



MAGPIES HAVE TUNES

“This major triumph for HamLabs™!” exclaimed Haricot Bert. “Look at stupid seagulls now!” Patty Perkins peeped over the edge of the saucer at the earth some hundreds of feet below. A flock of seagulls was flapping away disconsolately from the scene. Dotted about on the rooftops, there remained a handful of what appeared to be placid, contented, sedate seagulls.

Haricot Bert scuttled around the floor of the saucer, unable to contain his glee. “We done it! Hamsters have technology! Come on - hamsters must gloat!”

Without further ado, Bert seized the controls from Patty, who skirmished for a moment then decided to have a snack. With all the aerobatic skill of a gannet, Bert flung the craft into a vertical dive, and managed to pull up short about six inches above the ground, just outside a dog-kennel. The dog burst from the kennel, but Bert calmly put the saucer into AAARGH®¹ mode, and before you could say “Bumpy Stumpy Ballantyne”, the saucer was a hundred yards away, hovering as neat as you please in the shade of a pillar-box.

“Bit nifty, eh?” enquired Haricot Bert of his co-pilot, who was cowering under a pile of dislodged cotton-wool and carrot-tops.

“You dunce-head,” was Patty’s considered opinion. “You nincompoop. You break saucer one day with tricks like that.”

“You scaredy-cat,” replied Bert, jovially tucking into a piece of water-cress which was at least two feet long. “Hamsters have insurance.” It took some time for the entire length to be packed safely into the cheek-pouches. There was a contented silence in the saucer for a while, broken only by chewing and nibbling sounds.

There was a stirring in a dark corner of the saucer. A large white and grey hamster poked his head out, yawned massively and fell to cleaning his whiskers.

“Hey!” he shouted when all was done. “Anyone there?”

There were annoyed snores and snuffles from other parts of the saucer.

“Hamsters have work to do! Shake back legs, lazybones!”

Eventually, the grey hamster had to nip Bert and Patty on their tails, much to their annoyance. A scuffle ensued. “You bad hamster, Broccoli Bill,” complained Patty nervously. “You spoil beauty-sleep.”

When the dust had settled, the three hamsters held a council-of-war.

“Phase I of Master-Plan now complete?” asked Bill.

“Phase I complete,” acknowledged Haricot Bert. “No thanks to you,” added Haricot Bert. “You asleep all this time. Me and Patty do all hard work.”

“Correct,” confirmed Broccoli Bill. “That what it says in Master-Plan. Look...” And he pointed out a sentence on a rather scrappy piece of paper, which had suffered greatly from being nibbled, in an investigative manner, over the past two days. He read: “*Faze One - to be dun by Bert and Patty.*”

“So,” went on Bill smugly. “Phase I complete. HamLabs™ successfully replaced seagulls.” Broccoli Bill peered out of the windows of the saucers. “Nasty things seagulls. Swoop down on hamsters, frighten them.” Bill shook a tiny fist at the rooftops.

“Hamsters have no more bother from seagulls,” reported Patty Perkins. “All seagulls now swapped with GULLS®². All under our control.” To demonstrate, Patty seized a set of controls

¹ AAARGH - Automatic Avoidance Action for Rapidly Getting away from Hounds

² GULLS - Guided Ululators for Letting Loose Screams

which had been tumbling around the floor of the craft for some time. He began pressing buttons feverishly. All the hamsters peered out at a couple of seagulls roosting on the nearest chimney-pot. The birds did not move a muscle.

“Blast,” said Patty. “Dang. Must have run out of battery. Tarnation. Wait minute.” Patty rummaged in a pile of rubbish and finally unearthed a battery. With two deft movements of his paws, he had the old battery out and the new one in. He pressed a few buttons again. Immediately, the two seagulls stretched up their heads and screamed hideously. Patty jiggled a couple of knobs on the controls and the seagulls cackled and screeched. Finally, Patty pressed the STOP button and immediately the seagulls fell back immobile on to their chimney-pots again.

“Triumph,” confirmed Broccoli Bill. “Now Phase Two. Let’s see: what says here - Haricot Bert to unleash CROWS[®]³. You ready, Bert?”

Bert was just in the middle of a rather tasty corner of oatcake. Aware of the urgency of the situation, he pouched it and nodded.

“Phase II, Step 1,” he acknowledged. “Get rid of nasty croaky crows.” He turned to Patty Perkins. “Off you go, Patty.”

With the able assistance of Bill and Bert, Patty Perkins was eased over the edge of the saucer - which had been lowered to ground-level - clutching a mean-looking device. As soon as his paws touched the ground, Patty pressed a big red knob on the device, and a high-pitched whistle was emitted. Half a dozen crows, hopping in desultory fashion around the adjacent field, looked nervous and then took to the air. Patty scrambled back into the saucer, breathing rapidly.

“Hamsters not like crows,” he stated, needlessly.

“Patty Perkins very fat,” added Haricot Bert, Admiringly, puffing equally loudly. It was hard work pulling Patty back into the saucer.

“Hamsters no time for rest,” urged Broccoli Bill. “Phase II, Step 2!”

“Step 2 - deploy CROWS[®],” confirmed Bert. “Patty, send initiation message!”

Patty Perkins waddled importantly to the communications console, swept aside an assortment of vegetables, blew away the accumulated sawdust, and pressed the big green button. “CROWS[®] now deployed,” said Patty.

All three hamsters peeped eagerly out of the windows of the saucer. Across the road, at the edge of the field from which Patty had chased the previous incumbents, a large cardboard-box suddenly burst apart and out tumbled a variety of large black objects. As they disentangled themselves, it was evident that these were some kind of mechanical crows, for they walked across the field with very unbending legs, lurching from side to side.

“Phase II, Step 3, go!” urged Bill insistently.

“Step 3 - Patty, press blue button!” commanded Haricot Bert.

“Blue button...!” reported Patty, as, tripping over a small and untidy pile of dried banana-chips and twigs for gnawing, he fell face-first on to the communications console. He jabbed the said blue button heavily with his nose. “...pressed!”

As if by magic the half-dozen mechanical crows spread very ungainly wings, then sailed into the winter air. They flapped around in a circle for a few seconds, then, in pairs, flew down to lamp-posts and settled twenty feet above the pavement.

“Step 4 !” demanded Broccoli Bill.

“Step 4 - hamsters have fun!” Haricot Bert joined Patty beside the console. The two hamsters stared eagerly, if short-sightedly, out of the window of the saucer. “Wait for it...” warned Bert, “Wait - and ... now!”. At the moment when Bert saw a pedestrian passing underneath the lamp-

post, Bert and Patty simultaneously each poked a red button. The two mechanical CROWS[®] let loose a volley of crap from their rear-ends, on to the unsuspecting walker below.

Broccoli Bill had been watching through SIGHT[®] ⁴. “Bull-eye!” he squeaked. “Got him!”

“Hamsters have bull-eye!” agreed Bert, dancing a little jig.

“You mean bulls-eye, sawdust-brains,” said Patty.

“No, only hit one, numbskull!” argued Bert. “Bull-eye one, bulls-eye two.”

“Me not numbskull, you thickhead: Bulls-eye not two - bull-eye one, bull-eyes two.”

“Exactly,” said Bert, triumphantly.

Patty Perkins was about to say something. Then he cleaned his fur feverishly. While he did so, both Bert and Bill had an uproarious time waiting for pedestrians, then pressing the red button. They scored seven hits in as many minutes - two small children (who cried), an old man (who shook his fist), a postman (who did not notice), a cat (which wailed), and two cars (which swerved). After each hit, they yelled “Bull-eye!” at each other.

“Seven bull-eye is bulls-eye,” muttered Patty Perkins. “Or bull-eyes?” He thought long and hard about this, then cleaned his whiskers very very carefully. “Bull-eyes,” he said firmly, at last. No one was listening.

“Now Phase III,” announced Broccoli Bill.

“Hamsters have Phase III,” confirmed Bert.

“Bill has Phase III,” corrected Bill. “Phase III - MAGPIES[®] ⁵. Stand back, small hamsters!” Broccoli Bill swept aside both Bert and Patty - he was a big hamster - and strutted up to the console. He switched the red button for crapping crows to “autodetect mode”, confirmed that Patty was occasionally stirring up the robotic seagulls, then turned his attention to Phase III.

“Step 1: retrieve MAGPIES[®] from storage.” Bill pressed a series of switches and levers with lightning precision and speed. An innocent-looking wheely-bin twenty yards up the road suddenly reared backwards, then trundled down the pavement towards them.

“Now!” yelled Bert and pressed the red button. Two crows hit the wheely-bin with precision, covering it with a white sticky mess.

Broccoli Bill was furious. “You sawdust-brain!” he squeaked. “What you do that for? These MAGPIES[®]! Idiot.” He nipped Bert on the ear. Bert muttered angrily, but decided to keep quiet.

The wheely-bin, once green, now green-and-white, fetched up a yard from where the hamsters were hovering. Broccoli Bill moved to Step 2: deployment. The wheely lid flew open, and some remarkably lifelike large birds hopped out, dark blue, black and white. The MAGPIES[®] hopped to the ground, cocked beady eyes at the saucer, then flew up into the surrounding trees.

Where, in response to some deft clicking of controls, and to the great astonishment of both Haricot Bert and Patty Perkins, the mechanical birds began to sing. “Rudolf, the Red-Nosed Reindeer”. “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas”. “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” And other assorted Christmas hits.

“MAGPIES[®] have tunes,” pointed out Bill, unnecessarily.

“You daft hamster!” shouted Bert. “Magpies don’t sing!”

“Hamsters have MAGPIES[®] that sing,” stated Bill, nonchalantly. “Anyway, I not complain about your GULLS[®] and your CROWS[®]”

“But GULLS[®] screech and CROWS[®] crap just like normal gulls and crows. Magpies not sing!” argued Bert.

⁴ SIGHT - Super Intensity Goggles High Technology

⁵ MAGPIES - Megatronic Automota for Grabbing Pieces of Interesting and Excellent Stuff

“And not Christmas,” added Patty Perkins, somewhat glumly. “Only July. Hamsters like Christmas,” he murmured, wistfully. “Chocolate drops every day. For weeks,” he added. “MAGPIES® have tunes,” repeated Broccoli Bill, defiantly. He cocked his head out of the window, listening to the glorious wall of song. As he did so, he noticed all kinds of humans emerging from their houses, startled by the new-found voices of the raucous magpies. “Oh oh...” said, Patty. “Skinny-pouches at four o’clock!”

It did not take long for the local residents to discover that the MAGPIES® were not real birds. The more adventurous among them grabbed the MAGPIES® by the throat, turned them upside down and dismantled the intricate mechanisms.

“Oh no!” cried Bill, anguished, “Nosey skinny-pouches poking in HamLabs™ technology. All our secrets out!”

“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” muttered Patty Perkins, covering his eyes.

Broccoli Bill’s worst fears were realised. Within minutes, small boys had turned their attention, firstly to the CROWS®, then, with the aid of their parents, to the GULLS®. Small robins, passing bumble-bees and irate blackbirds were also subjected to unwelcome interference, but were able to fly away, squawking or buzzing their outrage.

Soon the pride of HamLabs™ was lying in bits on the ground.

Sadly, the three hamsters switched off their communications console, polished their noses, and ate a carrot-top or two.

Then Haricot Bert turned on the engines, and the hamsters swept up and away into the sky.

“This major upset for HamLabs™,” he announced sadly.

“Hamsters have upset,” agreed Patty Perkins.

Broccoli Bill said nothing, but pushed his whiskers deeper into the cotton-wool and slept.

