

The Enemy of Good

by Mark Shyer

Dixon sized up the bear. It stood on its hind legs, shoulders tight, claws raised, lips curled in a snarl, teeth on deliberate display. Its glassy eyes stared him down. Dixon stared back. The grizzly didn't flinch. A brown thrasher watched motionlessly, perched on a nearby fir with a grub in its beak.

Suddenly Dixon stepped forward, reached into the vest pocket of his mustard suit and pulled out a small black comb. Gripping the comb between thumb and forefinger, he reached up and teased the bear's fur away from its eyes with two quick swoops. He stepped back, assessed his work, and returned the comb to his pocket with the conviction of a gladiator returning his sword to its sheath. The bear looked aggressive, but not cruel; wild, but not unkempt.

"Perfect!" he declared, and carefully stepped backwards out of the pine forest and into the rotunda. The bear held its ground, the jay continued to watch. To their right a mannequin crowned himself emperor of France, next to that a pride of lionesses skulked across a yellow plain, chasing a white-tailed deer painted on the wall. Across the room a painted sarcophagus

was entombed next to the control room of a submarine, flanked on its other side by a partially assembled suit of armour. Another alcove was filled with dinosaur bones covered in layers of multicoloured dirt behind a pane of glass. In the centre of the room a circular bench surrounded an island of scots pines, which surrounded a tall trio of west coast totem poles. And above them, somewhere beyond the scaffolding that should have been removed a week ago, a World War I sopwith spy plane swooped in midflight.

Dixon's survey of the room was interrupted by a loud crack! followed by a high-pitched shriek. The crack! was the sound of a socket wrench hitting the floor next to Dixon at great speed, the high-pitched shriek was the curse word he spat out in involuntary reaction to it. Dixon followed up the soprano swear with a bass one upon seeing the damage: the socket wrench, now a harmless tool after a brief stint as a deadly projectile, sat on top of one of the hall's granite tiles, which had been broken into three pieces and pressed into the floor by the impact.

"Whoops!" called a voice from the top of the scaffolding, which Dixon knew, by location rather than timbre, must belong to Mills, who should have finished assembling that plane a week ago.

"Hope I didn't - everything alright?" Mills added.

Dixon could see him leaning over the rail directly above, a portly man in a pair of coveralls, originally blue but discoloured by improper laundering into a mottled green. Dixon's only response was to retreat to his office. "It's ok - I'll get it it", said Mills, the scaffold squeaking as he moved down its stairs.

Dixon's desk was strategically chaotic. Three piles of file folders were stacked diagonally at the front, deliberately arranged to frame his nameplate while making the desk appear full but not cluttered. A jar overstuffed with pens and pencils in various colours paid homage the creative aspects of his position, though he seldom wrote in anything other than the fountain pen he kept in his jacket pocket. One of the few items that wasn't a prop was a small wooden box of business cards which sat to the right of the blotter.

Dixon had just picked out a card filed under F for Flooring, when his office door, which he had left almost but not completely closed to signal privacy but not inaccessibility, swung open. Mills stood in the doorway, his hands held together above his belly as though sheepishly wringing his hat, though he had none, neither in his hands nor on his balding head.

"Just - just wanted to make sure you're alright," he

stammered "didn't say much down there - probably quite a shock - didn't mean - got to be careful, always, but - "

"I'm fine, thank you," said Dixon, speaking only to stop the churning flow of words from Mills' mouth. "Accidents happen. No harm no foul. Just be careful." Dixon didn't believe this, his words were like one of the rotunda dioramas - carefully cultivated to give a certain impression. In reality he was peeved by Mills' carelessness. But he needed him to finish his work. It would be easiest to simply never hire him back again than to fire him here and find a replacement. "I'll just have to call the tile people in to fix it."

"Oh good - I took care of it in the meantime - temporary fix - you know -" Mills relaxed a little, resting a hand on the doorknob, leaving a greasy smudge. Dixon preferred the invisible hat.

"Just do me a favour," Dixon said, eager to get Mills out of his office before he left any more traces. "Move the scaffold out of the way before you leave. I'm meeting Grace Bailey this evening and I'd like to show her how things are coming."

Dixon had dropped the name hoping to impress some urgency on Mills, but he gathered from his reaction that Mills didn't register who Grace Bailey was, hadn't put together that it was her name embossed on the rotunda wall in large seriffed metal

letters, didn't fathom it was her endowment that was paying for everything in that room, including the plane that should have been finished a week ago. And he'd certainly never met Bailey, didn't know she only cared about keeping her name front and centre in the right circles. When fashionable interest in a cause dried up, so did her patronage. And if something with her name on it didn't live up, off came the name and out came the money. Her standards were high. When touring an art exhibit her fortune had bankrolled, Bailey had reportedly dragged a gloved finger across a Van Gough canvas and, studying the result, proclaimed the gallery "grimy". She always wore gloves. And every article of clothing she owned seemed to have a bow on it. Hats with bows. Skirts with bows. Gloves with bows.

But Mills didn't know any of that, or didn't care, and it showed in the way he nodded and excused himself from the office, happy for the opportunity to leave, neglecting to close the door behind him.

Twilight fell on the museum like a banner unfurling. The high windows of the corridors deepened to a dark navy, setting off the orange glow of the electric lights. This was the perfect time to show off the new rotunda. The surreal quality of the the long evening shadows stretching through the museum's halls made

the dioramas - carefully staged, painted, and lit to mimic noon in the forest, dawn on the savannah, eternal midnight in the Egyptian tomb - seem realistic by comparison.

At a quarter to seven Dixon clipped down the stairs to give the rotunda a final inspection before Mrs. Bailey's arrival. Mills had in fact wheeled the scaffold into a discreet corner by the entrance, allowing Dixon to take in the entire space unobstructed. It was impressive. The Medieval armour had been assembled, and now all of the dioramas were complete. Only three of the eight, however, had had glass installed between them and the hall. A dolly piled with the remaining panes sat in front of the still-open submarine control room, surrounded by tools, screws, and empty coffee cups, all abandoned by the installers promptly at six o'clock.

This was fine, thought Dixon, better than fine, in fact - except for the coffee cups, that was sloppy, he'd remove those. But the rest of it comprised a sort of ninth diorama, a representation of the modern labourer in its natural habitat. More importantly, it implied that work on the new wing was moving forward, but not yet complete. Being ahead of schedule was just as bad as being too far behind, as it might imply that Mrs. Bailey's investment had been frivolously spent.

The one aberration in the room was Mills' "temporary fix":

a metal garbage can had been dragged from the ticket office into the rotunda and plopped on top of the broken tile. It stood in the middle of the room, not quite centred in any direction, a gleaming metal beacon of carelessness. The solution was worse than the problem, like a poultice on a pimple.

Dixon whisked the can away to another room and resurveyed the hall. The cracked, sunken tile still winked at him like a chipped tooth in an otherwise even smile. He'd have to cover for it. It was doable, he thought. If he stayed on Mrs. Bailey's right side as they circled the room clockwise he could block the offending tile from view. When they came to the Egyptian tomb, where the broken tile was most apparent, he would direct her attention up to the plane overhead -

The plane. As soon as Dixon's eye caught it his heart skipped, then raced. The plane was artfully positioned. The pilot was not. A mannequin sat in the cockpit, its head thrust forward, resting on the control panel as though the pilot had suddenly fallen asleep with his neck twisted the wrong way around. The pilot's left arm, meant to be casually crooked over the side of the open cockpit, hung slack in its US army uniform sleeve, the insides detached from the shoulder. The stuffing had gathered towards the hand and the entire appendage dangled lazily in a small circle.

Dixon sprang into action as though the dummy's injuries were real. He hauled the scaffold across the room, the metal tower rattling across the granite floor. He lined it up under the plane and took the stairs two at a time, cursing Mills under his breath all the way to the top. Technically the mannequin, not being part of the plane, didn't fall under the mechanic's purview, but that was no reason to be sloppy.

On reaching the platform at the top Dixon found he had misjudged the proximity to the plane. The dangling appendage was just out of reach. Dixon wrapped his left arm around the the corner post and hooked his foot around it for extra stability. Focusing all of his attention on his target, so as not to allow any of it to wander to the forty feet between him and the particularly hard material he'd chosen to cover the rotunda floor, Dixon slowly reached his right arm, then shoulder, then as much of his torso as he dared, over the railing towards the plane. Holding his fountain pen in his fingertips he managed to poke the pilot's arm. It swung away, then towards him. He stabbed at it again. It swung farther. The scaffold groaned. The arm returned, this time close enough for Dixon to grab it, the pen now clenched between his teeth.

From here Dixon saw two options. He could pull the dummy out entirely and squirrel it away before Mrs. Bailey arrived. Or

he could toss the arm into the cockpit. If he aimed well he could knock the head off the controls and drop the whole mannequin to the floor, out of sight. It was possible, but he only had one chance, and if he missed...

Dixon pulled. The dummy's shoulder slid over the side of the cockpit and the head lolled to one side, then stopped. The torso was caught, snagged at the armpit on the side of the plane. Dixon pulled harder. The scaffold creaked toward the plane. The plane pitched toward the scaffold. A stitch popped in the pilot's shirt. The head slid off the controls out of sight, but the mannequin moved no further. That was all Dixon needed - with the head out of sight he released the arm, tossing it slightly upward.

The dangling hand swung around its shoulder-fulcrum and landed out of sight in the cockpit. The scaffolding swayed violently, tossing Dixon from the post. The plane also swung away, taking what play it had in the heavy cables that held it in permanent flight.

His task complete, Dixon had a moment to consider his position, so close to the ceiling and so far from anything else - but only a moment before the plane swung back, twisting irregularly on its upside-down mooring. The tail of the plane clipped the edge of the scaffold, rocking the entire structure

backward. Dixon stumbled and fell to the back corner. For a moment it seemed like the tower would recover, and it might have, had the scaffold's back wheel not been parked directly on top of the broken tile. The wheel plunged into the sunken space. At the top, Dixon felt the platform tip dangerously to one side, stall, then continue its downward trajectory with fresh momentum. As the ground rushed up and his stomach lurched down, Dixon lunged for the only thing nearby that wasn't swinging unpredictably or careening towards the floor: the tallest of the three totem poles.

The scaffold passed the tipping point and slammed into the wall. A toolbox slid off the platform, spilling open as it tumbled over the edge, sending a rain of hammers and wrenches plummeting downward. As the base slid out from under it the top of the tower scrapped down the wall, tearing the letters G and R out of the word Grace as it went. The whole structure finally crashed down on top of the stack of glass panes, pulverizing them. A small avalanche of glass pebbles rippled through the rotunda.

Dixon clung to the totem pole, squeezing a carved frog in a desperate bear hug as his feet found purchase on a carved beak below. The totem, accustomed to boreal breezes but not leaping curators, toppled in its foundation. Its wing clipped one of the

smaller totems as it collapsed. Dixon held his breath, closed his eyes, and made a leap for the pine thicket.

There was a thud, then a smash followed by a sound like heavy rain, then a moment of stillness that might have been thirty seconds or five minutes. Dixon opened his eyes to find himself spread akimbo on a toppled tree. The smaller totem had smashed the dinosaur display; fossils and multicoloured dirt poured into the room. The scaffold lay in a heap, the large broken totem on top of it. Above him the plane still swayed slightly. Dixon heard a crunching sound approaching; he rolled over to see a pair of shoes picking their way over the broken glass: shiny black flats with a shiny black bow over each toe.

Dixon tried to speak but found his tongue obstructed. He spat out the fountain pen, now cracked between his teeth. He could taste the ink that dribbled down his bruised cheek.

"Perfect," he said, and passed out.