

## Sell-Out

“Everything must go!” exclaimed the Sales Director. “Christmas has gone and we have to get the new stock in for the Spring.”

There were mutterings from the staff. “But all our stock’s perfectly good...just more work for us to shift it...who’s going to do all the sale-tags, then?” The Sales Director waited patiently for the protests to die down. “Now you know we always have this, every year. It’s the Winter Sale. All the old stock’s got to go. So let’s get down to it. Perhaps there will be a Special Bonus if we sell out by the end of the week...”

Of course, there was no Special Bonus. He knew that. The older staff knew that - Sales Director had been saying it for years now, and not once, not once had there ever been a Bonus for either the summer-sale or the winter-sale. But the younger staff did not know that; their ears pricked up and they scampered off to do their master’s bidding.

Great banners were stitched together, proclaiming the “Greatest Winter Sale of All!”, and, to capture the passing tourist-trade, the red, black and gold “Winterschlussverkauf” flags were brought back from the warehouse. “Everything must go!!!” posters were done up in white on red and readied for the grand opening of the sale, 27<sup>th</sup> December. “If you can’t find what you want, you can’t want it!” was the motto of the store. There had never yet been a year when something had been left on the shelves.

Unicorns were to be knocked down to 75% off - barely four bags of gold each. There was a restricted number and, traditionally, the unicorns went to the first half-dozen people through the door. Some maidens queued for up to three days and nights just to be at the front of the queue. Of course, moral standards were preserved even during the Sale: you were not permitted to buy a unicorn unless it laid its head in your lap.

Distraught kings and queens frequently headed to the bedding department, to snap up as many mattresses as they could for their daughters. Some princesses were known to demand upwards of twenty or twenty-five mattresses to sleep on. With every ten mattresses, a bag of magic beans was thrown in free. This year, there was a special import of feather-down mattresses from Sweden, which the Purchaser had acquired through slightly dodgy Swedish importers. The longest-serving staff were outraged at this - “They shouldn’t be labelled as ‘Sale Items’”, they muttered. “That’s against the Sale of Goods Act 1997! Look what he’s done - stuck 40% off on them: they were never for sale at all!”. They knew, however, better than to protest.

Down in the chalice department, there were some other cosmetic changes to be made. Magic chalices whose sell-by date had passed - oh, not by much, though, a couple of months - had to be altered. Luckily, they were, precisely, “magic”, so it was simply a question of grabbing each one in turn, making a wish, and seeing the sell-by date change before your very eyes. But at least there was some sense of honesty here, and all of these re-furbished chalices were put out for sale at 50% off “while stocks last”. Not one of the customers had tumbled to this one. The head of the chalice section was a time-served old cynic anyway and he wasn’t going to let on. In the House-Plants section, four-leaved clovers were going at 10% of the original asking price. The Cloaks of Invisibility Department claimed to have all their wares on show - and no one could disprove that. Ogres and Witches were lurking in wait for customers, cudgels and broomsticks at the ready. Even the in-store café, “The Cornucopia”, was fully-stocked for once.

All was soon ready for the Grandest Sale of All!

There was just one little problem area. The Goblins objected to being marked down at 80% off. "Snot fair," objected one of them. "Effin' Fairies are only 60% off, effin' elves are 50% even. Us goblins is being undervalued, that's what. We demand our rights, right?" Soon there was a picket-line at the entrance to the "Supernatural Creatures" Department, formed by all the goblins, supported by a few hot-headed water-sprites and a pack of pixies. "Fair does for Goblins!" they shouted. "What do we want? 40%! When do we want it? Now!". "Equal discounts for all!" was the slogan, and some of the fairies and elves joined them on the line, out of solidarity.

In a sweat, the Sales Director consulted with the Finance Manager. "How much will this cost us?" he demanded to know. The Finance Manager looked into a crystal ball and did some arithmetic in her head. "About five," she said at last.

"Five thousand?" sighed the Sales Director "Well, I suppose we can afford that this time..."

"No," she explained patiently, "Five million."

The Sales Director was speechless. "What?" he said hoarsely. "Five million gold coins? But that's out of the question! We can't afford that, even with our Swedish mattresses... How can it be five million, anyway?" he demanded to know. "Sounds a bit steep to me."

"That's a worst-case scenario," she admitted. "If we put everything on sale at 40% off, then factor in the loss of business to 'Spells 'R Us' round on the High Street - ". The Sales Director blanched and felt quite dizzy. "Then I reckon on five million. However," she said gently, patting her colleague on the arm, "However, if we can restrict the damage to only the Creatures, then we might get away with a hit of fifty-thousand."

The Sales Director vaguely heard what she said and felt a bit better. "You reckon, eh?" he pondered, seeing a flicker of hope. "Fifty thousand? Worth twice that just to get shot of those trouble-makers. Let's see what we can do..."

The head-goblin went off for a meeting with management, to the accompaniment of cheers from his supporters. "Squeeze 'im for all e's worth!" shouted one particularly zealous group, the Aga- (or "hob-") goblins. "May the dust be with you!" were the squeaky words of encouragement from the pixies.

The meeting lasted all night; crates of beer and trays of sandwiches were wheeled in at regular intervals; and then, at 5am, one hour away from the opening of the sale, the head-goblin emerged. He belched and pulled some bits of roast-beef sandwich from his beard. "Brothers and sisters!" he announced, "We have a deal!" There were cheers all round. "What's the deal then, Brother Murg?" demanded one of the Aga-goblins.

"The deal - " began the head-goblin, then he stopped at corrected himself. "No: the demand which management capitulated to - " which raised a great roar of approval and excitement; "Our demand was for parity with the fairies and elves!"

"Yeah! Too right!" came the cries. A chant of "What do we want?" started up again, but the head-goblin put up his hands for silence.

"Right, lads! Listen up. We got parity - " His explanation was interrupted by raucous cheers from the assembled goblins. "We got parity - 40% across the board is what we got!" The cheers were redoubled. "Yes, lads, 40%! Fairies, pixies, elves, what have you - "

"What about the brownies?!" piped up a group of people at the back.

“Yes, brownies too!” confirmed the head-goblin, “Now then - ”.

“What about the dwarves, then?” growled another voice.

“Yes, yes, all of us” said the head-goblin testily. “Now, do you want to hear what else we got, or not?”

“Shurrrup, you lot at the back!” shouted one of the goblins, standing up threateningly and looking round.

“You want a piece of me, eh?” demanded a grumpy dwarf, getting to his feet.

“Stand up, shorty, and tell me that!” And so the insults flew round, until the head-goblin called for order.

“Now, the other thing management conceded, brothers and sisters,” continued the head-goblin, “Was that, if we go back to work straight away, then we get the recognition we’ve been looking for all these years: we’ll be re-classified as Spell Operatives!”

Over opposing shouts of “Gotcha!” or “What a stitch-up!”, the head-goblin appealed for calm.

“Different pay-scale, different conditions. No longer simply Manual & Craft, but Operative scale. That’ll mean a lot when we get to the next wage-round!”

“But we’re being sold - we won’t be here when the next pay-round - ” one fairy began to protest. She was thumped by a pair of goblins standing nearby and burst into tears.

“So I move we all accept this deal, being as what it gives us parity, *and* it gives us the recognition of our social worth, *and* on top of that being as it’s the best one we could hope for under the circumstances *and* it’s the best one I’ve negotiated for you in many a long night!”

“Good old Murg!” shouted his most loyal supporters.

“Sell out!” yelled the Changelings who had campaigned under the slogan “Less change for Changelings!”, which puzzled most people. But, being far punier than the goblins, they were soon silenced.

And at 6am sharp, the Hall of the Mountain King opened its doors to the throngs who had queued all night for the Winterschlussverkauf. And indeed, it was a sell-out.