

**THE BESTING OF
HUMPHREY MERCER**

by

NORMAN ALLEN

The Besting of Humphrey Mercer © Norman Allen 2006.

Author has asserted his rights under the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or stored on an information retrieval system (other than for purposes of review) without the prior permission of the copyright holder.

Published in Great Britain by Twenty First Century Publishers Ltd.

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 1-904433-54-5.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This book is sold subject to no resale, hiring out, loan or other manner of circulation in form other than this book without the publisher's written consent.

To order further copies of this work or other books published by Twenty First Century Publishers visit our website:

www.twentyfirstcenturypublishers.com

**For Laurent Bachet, Chris Burton, Tully Crook, Lee Story, Peter Tish, and above all
to my darling wife Katherine for her unswerving encouragement.**

1 Humphrey Mercer's face looked like a death mask: chalky, tired, and cast with a grim frown. His hair was slicked down as always, but he stooped a little rather than standing erect in his usual ramrod, straight-backed fashion. Humphrey Mercer looked as one who'd recently been resuscitated from death as he crept along the corridors of Dynamic House on this gloomy Monday morning, to see who was in. Angela certainly wasn't, if indeed she ever would be, and Digby Hope was taking a break for a few days, to think things over.

Despite it being a good 10 minutes before people normally started arriving at the office, he thought he heard the distant sound of laughter and paused. It seemed to be coming from the floor above, but he couldn't believe that anyone in the creative department would be in yet, especially on a Monday. He shook his head, suspecting the laughter might be within his ringing skull. His tinnitus was louder than usual, and he wondered if he should seek medical advice. In fact his health in general had taken quite a battering over the past several months. He squeezed his forehead hard, wishing the ghastly events of last Friday had been a dream, but he knew all too painfully that they weren't.

The faint peals of mirth rose again and he was sure the sound was imagined. He was certainly not as alert as he was accustomed to feeling and shook his head again. Stephanie Hargreave his P.A. had gone to make coffee, so he turned towards his office looking forward to a soothing warm drink. As he moved laughter filtered down from above him again, but louder this time, and Humphrey Mercer realised that the sounds were not imagined, so he gently mounted the stairs, eschewing the antiquated lift and its uncertain reliability. The laughter stopped, and he stopped.

After a brief quiet moment, a voice broke the silence.

'Pin it to the notice board?' a woman shrieked. 'You can't do that, ee'll go ballistic,' and Susanne Vérdier's pretty French laugh rang even louder as the small group in Angus Taylor's office crowded around his desk. Dean Dalton dropped his head sideways and clawed back lank tresses of mousey-brown hair from his crooked face. He stared at the sheet of A4 paper on Angus's desk. Not overburdened with articulacy, Dean gazed for a while with a look of bovine-eyed wonderment before passing his well considered art director's opinion.

'Isstoo complimentary, innit,' he chuckled. 'I mean, shouldn't it be a bit more insultin'?'

And more obscenely disparaging contributions to the sheet of text were volunteered by the others. Susanne was facing the open door and saw him first. Her sonorous Parisian giggling transmuted to an instant fit of contrived coughing to warn everyone that 'He' was present. The Savile-Row-suited frame of Humphrey Mercer stood predatorily in the doorway.

'I would take something for that cough, if I were you, Miss Vérdier,' Humphrey Mercer's thin, flat voice sarcastically suggested, and at once the room was silent. The Monday morning atmosphere became as cold and depressing as a mortuary. 'May I share in the cause of this merriment, or are we holding a wake?' His stretched mouth curved into an unconvincing smile, more resembling a painful grimace. Angus attempted, surreptitiously, to slide the cause of so much ribaldry under some papers on his desk, but at the speed of a

chameleon's tongue Humphrey Mercer's short fingers snatched up the sheet of paper. 'Some of us have got work to do!' he bellowed, saliva splashing from his thin mouth, 'but clearly you lot haven't and after last Friday's fiasco none of you are likely to have in the future!'

He was referring to the recent calamitous new business pitch his advertising agency had made - and he had masterminded - to a Swedish paint manufacturer, the comedy of errors Angus's copywriting was so savagely satirising.

Susanne gave her boss a look of undiluted loathing and confidently strode from the room. She had already tendered her resignation anyway and cared not a jot for this buffoon's threats. The rest of the group quickly followed leaving the office's two official occupants at the mercy of their employer. Humphrey Mercer frowned as he carefully read the poster which was set out in a variety of different typefaces.

**COME TO MAD MERCER'S
ADVERTISING CIRCUS!
YOU WON'T GIVE US YOUR BUSINESS
BUT YOU'LL DIE LAUGHING
AT THE WAY WE TRY TO GET IT!
Hear the world's un-funniest jokes from
the biggest joker of all time
HUMPHREY 'HAVE MERCY UPON US' MERCER!
You'll cry for mercy when he tells another.
You'll die when you witness the savage throttling
of our marketing director by the mad Pieman!
THRILL AT THE SIGHT OF THE INCREDIBLE
EXPLODING CARDBOARD PAINT TIN!
A tour de force of farce and ineptitude
Starring: Murky Mercer and his coke snorting pig.**

Humphrey Mercer slowly folded the A4 sheet, stuffed it into his pocket and with a face etched with revenge, swivelled on his military heel and left the room without further comment.

Angus looked sick as Dean exhaled a soft whistle before delivering his enlightening opinion. 'I don't think ol' Murky found that very funny.'

Angus slowly shook his head and spat a reply. 'Well, what does the stupid prat expect? The pitch was a bleeding farce, wasn't it? This place is like a bleeding lunatic asylum' Angus's internal telephone rang. He hesitated for a few rings, uncertain whether to answer, then suddenly grabbed-up the handset. 'Angus Taylor,' he boldly, almost challengingly announced, naturally expecting the caller to be none other than his certifiably paranoid employer.

'Hello, Angus.' The cool voice of Stephanie Hargreave pleasantly surprised him; her smooth Canadian accent always thrilled him. 'Could you go to Mr. Mercer's office? He wants to see you immediately,' she calmly asked, unaware of any impending acrimony between Angus and her employer.

Angus's stomach tightened.

'Oh hell, here it comes,' he muttered. It never augured well when Humphrey Mercer summoned anyone through his PA. It was a sure sign of trouble, and Angus entertained

thoughts of telling him where he could stuff his job. Despite this young-blooded bravado, however, he preferred not to join the ranks of the unemployed quite so soon and would just have to bend with the expected hail of verbal abuse meted out by this arrogant and strutting martinet.

'If anyone wants me, I'm with HM,' Angus informed his office mate as he left the room.

Humphrey Mercer, better known by his colleagues as HM, was the managing director and main shareholder of Marketing & Advertising Dynamics - more commonly referred to as M&AD. He had failed, or refused to recognise the negative acronym the company name's initial letters created, he being the author of this bizarre appellation. A pedant and self assumed expert on most things - if not everything, Humphrey Mercer preferred to believe that the *thrusting and aggressive image* his company name conveyed was good for business. He dismissed any disparaging comment the name might elicit as *the ravings of madness* and justifiably, many people drew parallels between him and the mental condition the capital letters suggested.

Angus Taylor arrived at his boss's office and was beginning to experience an increase in his anger as he firmly knocked on the panelled door. He entered without waiting for a reply, bursting in to find his employer pacing the carpet his face shrivelled with fury. The cool morning light flashed across the top of HM's smooth, shiny, unnaturally reddish-brown hair as his pale blue eyes bulged at this casually attired copywriter.

'Are you quite out of your mind?' he screamed. 'You know I should fire you for this. What the hell do you think would happen if this got into the hands of one of our clients, eh?' Humphrey Mercer's pulse was in overdrive, his face an over-ripe tomato about to explode, as he flapped the offending flysheet in the air.

'You mean we've still got clients?' Angus flippantly quipped.

'Yes, and with no thanks to you or your damned insolence!' HM shrieked as he ripped the poster into strips and threw them at the floor. 'Your property, I believe. Pick it up and get out before I kick you out!'

'No, no, that's alright, you keep it and with my compliments,' Angus struggled against the rising pressure of suppressed anger within him. 'I thought this was supposed to be a professional advertising agency, not bloody Fawlty Towers!'

HM was by now fissionable. 'Th' the chairman shall hear of th' this irresponsible attitude!' he spluttered with a shrill squeal.

'Ha, ha, the Chairman. You mean *if* he's sober!'

Angus's derisive reply detonated HM's atomic rage. 'You're fired! You can collect a month's money from accounts now and get out at five-thirty, you insufferable semi-literate skinhead!'

'Five-thirty? You really would try to squeeze every last second out of me wouldn't you. You'd even bill your own mother for giving birth to you if you could. I doubt that anyone will have a job by the time you and Angela Bottomly have finished fucking everything up. You couldn't even manage a game of tiddlywinks in a kindergarten!' Angus raged.

Humphrey Mercer's mouth frothed, his face whitened like a chalk cliff. He suddenly growled, moved forward and threw a wild punch at this impudent employee now framed in the open doorway. Angus nimbly ducked back and slammed the door into HM's face.

Stan Molloy was the Chairman and original founder of the company and at 80ish had become an almost fictional image of M&AD's past, like the faded half-tone portraits of

ancient company founders printed on boxes of oatcakes, or on tins of mint humbugs. He rarely appeared in the office and popular notions held that he had an alcohol related problem and had been driven into semi-exile by HM's double-crossing, which had relieved him of his controlling shareholding. Such notions were entirely accurate.

HM had uncovered certain irregularities in the way Stan Molloy remunerated himself: untaxed consultancy fees paid to members of his family, a system of claiming expenses for things which did not exist; talents in which HM himself nobly excelled. Stan Molloy, whose daily habit it was to kick-start himself with a pre-lunch bottle of gin, treated this all as fair game, but HM - whose skills in avoiding taxation were fiendishly less obvious - had suggested to Molloy an adjustment in the shareholding to HM's favour, in return for his tactful discretion.