

## Falling Angels

"Problems, problems, problems!" raged the Manager, "Why always problems on a Monday morning? Either Monday morning or Friday afternoon, when I just want to get away and play some golf!"

The Manager stormed around his celestial office for a minute, slamming his fist down on piles of paperwork which were buckling his in-tray. He had been given a stress-ball last Christmas: you were supposed to squeeze it hard every time you felt angry and then keep squeezing it until you felt better again. On the 3rd January, the Manager had thrown it clean through the plate-glass window when Gabriel had come in with yet another complaint from the Seraphim about the temperature of the water in the showers.

"All right, what is it now?" he said, sighing. He turned to the quivering angel who stood in the doorway. "Come on, don't waste my time! The Archangel want another surf-board for cloud-surfing? The Cherubim wet their beds again? Old Moses complaining about the young folks?"

"No, sir," stammered the angel in the doorway, who had just happened to be standing in the wrong place at the wrong time - "Off you go to the Manager!" they said, "Tell him we've got a major problem. Big problem, tell him that!"

"No, sir," he went on, crumpling his night-dress in his hands with nervousness. "Saint Peter asked me to tell you - big problems down at the Gates."

Impatiently, the Manager stood with his arms folded, waiting for further enlightenment. "Yes, and - ?"

The angel fidgeted. "Well, it's the Choir of Angels. It seems that they're falling..."

Aghast, the Manager grabbed the angel by the collar and pulled him nose to nose. "Falling - did you say falling?!"

The angel nodded, fearful.

"The last time we had that happen - oh no, it doesn't bear thinking about... It was Lucifer that time..." The Manager let go the angel and spoke to no one in particular. "Lucifer, the Fallen Angel. That caused all kinds of trouble. Don't tell me it's all starting again? I can't take much more!"

The young angel coughed and said, "It don't think it's as bad as all that, sir. I think it's just that -"

But the Manager turned on him.

"Don't you stand there and tell me it's not that bad, you young whipper-snapper! Don't tell me how to run this place! You young people just don't know what 'bad' is. Come on, come with me and I'll show you just how bad it can be!"

Without more ado, the Manager put on his hat and coat and barged out, the young angel twirling in his wake, left to catch up. Hat and coat were necessary now, with all the air-pollution about. Ozone layer was all shot to pot as well, so even when it wasn't raining in Heaven, you had to keep your head protected.

Down at the Pearly Gates, St Peter was scratching his head. What was to be done? The Choir of Angels had reported for duty as usual: a full programme of events today, that was for sure. Appearances all over the world. Bookings for months in advance. It was Christmas, so none of the Choir could take any holiday.

But no sooner had the first angels stepped out of the Gates into the sky below than they started falling.

Well, that wasn't right. Angels were supposed to fly, or, at the very least when they got old and dodderly, float gracefully in the sky. Certainly not fall like a sack of potatoes, shrieking and screaming in terror. Luckily, the Janitor was on duty and he managed to get all of them before they hit the ground; all except one, who ended up scratched and covered with bruises in an oak-tree far below. All those who had fallen were in hysterics, no good for any singing that day.

"All right then, Holy One, what's the gaff?" asked the Manager in a familiar manner when he came up to the Gates. "Bit of bother, have we?"

St Peter gesticulated widely at the crowd of angels clustered around the Gates.

"Don't know what's going on here, sir. Seems that none of them can fly any more, far less go on down to Earth and appear to the punters. Here, you, Silesius, get up here." St Peter pointed at one of the angels, who was at the centre of a small huddle of his fellows. "Got to watch this one, sir," whispered the Saint to the Manager, "Last time we had a problem, he had them all out on strike for three days."

The Angel Silesius sauntered up. The Manager gave him one of his chummy smiles.

"What's going on here, then, Sile? Bit of trouble with the wings, then, is it?"

"Looks like it, mate," said Silesius, sitting down on a passing cloud. "It's the new gel they've got up at the Bathing Pool. We were all there last night, as per the Ordinance - Thou Shalt Have a Bath Each Sunday. But I tell you, we washed our wings last night and now we can't do a thing with them. Just look!"

To demonstrate, Silesius held out his left wing. It was all floppy and droopy; shiny though. Normally the wings should stand up straight and be ready for instant flight. This angel was obviously going nowhere. The Manager looked at the others - clearly the same problem.

"Always the same," went on Silesius, warming to his theme, "They get in some new cheap gel and don't consult with the Brothers and Sisters, and look where it gets us. Just lucky some of us weren't killed. If the Janitors had been on strike like they promised - well..."

The Manager knew this was a bad situation. After all, he was the one who had bought the cheaper new gel. He had to do something. If Gabriel or any of the Archangels got to hear of this, his job was on the line. Or if it went higher...

"Right then, Sile, let's see what we can do here. Pete, can we use your office?"

St Peter shrugged and waved them into the tiny office beside the Gates. It smelled of stale cigarette-smoke, sour beer and was dusty with coal for the stove. On the walls were faded pictures of football teams and Angels-of-the-Month, about fifteen years out of date.

After two hours of tough negotiation, the pair emerged and, for the benefit of the assembled choristers and the Janitor, shook hands on a deal.

"Right then, brothers and sisters, this is the deal I want to recommend to you. Firstly, management will withdraw all stocks of the new gel and revert to the usual up at the Pool. Secondly, we'll get double-time paid until we can use our wings again. Thirdly, access to medical and psychological assistance for those that need it. Fourthly, management will hire suitable equipment to help us meet our engagements. All those in favour?"

The deal was agreed. And so it was that for three weeks over Christmas the choirs of angels arrived

- by parachute, sometimes in jumping-teams of three and four
- by bungee-rope, if they were adventurous (but that soon stopped after one of them mis-calculated the distance to the ground when jumping out over Aberdeen)
- by glider and balloon
- by jumbo-jet - this was the preferred mode of transport for the older angels, because they had the in-flight films and the drinks-trolley, and got to chat up the air-hostesses.

All paid for by management. It took a big chunk out of the budget for the year; but, as the Manager said, it was better than having a Fallen Angel or three.