

Ernie, the Change Agent

by George Lightbourn

I could tell by his shoulder slump that Ernie was in one of his black moods. So, since one of my great pleasures is provoking Ernie, I greeted him at the end of the bar by saying, "What a great day to be alive, don't you agree Ernie?"

"Yeah right. It's a great day for you to stick your Mr. Sunshine act up ..."

But I cut him off. "Ernie my good man, what's got you down?"

"Michael Dell that's what – you know, the computer guy."

"What in God's green earth does Michael Dell have to do with you," I asked.

He shoved a crumpled news clipping in my direction. As I unwadded the clipping I could see it was a story from the business section. After I recovered from my astonishment that Ernie was reading something other than the Racing Form or the sports page, I skimmed the article. It was a story about Michael Dell's recent re-ascension to the top of the company that bears his name. "So what's this got to do with you," I asked.

"It's partly your fault you know. You and my other dopy friends have been bugging me to buy a computer. Crawl out of the stone ages I believe was the way you put it." I nodded. "So I had a good day at the track a couple of weeks ago and I buy a computer, a nice little Dell laptop. At first it seemed very cool; lots of internet gambling sites, tip sheets, the works."

"So what's the problem," I asked.

"Didn't you read the article? That goofy Michael Dell comes in and, before his chair gets warm, he's cutting out a bunch of middle managers, lopping off bonuses and making a bunch of other changes. Eight-to-five says no one will ever pay what I paid for my computer. They'll all be a lot cheaper if this Michael freaking Dell has his way. All that savings, all that efficiency, well it just ain't right. The prices will go down, down, down. Jeez, I feel like such a sucker."

He continued, "They shouldn't let him get away with it. He should be stopped. He oughta run his company the way we do things down at the DMV."

"What?" I asked incredulously. "This is the model for a company?"

"What's wrong with the way we do things," asked Ernie. "We've got thousands of employees, hundreds of middle managers and a clutch of guys at the top. They're all princes. We're all one big happy family, everybody's getting a nice check, we all get a good pension, we're all happy. I'll bet they aren't all happy over at Dell's computer company, what with things being turned all upside down and all. And the motoring public, they seem pretty happy with the way things are. They don't like a bunch of surprises you know."

Ernie held up his mug in the direction of the bartender and said wistfully, "No, government isn't like some dopey computer company. We keep things slow and steady. We aren't into all these gimmicky changes."

"But how do you know if you're any good," I asked.

"Oh we know, my friend. We know. After all, people are still lining up at the DMV aren't they?"

"But ..."

"But nothing. We've got the nice steady business that that crazy Michael Dell can only hope for. We ain't got some goofy bottom line to keep feeding. Nope, slow and steady, that's the way we like it. Now where the hell's that bartender? What's taking him so long?"