

FOOL'S PROOF

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HUSZAR BOOKS

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UMAN-BEINGS *(also known as Hewmen, abbrev: Men)*
are bipedal, but lack feathers, beaks, or the power of flight.

Uman-beings possess a rudimentary yet serviceable spoken language, grammatically similar to our own and thus not difficult for any enthusiastic pet-keeper to learn. In addition, certain male Hewmen are able to utilize a system of notation which bears a surprising resemblance to our Scratchmarken.

The social organization of Uman-beings also mirrors our own. The best-studied Hewmen (those whose large sandstone hive is to be found near our Noble Stronghold) appear to have their own version of a royal family, court, peasants, and so forth.

*Indeed, scratches the eminent scholar Colo the Elder,
"If imitation be flattery, men have praised magpie kind
since the dawn of days".*

—Colo the Younger,
A Hatchling's Guide to Animals.

NO NOTE EVER SOUNDS, *without some note in echo.*

—Grandmaster Bharr,
Observations.

CHAPTER 1

THE GUARD WATCHING OVER THE evening market was a big, tall, strong wench of exactly the kind who watches over markets the whole world round. She had the standard town emblem sewn on her sleeve, the typical ill-shorn hair stuffed up under her helmet's molded brass curls, the all-too-common dribble of spit in one corner of her mouth from the big clod of maidenroot she chewed. It had lost its flavor, though perhaps not its effectiveness at preventing brats; she hooked its herbal cud out of her mouth with one finger and flung it into the mud beside a cattle trough, looking up just in time to see trouble coming— a street jester, shoving the crowd aside in his zeal to make some complaint.

With a yawn she pulled a bolt from the pouch slung beside her crossbow: a small blunt one, enough for a man. And now here was the jester.

The long striped tassel of his hat hung limp. His face glowed red with indignation. Something far more annoying than the summer flies, the stink of livestock for sale, and the wall of rain clouds threatening the sunset had worked him up.

“Hoy. Guard. There’s a penny-poacher over there, do you see him? Him! The one with the bird! Get him off our territory. Damn it deep, it’s already hard enough to make a living around here.”

“So whata ya want from *me*?”

“Shoot him with a stinger bolt, for Ye Gods’ sakes. Or something. Can’t you see he’s stealing our audience? Look. Look! They’re putting coins in his hat— and that’s no street-license hat. He’s obviously some rich man’s private Fool. So what’s he doing out here, poaching from the likes of us? Shoot the greedy wight! There are laws!”

The guard's watch was over at sunset. She glared down at the street jester.

"Till a town officer gets here, *I'm* the law, fella. So go on back and juggle ya balls. I've got work here. Someone's tryna—" she craned her neck—"I dunno, do a suspicious."

Before he could reply to this, a great din erupted from the market square. Something black and white flashed up out of the crowd, then plunged back down into it, screeching and cursing as if the voices of a dozen angry sailors had somehow come together in one throat. A mass of men surged toward the guard and she could see that every one of them belonged to the Public Amusements Guild, with his tassel and his baton and a tag with writing on it pinned to his shoulder. They were chasing somebody. Somebody in a drab, old-fashioned linen smock like the kind a monk would wear, and ridiculously oversized women's workboots, and a hat whose beautiful embroidery and numerous bells made it shine out like a well-polished lamp among cheap candles.

The Fool under it had a face so unexceptional the guard really couldn't have described it. But Great God Almighty, the man had flair! Even as he ran for his life, he was able to turn a very accurate handspring, kick his booted heels together and shout a few bars of some song that went "Help Me, O Help Me, Woman Are You Blind". The guard watched him and his pursuers sweep past, fascinated, and her finger lay motionless beside the trigger of her weapon until she realized it was too late to do anything at all. The fellow complaining to her had been swept away with the strange parade. Nothing was left but footprints in the clay road that led down to the river, where a weird little ferryboat shuttled people to the Whellen Country.

Vendors began striking their tents and packing away their wares. The wind kicked up and everywhere the evening turned a soft and sparkling gray. Rain gathered on the brim of the guard's helmet and dripped down her neck as she put the small crossbow bolt back in its pouch.

She gave a contented little snort. The Whellen Country!

She had been raised to want no truck with that place, nor with the crazy old hag who ruled it, but somehow she found herself wishing she were there. She wanted to watch the rich man's fancy Fool, as he learned the hard way that he ought to keep his jingles out of other people's business.

ONE BY ONE THE CROWD of squalid street-license hacks on the riverbank quit making their threats and obscene gestures. Malfred Murd, seated on the downstream gunwale of a departing ferryboat, leaned out from the knot of other passengers for a final glimpse of the knapsack which had hauled his meager belongings and his still more meager bankroll from one pisspot of a town to the next for all these weary months, and— what was infinitely worse, worse to the power of hundreds, of thousands— a final glimpse of his hat.

Even now, as some cut-rate provincial gagflogger dared to set it atop his lousy head, the hat had dignity. Sunset kissed the tarnished engraving of its bells, caressed its matted velvet, and whispered endearments to its faded comical embroidery of roosters laying eggs and nullicorns dancing with very un-virginal hunters. But the towering scrawny oaf seated beside Malfred elbowed him, and he had to turn away for a moment and then— just like that— when he looked again the hat was gone.

The magpie Corvinalias was still diving into the crowd after it, over and over, doing a fair imitation of an enraged falcon, but Malfred knew it was useless. His midsection felt strangely full: not of food, certainly, but of more than its usual bitterness. What else could happen? Oh, right. It began to rain.

He sat and got wet as the other passengers all reached into baskets and boxes and bags. Everyone else had a waxed canvas hood or an oiled silk wrap or at the very least a cone of braided straw. The fellow who'd

elbowed him now kneed him, and shouldered him, and ankleed him in the process of unfolding a set of freakishly long, lean, sinewy, tanned and windburned mostly-naked limbs. The wight had a bag around his sunburned neck, so he was clearly a flyer— that is to say, a long-distance roadgoing foot messenger— but he was the most ridiculous one Fred had ever seen. Most flyers were quick mannish little wenches, who sped between the carts and wagons of road traffic like dragonflies between cattails. But this one reminded him of a big-nosed, sad-eyed and frequently-kicked male greyhound, which opened the bag and drew out a long, long oiled-silk rain poncho that flapped and fluttered and stuck to Malfred's wet face.

“Hoy, Stilts. Do you mind? I'm not your deep-damned clothesline.”

The flyer muttered a reply in the thickest Yondstone accent he had ever heard: it couldn't have been more of a caricature if a goat had yodeled it from a stony mountaintop. A dozen juicy Yondy jokes were on the tip of his tongue and he saw his chance to make a couple of brass pennies before the trip was over, but then he realized that, without his hat, the other passengers couldn't know he'd ever been a Fool at all. So he held his tongue, wondering miserably how he was going to pay the ferrymaid.

But there was no ferrymaid. No oars, no scull, no sail. Only the craft moving straight as a shot across the rain-roughened water, passing buoy after buoy. Malfred's hair stuck to his forehead and his smock became a great damp floppy awning and the twin blister factories that served him as boots let rain come in— for although twenty years of professional acrobatics, dancing and stunts had left him as brawny as a common laborer, the boots had been made for Lumpy Lettie, the royal family's head charmaid, and his legs simply weren't thick enough to fill them. He turned around on the bench and knelt, drawing his feet up behind him and getting the seat of his breeches wet too. He sighed and stared down at the turbulent river.

This was probably a winchboat. He had seen such things before; on the Isle of Gold there had been plenty of winches, powered by ponies or

oxen or workers' strong backs. There had been a clever system by which food and drinks could be winched up to the royal chambers in an ornate gold-trimmed rosewood crate. There had been a water mill and seven windmills. Keep thinking about machinery, he told himself. About rain. About anything, anything except what the hottest hindmost Hell you're going to do with no license, no money, no hat and no future.

A black and white speck was following the boat, pulsing and flashing through the gray veil of rain, drawing ever larger and closer. With a fierce grunt of effort Corvinalias made a final wingbeat and flung himself aboard, landing hard on Malfred Murd's shoulder. His long black claws dug into the linen of the smock and he clung there, sputtering and trying to wipe his eyes and beak on the ragged stubble growing on his pet's jaw.

"Ye Gods, those low-rent fools can fight," he gasped. "I had to brawl like a gull back there. Broke two toenails and bent one of my remiges. I got a couple of licks in— I think I bit a piece off some poxy wight's ear— but it was no use. They took the hat and all your shinies, Fred. I'm really sorry."

"*You're* sorry?" Fred burst out. "What am I supposed to do now? Look. Look. I bet I can do the whole Topsy Turvy routine right here and no one'll give me so much as a half-penny." Without warning, he stood on his hands and began wriggling his legs as if they were two actors performing a puppet show. His smock flopped down over his head and he coughed at its musty stink. Not a soul laughed, although he did hear a yelp from the Yondy flyer as one of his boots hit something. When Fred turned back upright he expected to find every face in the boat glaring at him with disapproval, but for some reason most of them were smiling. One or two of them even winked at him and hoisted imaginary cans of drink to their lips. That gave him confidence enough to lean across toward the wench who sat on the opposite gunwale and say: "Did I give you a laugh, goodwife? How about giving *me* a couple of brass pennies? For the fare."

The woman shook her head. “Ain’t gotta pay any fare. Not till tomorrow. A holiday ain’t over till the midnight bell.” A few of her neighbors gabbled and babbled in approval. They spoke of taverns and barrelmusic and picturebooths and coinpuppets and dancing under a wyrmflight lamp; a tavern was the only one of those things Fred had ever heard of. He turned to Corvinalias.

“Well? Are you going to explain what you’ve chased me into *now*?”

Corvinalias purred soothingly. “Fred, Fred. Don’t get angry. I didn’t chase you, you know that. I only ever make travel suggestions— it’s those other Uman-beings that chase you. Shhh, shhh. It’ll be all right. I’ll catch you a nice big juicy mouse. Or a frog. Or a lizard. Or a whole pile of locusts. And then I’ll— whoa.” Corvinalias’s supple neck whirled his head around as if it were a flag in a sudden change of wind. His gaze was upon the Yondy messenger’s bag. “Did you see that?”

“See *what*?” Fred’s voice had an edge to it now. He was becoming agitated. Corvinalias purred some more.

“It’s all right, it’s nothing. We magpies can see all kinds of things Umans can’t. It’s— well, all right. It isn’t nothing.” He hopped higher on Fred’s shoulder, pressed his beak against Fred’s ear until the whiskers around his nostrils bent, and whispered: “It’s shinies. That fellow’s bag is full. Of. Shinies.”

Fred couldn’t help but gaze at it himself. *Really? Someone trusted a bagful of coins to this dolt?* Oh, if only one or two of them would fall out. And oh, if only those were more than just brass pennies. Oh, my God, be good to me, and make a few fall out that are moon-marbled silver, or glistening gold.

But the passengers began to shift themselves closer to the gangplank stored in the bow; the giant bony flyer stood up and a gust of wind plastered the tail of his poncho to Fred in a great damp slippery slap; fine soft gravel hissed along the hull of the boat and someone flopped

the gangplank down; everyone swarmed off the ferry and Fred's god was not good to him at all. Nothing fell out of the Yondy's bag. Indeed the fellow vanished into the crowd that was flowing from the waterfront toward some kind of noisy glow. Fred was about to demand that Corvinalias tell him just where in the furthest foulest hell they were, but before he could the bird cried "Jackpot, Fred! Meet you later!" and launched himself away.

FRED LEFT THE FERRYBOAT BEHIND and drifted through the streets. Very clean streets, he couldn't help but notice, paved with limestone cobbles so uniform they might have been tiles on a floor. No bothersome puddles here; instead the well-drained cobbles simply glistened in the rain, reflecting a galaxy of lamps on posts. He gazed up at the lamps for quite some time: whoever could afford them all? Even the King didn't send his servants out to hang this many lamps, and certainly not in a mid-sized street full of commoners. *Were* these commoners? They were all so well dressed, and as clean as the cobbles... then Fred heard a hissing, and smelled something burning. He pulled his foot hastily out of a gutter in the middle of the pavement where a dark-gray cable rushed swiftly along. It had run smoking against his boot and as he stood cursing at the long, charred scar it had left, someone grabbed the collar of his smock and yanked him out of the path of a wagon, clamped to the cable and trundling along at what would have been a brisk round trot if there had been any horses. The people in the wagon all turned back and stared at him as if *he* were the oddity.

Fred heard music, and jogged toward it, thinking to ask the piper or the fiddler or the dulcimer-drummer what the situation was like around here for illicit busking. But there were no pipers, or fiddlers, or dulcimer-drummers— only lit-up pavilions full of people dancing: skipping and jiggling and kicking up the Dizzy Dan around fellows who stood turning cranks on the sides of kegs. He had no idea who played the music. Nor any idea why children were lining up to put their eyes

to a hole in a crate, or what was inside it to make them laugh or scream or applaud.

Neither could he guess who this woman might have been, with her face on all the banners hanging limp and wet about the town. They were crude folk art and not realistic. Every year the Royal Family had proper portraits done; Fred had fumed at the way he was always shown sitting off in a corner, with his thumb stuck in a pie or some such nonsense, but at least those portraits had looked like them. These showed him only that the woman was old, and had some kind of gray tiara on her head. One of the banners had writing on it, but the letters were sloppy and Fred really couldn't tell what HPE XSSHN DA was supposed to mean— if that was what it said. But then he turned a corner and found himself in a square dominated by a big coaching inn. Under the eaves of its long veranda hung a banner which had clearly been painted by a professional scribe: ALL OUR PRAISES TO HER HIGH HONOR, DAME ELSEBET DE WHELLEN! HURRAY FOR YET ANOTHER PROSPEROUS YEAR!

It took Fred aback. He actually froze in mid-stride and looked around. He was in the Whellen Country? But then where were all the slaves, groaning at the bars of some dread gigantic capstan? Where were the bitter lakes of sweat and tears? Or the furnaces, belching filth as they poured forth shoddy brittle tin and cloudy glass? Come to think of it, hadn't these de Whellens been extinguished, or at least brought to heel like their co-conspirators the de Brewels, who— let's not kid ourselves, thought Fred, remembering the tribute they paid the Crown— were still rolling in gold?

This couldn't be right. He ran his wet hands through his wet hair, flummoxed. If this were the Whellen Country, why then, he'd be a blue-arsed ape. He'd be a rubber pumping bucket. He'd have a seven sided blister on his little pinky toooooooe...

There was. There was something by his pinky toe. Fred whipped off his burned boot and shook it and, Great God Almighty who is beyond and between and within, it was a coin. Hell's holes, a coin!

It was a single brass penny, dull and greenish in the lamplight, warm and stinky as a sweaty foot, but Fred could not have been more excited if it had been a wish-granting magical gem. His mind began racing, thinking of what he might buy with a brass penny. A drink, by his god, that's what he wanted. He strode toward the inn, boots squishing. But the closer he got, the more it bothered him that the patrons going in and out looked clean and prosperous, laughing under their lacquered rain hats, gesturing with hands full of rings. Fred knew what he looked like. Dodging another cable wagon, he scanned the street for the shabbiest people he could find. Some bedraggled travelers trudged by; he watched them go until he spotted others who looked worse; and by this means Fred soon came to know that off the square, behind the prosperous inn, there was a seedy one where strangers like him took their custom.

It wasn't really even an inn: only an open shed and some stalls meant for travelers' beasts. No glass lanterns here, no cheerful pavilions; just a few rickety tables and some smoky rag-wrapped torches, stuck into sockets in the ground. Low-budget drinkers sloshed through puddles on the gravel floor and dodged drips from the leaky roof. The emblem of a Brewel Country throwball team was painted on one of the inside walls, but visitors had carved so many species of genitalia over it, as well as one or two misspelled cursewords, that it was hardly legible. Fred gripped his brass penny more tightly and set himself to figuring out the least poisonous thing he could order.

"Sherry Lorroso," he heard someone say, and a laugh burst from his mouth. Who knew he still could laugh? Really, it was just too absurd. Lorroso.

But after Fred's laughter died he felt like weeping instead, weeping for one last taste of that exquisite dark nectar the King's butler used to

bring up from the cellar in quaint bottles thick with dust, and pour into red crystal glasses on an old, old, historic bronze tray. His body moved of its own accord, sleepwalking toward a crooked square window where a sullen innkeeper rattled crockery.

“Another Lorroso here.” He ordered as if in a dream. He didn’t know how much it cost. It didn’t matter.

The moment Fred took the dirty glass mug, someone tapped his shoulder. “New in town, are ya?”

A bumpy-faced fellow whose hair was longer and dirtier than the wig balanced on top of it leaned conspiratorially against Fred, who flinched in reflex.

“Well? Are ya? New.”

“Mmm-huh,” he replied. He didn’t know where to look as he tried a sip of the sherry. He gagged— it tasted like distilled horse piss. The fellow was still leaning on him.

“Where from?”

He forced himself to keep sipping, and the fellow leaned harder, until Fred said, “South.”

“Silver Bit? Oldmarsh? Coastwall?”

The fellow’s bumpy face was inches from his own, his breath ranker than sweaty boots, his insistent stare making it obvious that he could, and would, lean on Fred all night waiting for an answer. Fred set his jaw, squirmed the fellow off his shoulder and said, “Further. Now go away.”

For one blessed moment the bumpy fellow was quiet, eyeing Fred’s diminishing drink. But then he was at it again. “Ain’t no land south of

Coastwall. Not till opposite shore of the Midland Sea. I know, for once I used to be a sailor.”

Fred twitched as he downed the last of the reeking mug and set it down with a thump. “Oh, there’s something before the other side all right.” He turned away— but not before he saw the bumpy fellow snatch up the mug and lick the inside of it, his tongue inching against the glass like a big pink leech.

The fellow gave a belch of surprise. “You don’t mean the Isle of Gold? Really! You were a servant at the King’s Palace?”

Fred flicked a dismissive hand, which did in fact wave the fellow’s stink away for a moment, so he did it again, harder.

“Well me, I come from Coastwall, come up here to get work as a poet.”

That actually got Fred’s attention. “You. A poet.”

“Oh, aye, I’ve as good as got my license—guild just wants a written sample. Now, truth is I don’t actually know my letters. What I do know is a wight back in Coastwall who’s a scribe and he fixed me up.” The fellow tapped one grubby finger on the side of his greasy nose. “Wrote it down neat as you please, under the table like. Meanwhile I know my poem by heart. I bet you can’t top this: ‘Dear Dame Elsebet. You’re the greatest yet. Fifty years you’ve ruled here fairly, trouble has come rarely. You are wise and strong and skilled. Put me in your Guild of Poets.’ ”

During his months of exile, Fred had let a lot of his standards slip. Shaving every day had soon given way to shaving every week; paying some hostelry for a tub of bathwater had become jumping into a cattle trough when the farmer wasn’t watching; human meals like soup and sausages had turned into whatever vile tidbits Corvinalias brought him, jabbed on a razor and charred over a skimpy fire. But everyone has some depth to which he will not stoop— and Fred’s was letting this blister think he could beat him at poetry. In twenty years with the Royal

Family, he had composed poems beyond counting. He hadn't written them all down, but they could have filled a book: intricate, winding fourteen-line sonettos with not a rhyme in them, but only the whisper of agreement; lilting, looping mirandelles with their interplay of repeated words; doublets, heptoons and punchy little snap-songs that could be taken as bawdy or pure, depending on the listener. Grudgingly he decided to give the bumpy fellow a sample of the latter:

*"A clever young scribe from the Fen
said 'mistress, come sharpen my pen.
And if you should think
it has run out of ink—
why, sharpen my pen yet again.'"*

That one had occasioned a lot of giggling and raised painted eyebrows among the Old King's even older sisters. It was a classic. But the bumpy fellow only turned out his sticky lower lip, narrowed his eyes and after a maddening delay said, "I don't get it."

Fred took a deep breath and, wrapping the tail of his smock around his hand, picked up the vile mug. In pointed silence he strode back toward the innkeeper's window, hoping with all his heart that distilled horse piss cost less than a penny.

But the fellow followed Fred, grabbed his shoulder and whined, "Hoy, seeing as how you're rich, can't ya get me a drink too?"

"No. And I'm not rich."

The fellow became insistent, tugging at Fred's sleeve. "Sure you are. King's servant musta got a fat pension—whatever the King touches, it's gold, ain't it? On the Isle the buildings is all gold. I seen 'em from the deck of my ship."

"Go squeeze a boil," growled Fred, yanking his sleeve out of the bumpy fellow's hand.

The fellow scowled. "Hoy. Watch it. You don't want me to get cross, do ya?"

"I do. I want you to get 'cross the yard. To the latrines over there, and shove your thick head in." Fred thought that was good and witty. He strode away.

But the fellow got revenge. He waved his arms overhead and boomed out: "Hoy, mates! This rich fella says he just bought a round for the house! And he's getting the next one, too!"

A frenzy swept the shed. Some of the squalid customers converged upon the window, ordering more; others simply downed their drinks and fled, leaving their tabs unpaid. The bumpy fellow was one of these. He slipped away as smoothly as a braised eel, leaving Fred squarely in the path of the meanest-looking barmaid he'd ever seen.

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And Yes!

The sequel, POWER'S PLAY,
is coming in October 2021 !

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