisky.

“I'd rather you lent a hand with this page revising,” I said sharply. But my authority didn't penetrate the veneer of goodwill Bob had constructed around himself.

“Ah, but I've done me shift, guv. If you want to play the good guy and stay late that's up to you.” He plonked the whisky in front of me. “Oh, and here's something for you I found in the mailbox. Merry Christmas, see you in the pub.”

With that he was gone no doubt to join Santa's other elves at the bar. I looked at the stiff, manila envelope he had given me. I knew exactly what it was.

“The Editor of the Daily Blade and his executive management team request the pleasure...”

And what a pleasure it was going to be.

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“You’re looking very smart, Alistair.” Carol Pinksale, one of my copy editors, gazed up admiringly at my light blue suit. I was wearing a crisp white shirt and silk tie in subdued, gleaming Oxford wingtips.

“Thanks, Carol,” I said. She was a short, busty woman who was capable but no genius. She had performed adequately on the media fringes for many years and was now settled at the Blade. What was she? Forty-something? Maybe 50? This was her home now and she knew it and she wasn’t going to offend anyone and didn’t have the least difficulty sucking up to the boss.

“And where might the governor be off to?” she said.

“Where do you, think Carol—only the Ed’s Christmas do.”

“Not the one at the Cleremont!”

“Yep.”

“Ooh, Alistair, show me the invite.”

I didn’t like being quizzed by lesser members of staff, but, well, it was Christmas. I carefully removed the white card from its protective envelope and held it in front of her blunt nose. She reached for it in a natural movement but I moved it slightly away from her grubby fingers. She knew better than to persist and dropped her hand.

“The Editor of the Daily Blade and his team...wow! Beautiful.”

“The Editor of the Daily Blade and his *executive management team*,” I corrected.

“Great, boss. Tell us all about it in the bar tonight and don’t get too sloshed.”

“Of course not,” I said sharply and Carol pinked up slightly, realising she had dropped a point.

“I...er..” she started, but I waved away her dismay. “Try not to make a mess of the edition,” I said to the desk in general and ignored the growls that followed me down the room.

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I sat back in the taxi and tried to relax and enjoy the unaccustomed luxury: the plush seats, the smooth unworried progress through the traffic, the hurried crowds rushing off to their jolly Christmas lunches. I watched them benevolently, serenely through the window.

The Cleremont sailed into view like an ocean liner: magnificent and unburdened by its gravity, splendour and importance. The sight of it set off all sorts of imaginings in my head:

This could all turn into something greatly to my advantage. Here would be the shakers and movers and I could swim among them a new young fish with fresh flashing scales and a quick, eager mind. If I could make an impression then who knew what might happen?

I was surprised to see the doorman wasn't wearing a top hat, but he did have a silky tailcoat and gloves. He smartly opened the door for me, a rather younger man than I expected with shiny hair slicked back. Should I tip him? I was uncertain and thought I caught a hard stare of insolence in his eye.

But here they were! Relaxed and elegant, glasses in hand among the marble and the fresh flowers, the gorgeous drapes and ivory and gold fittings.

“Good God, Alistair! What the hell are you doing here? They're letting anybody in.” I turned smiling towards this coarse greeting; I had recognised the hearty playfulness of the deputy Features Editor Grant Picton.

“Well, you got in so I suppose the standards have hit rock bottom!” I returned his volley enthusiastically and with just the right mixture of editorial jest and venom.

His round, pitted face creased in a reluctant grin. Picton looked like a hod carrier but had the most graceful writing style of anybody I knew and a manner that gave his speeches authority and dignity—when he needed it.

“What're you going to have then, sunshine,” he said. “Don't hold back, it's all on the guv'nor!”

I stayed at his side for a while—not too long, for his playful bullying could be wearing, but it was good in this company to be seen as a familiar of his. I surveyed the room over my glass as we bantered. There was the editor, greying hair slicked back, trying to charm an elegant woman, one of the legal department's barristers I thought. The thin, wired Foreign Editor was nearby casting anxious glances in the editor's direction like an actor waiting cues. Top reporters and columnists by the handful. Several politicians with purple noses and rounded guts.

Towering over them was Neil Banderly the huge, former stringer who had suddenly appeared in the city office one morning and seemed to scale the editorial food chain in a matter of months. Neil was actually little more than a gofer for the chairman and the editor, but he knew the buttons to push, the egos to caress and how they liked their coffee.

I spotted Harriet Quinton standing alongside a beautiful oak side table which held a vase of white roses. Slender champagne glass in hand, she breathed quiet intelligence and had the loveliest skin of any woman I knew.

“Pardon me, old man,” I said to Grant Picton, “you’re quite fascinating but nowhere near as lovely as you Harriet. I’m off to toy with her affections.”

“Good luck, mate. Not that you’ll get anywhere—remember not to drink too much, we don’t want to annoy the brass.”

“As if!” I replied. “Ta ta.”

With Harriet firmly fixed in my sights I pushed and jostled my way through the crowd. In what seemed like a few minutes during which I had been exchanging insults with Picton the crowd appeared to have doubled, tripled.

I suddenly felt a heavy hand fall on my shoulder. I turned and found myself looking up into the great bear face of Neil Banderly.

“Ah! Alistair! Our new Untergruppen Führer! First time here eh, mate?”

“Oh, hullo Neil,” I said. The man was an oaf, but not one to be dismissed lightly; he had the ear of the Editor.

“So, do you know the rules, mignon?” When in an affable mood, which he was most of the time, or seemed to be, Neil would litter his speech with foreign tags and phrases. It was one of his most irritating habits, but it was difficult to make any protest to a man of his size.

“Rules?” I asked, “There are rules?” I took a sip of my drink and looked wistfully over in the direction of Harriet.

“Oh, mon cher, but of course!” His great voice boomed out and even in this crush I saw one or two heads turn towards us. “You have brought missiles, of course?”

“Missiles? What on earth are you talking about?”

“To hurl at the bosses, cara mia.”

A vague feeling of discomfort spread up from my stomach. I had heard something about this habit of throwing things at the top table as the drink flowed but had dismissed it as childish nonsense.

“They actually do that?” I said.

“Biensur! Two years ago old Petersen caught the company chairman with a crusty roll right on the forehead. Bing! It was hilarious...I remember a rivulet of blood ran down his lordship’s face! It brought the house down. That’s the main reason they only serve soft rolls now. Fewer injuries, quel dommage!”

“It’s also probably also the reason Petersen doesn’t work here any more,” I said.

“Ah, don’t be a stuffed shirt—it’s all part of the fun, mein kleines.”

“Not part of my fun, Neil. I intend to network, have a few drinks and tuck into the figgy pudding.”

Neil gave a roar of laughter and opened his cavernous mouth; but before he could utter another ridiculous foreign phrase I added: “Talking of which I spy someone far more fascinating and prettier than you...excuse me.”

“Tout a l’heure, Alistair!” Neil bellowed after me as I continued tacking towards Harriet.

“You look absolutely ravishing, darling,” I told her.

“Not bad yourself, Alistair,” she said. She was speaking to a minor politician who wore a bow tie and a hopeful expression. She leaned in close to me as I kissed her cheek and to my surprise whispered deliciously in my ear: “Get me away from this bore!”

“Sweetie, you must come over here with me, there’s someone who wants to talk to you in confidence about your column,” I said.

“Of course. Please excuse us, Professor. I hope to see you later.”

Out of earshot, I said: “He’s a professor? Heavens.”

“Yes, and a war hero, brain surgeon and rocket scientist at the weekend if you believe him.”

“He’s only trying to impress you. I’m glad you left him with some hope.”

We drew away to a relatively quiet corner and I settled to enjoy her dancing eyes and mordant wit. Harriet was the finest women’s columnist the paper had ever had in my opinion. There was nothing between us—her husband was a reputedly ace lawyer—but we had one of those delightful flirting relationships that bordered on the edge of lust, at least on my part, and our conversation was full of double meanings and compliments seeded with chaste and not-so-chaste longings.

We also giggled a lot.

“You look absolutely divine, Harriet,” I said. “The champagne suits you. It’s brought a maidenly blush to your ivory cheek.”

“Whoa, steady boy! I’m way past maidenly...more like matronly.”

“Hmmm, maybe not. ‘Matronly blush’ doesn’t have the same impact. Or perhaps you’re just blushingly grateful I rescued you from your dull professor.”

“Perhaps. But didn’t *I* save *you* from the huge Banderly, mon ami?” Her tone was delightfully mocking, emphasising Banderly’s annoying habit.

“You certainly did and I shall be undyingly grateful. What’s with him, anyway?”

“Neil? In what sense?”

“He gives the appearance of an ace brown-nose, but there seems to be a huge resentment bubbling underneath as though he hasn’t been given his due.”

“What evidence d’you have for this?”

“Evidence? You can tell your old man’s a lawyer. Well, Neil was talking to me about throwing...”

Somebody somewhere actually sounded a gong. We were being summoned to lunch. I grabbed

Harriet's cool hand, hoping I was seated near her. But no...

"Mon brave! What an honour!" Banderly sat at the banquet table before me brandishing a huge hand towards my seat.

I watched Harriet vanish off towards the top table while I stood astounded by my bad luck. I had been put at the end of the huge U-shaped set-up next to Banderly. The bosses at the top table were far distant.

"Oh," I said, trying not very hard to keep the dismay out of my voice, "is this my place?"

"Mais oui and bienvenue!" I sat down hopelessly and turned way from Neil to my left. Some consolation: my other neighbour was the pretty airhead Sally Schwartz, a reporter who had allegedly slept her way to the bottom.

"Greetings, Alec. What a do, eh?" she said all gleaming lip gloss and Dior eau de toilette.

"It's Alistair, Sally."

"Oops, sorry, toots," she tittered giddily and swigged enthusiastically from her champagne flute.

I had a strong sense of foreboding.

I was down this end of the room because I was a newcomer. Sally because she was a minor reporter. But why was Neil here? I thought he would be ranked further up the food chain. Didn't he resent this? I was soon to find out.

My dining companions dulled the edge of my enjoyment. The dining-room was certainly vast, but far from gorgeous. I could see now its drapes were faded and its sconces worn; the waiters looked tired and in need of superannuating, while the silver service barely gleamed.

But the wine flowed and the merry chatter rose and the little table decorations sparkled with tinsel, holly berries and the spirit of the season.

Sally turned to me suddenly and kissed me full on the lips.

"Merry Christmas, sweetie," she said and the unsought human contact cheered me despite myself and

dispersed some of my gloomy angst.

The room went round and round and the speeches rose and fell. I was careful to keep myself sober by eating steadily but my companions showed no such caution. Louder and louder Neil roared with laughter at the jokes of the bosses and Sally at some point got up and tottered daintily to the top table. Uninvited, she pressed herself between the deputy Chairman and the Editor, neither of whom showed any reluctance to give her room. She sat between them eyes filled with a vacant gleam of happiness and booze. Well, *she'd* arrived.

We'd been feasting for nearly two hours and the figgy pudding had been piped successfully in by none another than the Industrial Editor Gerry O'Mally whose Irish ancestry allowed him to claim some skill on the bagpipes.

Neil tapped me on the leg. When I turned he was holding something in his hand beneath the level of the table and conspiratorially close to the linen cloth so it couldn't be seen by anyone else.

"Regardez, fratello," he said, drunkenly mixing French and Italian, and when I looked down I saw an egg nestling in his huge palm.

"What on earth's that for?"

"What do you think, innamorato? One must be prepared." He patted the egg with his other hand so that the surface of the shell became crazed.

"Why are you doing that?"

"Mustn't throw a solid egg, buddy los mios--might cause too serious a wound."

I started to say: "You are not serious..." but before I could finish Neil leaned back slightly in his chair; his big arm swept down and back and then arced over his head. Oddly, he didn't seem to look towards his target but up at the passage of his hand. I turned, mesmerised to watch the flight of the missile.

It was an incredible shot. The egg seemed to demonstrate a sort of controlled flight like an Exocet. It fell short of the top table but swooped down and under the table. Then again it flew miraculously upwards and under the blue silk dress of Sally Schwartz who was seated swaying drunkenly between the two powerful men either side of her. A wet, glutinous stain spread slowly on the material between her legs.

This enemy action was something that couldn't be ignored. True, bread rolls and hors d'oeuvres

including whitebait were still flying from side to side and even up towards the bosses—but Sally stood up with a shriek and displayed her ruined dress to all by pulling the skirt out with both hands.

I noticed two things that took my breath away. Harriet had in the confusion come and occupied Sally's empty seat next to me and the Editor's fearsome deputy, Richard Spottiswoode, was marching in my direction, a look of cold fury and hatred on his face.

Harriet said to me: "Why did you do that?"

"Me!? I didn't," I replied. "It was Neil."

"Well, darling, it's probably the end of both your careers."

Spottiswoode had reached us. I had stood up as though to defend myself and the Deputy Editor exploded at me; "You disgusting swine! You've ruined Sally's dress."

I turned to Neil expecting some sort of defence—but he was still seated, lying back and looking quite relaxed. I began gibbering and pointed at him, but he shook his large head slowly, almost disapprovingly.

"It was NOT me...it was Neil!" I finally spluttered. I felt like a grass.

Spottiswoode waved his fists in the air, but he couldn't do anything; the Christmas party spirit still washed in waves all around him and he bobbed and tossed on its current like a champagne cork from a passing liner. As he drew breath to offer another fierce blast someone trod or blew on the Industrial Editor's discarded bagpipes and the unexpected piercing wail drew gales of laughter from everyone. To me it sounded like a death knell. Spottiswoode had to go now, but in the dark days to come he would lean over the Editor's shoulder and mark my name through.

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After the racket of the Cleremont's dining room, the Blade's offices seemed deserted: a few messengers leaning lazily against a wall, one or two reporters on phones, their voices inaudible, a silent row of copy editors concentrating on their screens. The place had an echo I'd never noticed before.

The Christmas lunch had gone on later than I realised. The edition was gone, or put to bed; now just those working on the late editions remained.

In the Features section only Carol Pinksale was still there, fretting at a copy of a page layout. She looked up as I released my weight into my chair.

In the taxi back to the office I had slumped back and looked dismally out of the window. How different the scene seemed now from my journey out, full of hope. It had started to rain and in the miserable grey darkening streets the crowds were huddled against the weather, the lighting of the shops garish and stark, the greasy pavements slippery with rain.

“Alistair.”

I looked up into the face of Carol Pinksale and suddenly noticed her eyes were swimming with tears. She was pale, far paler than usual. Her mouth turned down in despair.

“I’ve really done it this time, boss.” She gulped back her air as though it was difficult to breathe.

“What’s up? What have you done?” I asked.

“The lawyer brought a proof of legal corrections after you left and I sent the page off without doing them. I just forgot, I was trying to do too much at once. The page is printing.”

“Show me the corrections.”

Carol put the paper proof in front of me and I saw the lawyer’s distinctive purple marker straggled across it.

“They’re not supposed to use these proofs, Carol. They’ve got to do them on the computer.” I spoke sharply and looking up saw she was crying now silently.

I leaned forward and uncharacteristically stroked her lower arm. She jumped slightly as though expecting a blow.

“Hey, darling, it’s okay.” I said. “I’ll get the night man to pick ’em up on the next edition. They won’t print many.” I ran my eye over the barrister’s corrections. “These are mainly rubbish anyway. It’s old Carling, isn’t it? I recognise his hand—just lawyer’s nit-picking. Forget about it.”

“But it’s my fault...I...” she said sobbing.

“Carol, relax. I’m the chief copy editor I’ll take full responsibility. That’s my job.”

“Alistair you’re a saint.”

I smiled grimly at her. “I think not. Are you finished now?” She nodded, a smile of relief on her tear-stained face. “Go home, or go and join the rest in the pub and have a Christmas drink.”

“No, I’m starving I haven’t eaten all day; I’m going to the canteen. Can I get you something? My treat, my Christmas treat to you. The greatest boss in the world.”

I realised it had been some time since that disastrous lunch. I was hungry again.

“Okay, Carol. Get me a sandwich. Any filling...I don’t mind...as long as it’s not egg.”

End