

## Oysters, Hamsters

‘Oysters? Mm’m’mm. They know nothing! Pah!’

‘Not even drive tram! Ymn-ymn. Oysters? Pooh!!’

Haricot Bert and Broccoli Bill were discussing sea-creatures in dismissive terms. They felt entitled to. They had, after all, just won the most lucrative contract that had ever come the way of HamLabs™, at the expense of those oysters. Teddy Parker listened in, mostly because the hamsters were celebrating with a pile of yoghurt drops and several florets of broccoli, secreted in their campaign HQ in readiness for just such a day.

‘So,’ continued Bill after several minutes of happy munching, ‘HamLabs strike again. What we done now, heh!’

‘What we done now?’ asked Teddy nervously, looking around very carefully.

‘We only done got biggest contract ever, Teddy,’ replied Haricot Bert. ‘You forgotten already, dummy?’

Teddy bared his teeth, then decided instead to clean his fur. ‘Course I remember,’ he mumbled from somewhere half-way down his decidedly broad and healthy back.

‘We was supreme, heh?’ said Bert.

Bill snickered. ‘Another triumph of invincible hamsters over lesser animals,’ he crowed. ‘Brilliant coup.’

‘What’s coup?’ asked Teddy.

‘Coup is when hamsters outwit opposition,’ explained Bill.

‘Hamsters outwit oysters,’ announced Bert. ‘HamLabs now run Edinburgh trams.’

‘Hamsters have trams?’ gasped Teddy, unable to remember a thing.

‘Hardly cost us penny,’ remembered Bill smugly.

‘But hamsters had to give away technological secrets,’ said Haricot Bert in a low voice. ‘Don’t think HamLabs very pleased about that.’

Bill snorted dismissively. ‘Just some old plans they all forgotten about,’ he said. ‘Anyway, you just old worry-clogs, Bert. HamLabs no find out. Who tell them? Those oysters already on first fish-lorry out of town. Not hear from them again.’

‘Where they say they go?’ asked Teddy.

‘Lunnon-town. Back to Lunnon-town fast as they can. Good riddance to them. Come up to Edinburgh with Pearly Queen outfits, talking Cockerney. Real big cheese, they think.’

‘Didn’t talk so big to us,’ gloated Bert. ‘Soon cut them down to size. Hamsters brilliant negotiators. Oysters wanted half-a-million. Leave it out, says Bill. Took us just ten minutes to beat them down.’

‘Five thousand and the plans for SmartyPantsCard® thrown in,’ confirmed Bill happily. ‘Stupid oysters. They not know what hit them.’

‘What hit them?’ asked Teddy, now really confused. He pouched another four celebratory yoghurt-drops. Just in case he forgot again.

‘You no listen?’ demanded Bill in annoyed tones. ‘Hamster supremacy what hit them. Hamsters have - what that word, Bert? Pre-neminimance, that it. Hamsters have pre-neminimance.’

‘Oh,’ said Teddy hopelessly. ‘That good.’ He chewed for a few minutes. Then: ‘That prenenemy-mints - that why they got our five thousand and those plans?’

'We not talk about plans,' said Bert hastily. 'Walls have ears. We just call it five thousand. Dumb oysters. They got contract weeks ago, but they find out they not able to drive trams. Have to sell out. How stupid you get?'

'Well,' said Teddy eagerly, feeling more confident, 'Me get -'

Bert nipped the other hamster's tail sharply. 'That not question, stupid!' he muttered.

'So,' he went on, 'oysters looking to off-load contract. Thought immediately of hamsters.'

'Quite right too,' said Bill enthusiastically. 'Who else to think of? Skinny humans?' He laughed in a hollow manner and nonchalantly reached for a sunflower seed.

'Come all way from Lunnon-town,' said Bert. 'Say they got underground contract in Lunnon.'

'Unlikely,' sneered Bill. 'Rats got underground sewn up.'

'Rats?' exclaimed Teddy. 'Inferior species. Skinny pouches. Any here?'

'No rats here,' said Bill. 'Just us hamsters here.'

'Anyway,' continued Bert, 'start at half million. After five minutes they talking ten thousand. "That lot of money," says Bill here, all cool like.'

'Did, didn't I?' said Bill admiringly. "'Ooh, that lot of money," says me. "How about one thousand?" Dead cool.'

'Very cool,' said Bert. 'And then we got them down to five thousand and - and that other thing we no mention.'

Teddy brightened up at this. 'You mean the plans for SmartyPantsCard<sup>©</sup> ?'

'What we no mention, blabbermouth,' chittered Bill. 'You want get us all in trouble or what?'

Teddy Parker shook his head sadly. He yawned widely and looked around for somewhere for a short snooze. All this intellectual activity was making his cheeks hurt.

'Dumb oysters very pleased with the - useless thing we not mention. Said they going to use it to make Oyster-Cards.' Bill tittered. 'You ever hear anything so daft? Oyster-Cards? What they thinking? Oysters know nothing.'

'Oysters know nothing,' echoed Teddy Parker, pleased with himself.

'So we hamsters now masters of Edinburgh transport system. Today trams. Tomorrow the world!' Broccoli Bill sat up proudly. 'HamLabs get even richer once trams get started. Bert, you our Consultant. What it cost for humans on tram?'

Bert considered this. He chewed abstractedly on a carrot. 'Pound?' he offered at last.

Bill scoffed. 'Pound? Pound? You cheapskate or what, Bert? Two pound at least. Humans no get driven by hamsters on tram every day. Special treat. Two pound. So that make -' He paused. 'That make five thousand into two. No, two into five thousand. Whatever. How many humans travel on tram in one day, Bert?'

'Tricky question for Consultant,' said Bert. He consulted his ears for a while. Then he sat up. 'Six hundred exactly,' he announced.

Broccoli Bill considered this for a moment. 'Six hundred times two pounds, make - make Lots. Five thousand divided by Lots - make - what that make, Bert?'

'Make Not Many,' said Bert confidently.

'Not Many!' echoed Bill triumphantly. 'Hamsters have profit after Not Many days. We made for life, Bert! Even if HamLabs find out about You Know What, we already forgiven.'

Bill and Bert chewed contentedly. 'You drive tram?' asked Bill after a while.

'Me?' said Bert. 'Easy-peasy,' he confirmed. 'You?'

'In my sleep.'

They munched on.

Teddy paused for a breather in the task of building his nest. 'You say trams, Bill?'

Bill rolled his eyes and nodded. 'Trams. Yes, cloth-ears. Edinburgh trams. All ours now.'

'H'm,' said Teddy nervously. 'Says here in newspaper that Edinburgh Trams - what this word, Bert? Can-something.'

'Here,' said Bert impatiently, 'let me look. You no can read. Trams Can Not Be Stopped Now probably what says.'

He snatched the piece of crumpled nibbled newspaper and squinted at it short-sightedly. Laboriously, he read aloud: 'Edin - burgh - Trams - Pro - ject - Can - celled.' He stopped and began to breathe very deeply. Then he emitted a strangled squeak and gave himself a thorough cleaning.

'Cancelled?' scoffed Broccoli Bill. 'Here - you both dumb. Let me see. Me read better than both of you!'

Impatiently, he pulled the scrap of paper from Bert and read it out to himself. After a couple of minutes, he stopped reading.

'Hamsters have trouble,' he said mournfully. 'HamLabs not be pleased.'

'And oysters have coup,' added Teddy, proud he had remembered a new word.