March Against the Foe

Isaac Asimov

**“**TELL ME, GEORGE, HAVE YOU EVER thought of getting a job?” I asked.

We had finished dinner and were walking through the mellow- twilight along the edge of the park. I had asked the question idly. I knew he never had.

But he did shudder and a look of nameless horror passed across his face, as though he had suddenly found himself gazing into a pit of writhing vipers.

“That is no question,” he said, hollowly, “to ask a gentleman who is placidly digesting one of your less-than-scrumptious din­ners.”

“Why not?” I was annoyed enough at his description of the lav­ish meal I had provided him to pursue rhe subject. “Uncounted mil­lions of human beings work for a living.”

“Yes,” said George. “Exactly. So they do. And I believe I am quite right to choose not to be one of their number.” He heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the profoundest depths of his being. “Have I never told you the tale of Cuthbert Cantrip Culloden?”

“No, George, you haven’t, and I am grateful for it. Thank you.”

George seated himself at a park bench that had just been vacated by a New York gentleman of the hippy persuasion and said, “I will now tell you the tale of Cuthbert Cantrip Culloden.”

Desperately, I tried to fend it off. “Culloden.” I said, “is an interesting name. At the Battle of Culloden in 1745—”

Cuthbert Cantrip Culloden [said George] had been a classmate of mine at the old university. He was not a remarkable fellow and not one of his names lent themselves to the easy informality of a short­ened nickname. It was, of course, impossible to call him Cuth or Cant or Rip or Cull or Loden, and we ended up—

Why, yes, now that you mention it, it might have been possible to call him Bert, but we never thought of that. It’s just as well, too, for I had a better solution to the problem. I called him “Cussword,” which, as a reasonable facsimile of his first name, was at once adopted by all and sundry.

That seemed to induce a certain gratitude in him. At least, he called me several cusswords in return.

These things build a friendship you know and all through our years at the university we remained close. And when we graduated we swore that we would remain friends through all eventualities and that, without fail, on the anniversary of our graduation we would get together, he and I, and have a drink to our old fellowship.

What do you mean, and did I? Without fail, old man. I never once failed to miss it. And I believe he never failed to miss it, either. Ah, college days.

You can imagine my surprise, then, when one day some fifteen years after graduation, I came across old Cussword, in a bar on which I was, in those days, bestowing my custom. The meeting was a beneficent one for I was busily engaged in an intricate financial deal that was failing to extend my credit for one more drink, when an arm threw itself around my shoulder, and a voice said in my ear, “This one’s on me, old buddy.”

And it was Cussword.

Nothing could have been more gratifying than his kindly offer, and in no time at all we were engaged in those reminiscences that are the bane and dread of all college reunions. He dredged up names and events that I preferred not to remember, and I was careful to do the same for him. And all the time I watched him narrowly.

Cussword had shown no promise at the university of ever becoming prosperous unless he met a woman of sufficiently uncer­tain age and looks and sufficiently certain wealth. Casual question­ing, however, convinced me that he had been as unsuccessful in this laudable search as I had been.

And yet there was an undefinable air of prosperity about him. The fact that he had paid for several drinks meant nothing, for any­one can have a little money in his pocket at some particular time. Rather, Cussword had a feeling to him, a kind of self-confidence that came from more than the immediate supply of coins. He exuded the kind of aura that someone would if he had a source of additional coins that he could draw on at will.

It was difficult to believe, but I felt that I was right. “Cuss- word,” I said, with a certain awe and revulsion in my voice, “can it be that you have a *job?”*

He had the grace to redden, but Cussword was a man of integrity who would not lie without good reason, or, anyway, fair reason. “Yes, George,” he said, “I have a job.”

His redness deepened. “In fact, George, I’m a vice president.”

I stared my disbelief. “Of what?”

“I’m Vice President in Charge of Corporate Enthusiasm at B & G.”

“What’s B & G?”

Cussword told me and I continued to find everything hard to believe. “Are you trying to tell me that B & G stands for ‘Bunk and Garbage’?”

“Not at all,” said Cussword, with annoyance. “You’re com­pletely missing the pronunciation, George. It is not for nothing we used to call you Tin-Ear. The firm was founded by Morris U. Bunque and Charles E Gabbage. Bunque is of an old English family and it comes from an old Teutonic word referring to oratorical expertise. Gabbage is of Dutch origin and is the term used in a regional dialect there to represent a rich fertilizing mixture. For some reason, though, the firm feels that ‘Bunque and Gabbage’ lends itself to misapprehen­sion and ‘B & G’ is the term generally used.”

“Very sensible,” I said, “and what kind of business is B & G involved in?”

“Why, there, George,” said Cussword, “you have me. I do not know. It is not my department. I am concerned only with Corpo­rate Enthusiasm.” He ordered another drink for each of us, which was a kindly thought, and said, “Let me explain Corporate

Enthusiasm to you, George, for in your happy state of unemployment you, perhaps, are unaware of the complexities of modem business.”

“Indeed, I am,” I said, repressing a slight shudder.

“The worst problem that corporations face these days is employee disloyalty. You may think that rhe average employee would be intent on having the business he works for succeed, but this is not so. The average employee,” and here Cussword began ticking off his fingers, “demands regular pay increases, job security, medical insurance, long paid vacations, and various other items that must all eat into the profits well earned by Bunque and Gabbage.

“When it is explained to said employees that all these demands would cut into the large annual pensions paid to Bunque, Gabbage, and several relatives; that private golf courses and yachts are expen­sive to maintain and cannot be properly taken care of if money is to be wasted on employees, an ugly spirit of dissatisfaction arises, which goes to the heart of Bunque and Gabbage.

“They have decided, therefore, to cultivate a spirit of pride in B & G, an exciting feeling of working for a great corporation and putting to one side petty considerations of salary. After all, you remember the football team at the old university.”

“Very well,” I said.

“And you remember the pride we had in it. No one had to pay us to be proud. We would have scorned money—unless it was quite a lot. Remember that time when the team actually won a game.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Well, that’s the spirit that was wanted at B & G. Someone at the firm happened to know me as a writer of inspirational songs at church functions and outdoor barbecues, and so they came to me to create the necessary corporation enthusiasm.”

“And you’ve written songs for the firm.”

“Quite a few. My best so far is a spirited marching song that goes” [and here he sang it in a ready tenor that drew disapproving glances from every person in the bar]

“*Ever onward, B & G, we march against the foe!*

*Forward, forward, B & G, the lily banners go!*

*Always there’s a little bit to spare for thee and me.*

*And always there’s a great deal more to give to B & G.”*

“Hmm.” I said. “Very stirring. But why the lily banners? Do you have lily banners?”

“The words don’t matter,” said Cussword, “It’s the spirit that counts. Besides we *will* have lily banners. I’m designing a corpora­tion flag right now that will have a fleur-de-lis design. The French, I understand, are no longer using it, and it’s silly to waste it.”

“But what about the little bit for thee and me and the great deal more for B & G. Is that fair?”

“Absolutely fair. Bunque and Gabbage need the money much more than the unimportant people who work for them. You have never seen their mansions. It costs a fortune to heat them.”

“Yes, but do the employees think that’s fair?”

Cussword looked annoyed. “There you have put your finger on a sore point, George. The employees do *not* think that’s fair. I have held seminars on the subject, complete with slides of Bunque and Cabbage’s personal properties and home movies of their darling chil­dren and I can’t seem to rouse any decent set of Corporate Enthusi­asm. In point of fact, I have been as good as told by Bunque, and also by Gabbage, that if I can’t show results in two weeks, I will be fired.”

That bothered me, as you can well imagine, old man. Not only was Cussword an old school chum, but he had just bought me sev­eral drinks and had never mentioned a word concerning repayment. It seemed a small thing to me to try to return the favor by means of Azazel.

Azazel was, as usual, in a state of violent protest, once I had man­aged to drag him out through the space warp, or whatever it was that connected his world and ours.

Since he was red to begin with, he could not turn red with fury, but his two-centimeter body twitched uncontrollably, and his long spiked tail lashed back and forth. Even the small nubbins of his horns seemed to swell slightly.

“What is this?” he said. “It was only two months ago that you called me last. Am I to be at your beck and call every moment of the day and night? Am I to have no private life?”

I had no choice but to placate him. “Please, Coordinator of the Universe. There is no power anywhere in the cosmos that can do what you can do. When one is the best there is, one must expect to be called upon.”

“Well, that’s true enough.” said Azazel, grudgingly. “But what in juguwolen do you want now?” He was sufficiently mollified to apologize at once for using that vile term. I didn’t know what it meant, but when he said it his tale briefly turned blue, so it must have been powerful indeed.

I explained to him the fix in which poor Cussword had found himself.

“And you say he was a schoolmate of yours? —Ah, college days. I remember an old professor I once had, a vicious grumchik, who was supposed to teach us neuroadjustometrics but spent all his time drinking phosphoamitol and showing up for lectures unable to speak, let alone teach.”

“I had a vicious grumchik, too, O Master of the Infinite. Sev­eral, in fact.”

“Poor fellow,” said Azazel, wiping his tiny eyes. “Well, we will have to do something. Do you have anything belonging to him?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “I managed to abstract the school pin from his lapel.”

“Ah. There is, of course, no use in trying to adjust the minds of the callous and cold-blooded employees of that marvelous firm that employs him. I will instead so adjust your friend’s mind as to make his views irresistible.”

“Can that be done?” I asked, rather foolishly.

“Watch and see, Miserable Remnant of a Fetid Planet,” he answered.

I did watch, and I did see.

Before the two weeks were up, Cussword was calling at my humble abode, face distorted into a broad grin.

“George,” he said, “meeting you in the bar was a stroke of luck or something because everything has suddenly changed, and I am no longer in danger of being fired. It can’t be anything you said, because, as I recall, you didn’t say anything sensible at all, so it must have been the mere fact that I unconsciously compared myself to you. There I was, a vibrant, handsome vice president; and there you were, a cadging bum—a description I use without any intent to insult you, George— and the contrast was such that I just went out and licked the world.”

I will not deny that I was taken aback, but he went right on without noticing how far aback I had been taken.

He said, “The entire body of employees, at 8:50 A.M., every work morning, sings ‘Ever onward, B & G’ with unexampled enthusiasm. You should see, George, with what vim and vitality they march against the foe. As soon as I have the lily banners, they will wave them with enthusiasm.

“We will have parades. Everyone will wear the B & G uniform, complete with a B & G sash in different colors and designs to show the level of employment. We will march down the main street to the town square singing songs, and I have written two more.”

I said, “Two more,” rather dumfounded at his daring.

“Yes,” he said, “one for Bunque and one for Gabbage. The one for Bunque goes as follows:”

“*Cheer, cheer for Morris U. Bunque*

*Without his wisdom, we would be sunk.*

*Watch him with his genial smile*

*That’s just like a crocodile. ”*

“Crocodile? Is that the *mot juste?”*

“Why, yes. He has long been known affectionately as ‘Old Crocodile’ and he’s rather proud of that.”

“What about the one for Gabbage?”

“That goes like this.”

“O, *whom do we love? Yes, whom do we love?*

*It’s Charles F. G-A-B-B-A-G-E.*

*We are below and he is above*

*Hurrah for him and also B & G.”*

“The trouble is,” said Cussword, “that Gabbage is difficult to rhyme. The only rhyme I could think of was cabbage, which is what he smells like, but I didn’t think it wise to say so. So instead I spelled out his name. Ingenious, don’t you think?”

“I suppose one could call it that,” I said, dubiously.

“Well, I have no time to talk further, George. I just wanted to give you the great news. I’ve got to go back now and organize a snake dance for the five-o'clock whistle, one expressing the great joy every employee has had at the opportunity of working for B & G all day.”

“But, Cussword, are you implying that the employees are no longer interested in pay increases and all the rest?”

“You don’t hear a word of it anymore. It’s all fun and games now. It’s all joy and hilarity. And its my job to make sure that every moment of every day is filled with Corporate Enthusiasm. I am sure that before long I will be made a partner in the firm.”

And so it went, old man. B & G became the center of an amaz­ing joy. It was written up in *Fortune,* in *Time* and in *Corporations Illustrated.* In the last case, Cussword’s face appeared on the cover.

And that’s the story, old man.

“That’s the story, George?” I said, with astonishment. “But it ends happily. Why has that soured you on the prospects of employ­ment?”

George rose from the park bench, and said, “I left out the last little bit. inadvertently, old man. Cussword was a resounding suc­cess. You couldn’t imagine a greater one. But B & G wasn’t. As a matter of fact, it went bankrupt.”

“Bankrupt? Why?”

“Well, everyone was having so much fun, and there was so much singing and parading and going around in uniforms that no one did any work, apparently, and the firm just collapsed.”

“Too bad.”

“Yes. Poor Cussword is an exemplification of the uncertainties of the corporate life. Although an enormous success, was he made a partner in the firm? No. His job simply vanished and he has been unemployed ever since. And you ask me if I have ever thought of getting a job. Why? To fail even in the midst of suc­cess? Never! Why only last week, old Cussword asked me to lend him five dollars and I couldn’t. Of course, old man, if you gave me ten. I could give him half and you would be killing two birds with one stone.”

I passed over the ten and said, “I suppose it would be too much to expect that I would really be killing the two of you.”

George looked at the ten-dollar bill, contemptuously, and said, “Well, you won’t be killing us with kindness.”

“Wait, George,” I called out, as he began to walk away. “What kind of business was B & G involved in?”

“I never found out,” called back George. “Neither did old Cuss­word.”