

Bumbles the Halfling Goes To The Store

A short story by William C. Brock

A bell jingled above the door as Bumbles the Halfling¹ entered Mr. Finkly's Various Goods and General Store. A warm smile, courtesy of Mr. Finkly himself greeted bumbles. The store was a usual Halfling affair: a hollowed out hill packed with various foodstuffs and rural items that Halflings would need to farm, if any of them were ever inclined to do so.

"Ah, Mr. Bumbles, is it Tuesday already?" asked Mr. Finkly.

"Yes indeed, Mr. Finkly. Yes indeed." Replied Bumbles as he picked up a small spherical device from the counter and began to play with it. It seemed to Bumbles as if someone had managed to stick a small metal ball inside a slightly larger glass ball and then grease the metal one with oil so that it spun freely inside the other, giving the impression that the ball, when spun, was rolling, even though it wasn't. It seemed to be an excellent way to spend 20 pieces of silver on a device that would provide about half an hour of entertainment, only to be discarded afterwards into a forlorn closet and never seen again until after your funeral, whereupon it will faithfully re-emerge and provide yet another half hour of entertainment. In essence, Bumbles was holding the circle of life in his very hands. It was humbling.

"How *do* they make these things Mr. Finkly? It seems as if a new one is out almost every year, to cheat honest people out of their hard earned money." Queried Bumbles, turning the orb over in his hand.

"Only the gods know Mr. Bumbles, and they aren't telling. Most likely because they have some capital invested in the damn things. They work in mysterious ways, it has often been said. Now, will that be two crates today?"

"Better make it four, Mr. Finkly. The family is coming in for the holidays."

"Very good, Mr. Bumbles, very good. Now let's see, four crates of barley wine² will cost you... ah yes, 268."

"268 pieces of silver? By Gods, Mr. Finkly, has another tribe of goblins sacked the breweries?"

¹ A Halfling, in case you don't know, is a creature approximately half the height of a normal human. They are known for their laziness and love of food, and big hairy feet. They are, for all intents and purposes hobbits, only less copyrighted.

² A type of potent alcohol favored by Halflings, due to the silly sounding name. The taste, however, is nothing quite as fanciful as the name implies.

“Pieces of silver?” laughed Mr. Finkly, ever so politely. “Haven’t you heard, Mr. Bumbles? We are using these paper things called *dollars* now instead of *actual* money! It’s all quite modern.”

“Paper money? But paper isn’t worth anything! It must take thousands of pieces of paper to pay for a... for a paper *clip*!”

“Quite the contrary, my dear Bumbles. You see the king chooses how much our money is worth, relative to other countries currencies and the mood he is in at the time. It’s all very complicated, but the gist of it is that every now and then our dollar will be worth quite much more than, say, the Stonebridge dollar, and we will be able to purchase things at a much lower cost.”

“How does you find out about the value of the dollar?”

“You don’t. You just go to the store and try to buy something and hope that the dollars value is close to what it was an hour or two earlier.”

“I don’t follow,” said Bumbles, nearly sick with confusion.

“Well, if you look here I have this handy ticker tape machine some clever wizard from Purplehedge invented. And on this tape is a minute by minute account, steamed directly from the kings chambers, of the value of the dollar.”

“How often is it updated?”

“Oh about every 12 seconds or so.” Said Mr. Finkly as he began pulling the tape through his hands, looking for something. “If you would have come in about 365 seconds earlier, you could have bought your barley wine for \$3.75 a crate. The dollar was very strong about 5 minutes ago.”

“And now?”

“Oh Mr. Bumbles we’re in a bad way.” Said Mr. Finkly, his voice suddenly serious. “We’ve been in one for the past 2 minutes. Don’t know how I’m going to put food on the table tonight, seeing as how bread now costs” he paused for a second, reading the ticker tape, “\$567,890,345.99 a loaf.”

“\$567,890,345.99 *a loaf*?”

“Yep, but don’t worry; most of the forecasts are predicting an economic turn around in the early evening, on account of the low-pressure system coming through. We might get some rain too.”

“What does the weather have to do with the economy? I had always thought that those two subjects were completely different fields.” Said bumbles, exasperatedly.

“It all has to do with this new FIAT currency, Mr. Bumbles.”

“Fiat? I thought you said it was called the dollar.”

“Oh right you are Mr. Bumbles, the dollar it is, but the type of dollar is called FIAT.”

“FIAT? What does that mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything per se. It’s one of those acronyms. Or abbreviations. I always get the two confused. Either way it stands for the words that the king said when he came up with the new currency.”

“Wait, you mean the king came up with the new currency? When?”

“Just last night. He had all his hunting buddies over and they had gotten to drinking. They ran out of mead before they were finished and decided to pop down to the brewery to get some more, but wouldn’t you know, the king had left all his gold in his other trousers, which has happened to all of us more times than we care to mention I’m sure. All he had was some sheets of paper he had been drawing his face on the day before, as he is wont to do, and presto, FIAT dollar.”

“Why did he call it FIAT?”

“Oh he didn’t... not quite. FIAT stands for what he said to the treasurer when he told him that paper isn’t money. The king stumbled up into the treasurer’s face and shouted ‘(F)uck (I)t (A)ll, mister (T)reasurer, I’m king aren’t I?’ to which the treasurer quickly nodded his head, lest he lose it you see, and left the king alone to invent our new currency.”

“So how does it work?”

“Well that’s the thing, no one really knows. The king got some sort of machine made by that dwarf company from Freeport...”

“You mean Echo, Nomics & Co³?”

“Yes, one of them EchoNomics machines. Anyway, this machine’s got a bunch of levers and knobs what can be used to manipulate the currency. Problem is, it didn’t come with any sort of the manual, and so whenever the king messes with it...”

“Hold on a second.” said Bumbles, now deathly ill from confusion, “Why would the king mess with a machine that he knows nothing about. Why wouldn’t he just leave it be?”

“Well, when the king needs to get something from the store, he likes the prices to be as low as possible, so he twists knobs and pulls levers till he see’s the desired result. Perks of the job and all that. Only problem is, since there’s no

³ A famous Dwarven company known for making all sorts of things intended to make life easier, but seldom do so.

manual with it, the damned thing changes the values right after the king let's off the controls, so his lordship has to sprint down to the stores before the prices change too much so he can get the best deals. He's lost 4 pounds already. It's all very modern," Mr. Finkly said as he started stacking crates of barley wine on a pushcart.

"Cant the king just pay someone to constantly be messing with it to keep the prices steady?" asked Bumbles as he eyed the ticker tape nervously. It had begun to click madly and print out tape at an alarming rate.

"Oh he does, Mr. Bumbles. He's got one of the chairmen from the bank doin' it. Name's Fed or Ted or somethin'. Funny thing is, the more he messes with it, the more unpredictable it becomes, and the faster the changes happen. He's now just contented himself to leaving it alone unless the king needs to buy something. He's also been havin' to draw more pieces of paper with the kings face on it, since everything is getting more expensive by the minute. There came a point a few hours back where there wasn't enough dollars in the world to buy a good sandwich, on account of there only bein' the twenty or so the king had drawn up for the mead last night."

"This sounds so horribly complicated, Mr. Finkly. Why doesn't the king break the damn thing and go back to the old way?" Asked bumbles. Mr. Finkly glanced around to make sure no one was listening in, and then leaned close to Bumbles.

"Speakin' strictly confidential Mr. Bumbles, if you had messed up that bad, would you be willing to admit it?" He asked, with a knowing twinkle in his eye. Bumbles thought about this for a moment.

"So let me get this straight." Said Bumbles in the manner of a man who is trying very hard to put two and two together and is failing miserably. "The king, after a night of heavy drinking, changed the money system from the traditional copper, silver and gold currency of most fantasy settings, a system that has worked for thousands of years and never caused too much trouble, to a system of worthless paper money which a machine that no one understands gives value to. This value is constantly changing and requires up to the minute knowledge for commerce to work, and no one knows how to make the machine stop. The king is able to change the values whenever he goes shopping, because it's the perks of the job and all that, but only manages to make the machine even more erratic and unpredictable, and the process have changed so much that the king is having to make more money for us because no one has enough to even buy a sandwich, and there's nothing I can do about it except sit around with old men on front porches and complain about how everything has gone to hell?"

There was a silence as Mr. Finkly thought. "Yes, that's right." He replied.

"Well then, Mr. Finkly, I shall need 12 crates of barley wine, and you can just put that on my tab."

"Very good Mr. Bumbles, very good indeed."