

Peter Saul and Mary Ltd

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For Miriam,
who is still surprised

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary. If you've ever worked in an office you've probably met most of them.

Peter Saul and Mary Ltd is an entirely imaginary business too. In this UK edition it is also an obviously British company using British corporate vocabulary. For non-British readers it is probably worth noting that 'Ltd' is the UK equivalent of the American 'Inc' but specifically denotes a company whose stock is not traded on a public exchange. The officers of a UK company are Directors and hold Board meetings to formally manage the company. Mary is Finance Director in this novel; in an American edition she would become Vice President of Finance or Chief Financial Officer.

Chapter 1

Mary walked into the boardroom. In her immaculate business outfit, cut just tightly enough to hint at the figure beneath it, she looked every inch the modern female executive. She was in her early thirties, and her crisp workplace efficiency was tempered occasionally by just a hint of femininity. In the office anyway. Outside the office... well, that was another matter entirely.

She was in a good mood, for this promised to be an excellent board-meeting. Profits were up, market-share was up. The others had not arrived yet, so she sat down, sorted out her papers, and then eyed up the contents of the picture-frames hanging on the panelling of the boardroom walls.

“Peter, Saul and Mary Ltd - Soulbrokers,” said one. “Our Mission: to become the leading supplier of souls to the soul-refining industry by the end of the second millennium.”

Three other frames contained portraits. “Mary Magdalene, Finance Director” read the inscription beneath the first. Her dark eyes looked back out at herself. A second offered “Peter Fisher, Operations Director” and showed a large round man, smiling but with disapproving eyebrows. As she turned to consider “Saul Tarsus, Marketing Director” the man himself stepped into the room.

“Morning Mary darling,” said Saul. Saul was tall, thin and elegantly clothed. “Insouciant” was his word for his particular style of dressing. “Camp” was nearer the mark, thought Mary to herself as usual. Saul favoured cravats in place of the more usual tie, and today’s was a particularly luminous pink.

“8:59am and 50 seconds, 51, 52...” intoned Saul. “At the third stroke, Peter will be here, *precisely*” and indeed, here was Peter, exactly on time as usual. He was followed by a small bearded man, dressed in a curiously old fashioned manner.

“Come on Moses, come on, you’re late. Morning all,” boomed Peter. “OK whose turn is to chair this one. Not mine I did it last time.”

“Mine, Peter, remember” said Mary. “I sent out the agenda, *if* you recall. OK, item number one, tablets of the last meeting. Any points?”

“Yes,” said Peter. “I really must insist that the tablets are issued within forty days and forty nights of the previous meeting. It’s simply unacceptable for it to be three or four months.”

“OK, OK. Moses, please try and be more prompt with the tablets of the meetings will you?”

“I expect to see it recorded formally on the tablets,” said Peter firmly. Moses nodded, head down, and scratched a note. “Company Secretary to issue all tablets within 40 days and 40 nights of board meetings” reinforced Peter. Moses nodded again, while the others winced perceptibly.

“I think we’ve got the point, Saint,” muttered Saul. “OK item two, financial report” interjected Mary hastily. “Basically things are pretty good. Profits for the generation stand at over twenty-five million Credos and...”

“I do hate these new Credo things,” interrupted Peter. “What was wrong with the good old Sestertii, I want to know?”

“Peter, you say that every time I present the figures. Since the government took us into the new single currency, it’s Credos, OK? 7.5382 Sestertii to the Credo. It’s really not that difficult is it?” said Mary, trying to be patient.

“I think the currency is rather beside the point actually,” said Saul, breaking in.

“What *is* the point then, if it isn’t that we’re doing really well?” asked Mary.

“Yes yes, we’re doing really well now, darling. But just look ahead a little. Why are we doing well now?”

“The Black Death,” said Peter.

“Exactly” said Saul. “Fantastic for business right now. Almost more souls than we can conveniently handle. But what about next generation? Since half the population of our dominant sectors will be dead, they won’t be breeding the next generation of souls, will they? There will be a lot less people, so there will be a lot fewer people to die. At least in areas where we have the main market share. Other parts of the globe will be doing fine apparently. But not us stuck in Europe, oh no. We’re going to have a big problem sooner than you think.”

“Actually, there are more souls than I can conveniently handle at the moment,” admitted Peter. “We’re having to take on temporary reaper-calls-centre staff. Anyway, Saul, you’re right. We’ve got a problem. What are you going to do about it? How about another direct mail campaign? The last one you did went OK, I seem to remember.”

“Oh come off it, Saint darling,” replied Saul. “That sort of thing went out with the dark ages. Letters to the Corinthians might have been fine in the classical first century, but I can hardly see ‘Letter to the Londoners’ or ‘Letter to the Frankfurters’ being a success in the mediaeval age. Most of them can’t read, for one thing. No, I thought maybe a schism would be a good thing to go for.”

“A schism?” asked Mary. “I though they were rather old-fashioned too?”

“No, no, this is the perfect moment for a schism, don’t you see? As soon as they divide like that, each side has to prove it’s best by going off and winning new converts for the faith. Just what we need in the forthcoming depressed market. Always works, and never goes out of fashion. And we’ve not had one for nearly four hundred years, so there’s no danger of customer concept fatigue.”

“So then Peter, will you organise it?” said Mary. “Saul, you’ll provide the theological basis as usual I take it.”

“Yes, yes” boomed Peter. “Leave it to me, I know just how to run a schism. I don’t think you need bother yourself much, Saul. I can create a basis myself for something as simple as a schism.”

“OK, Moses, take to the tablets that Peter will organise a schism and report back to the next meeting” said Mary. “Now, item two, forthcoming investors’ meeting.”

“Who’s coming to this one?” asked Peter.

“Mrs Carpenter as usual...” began Mary. Saul groaned softly. “And the Pantheon Fund Manager’s Alliance are sending a representative.”

“Who?” persisted Peter.

“The guy with the footwear problem, you know, what’s his name?” replied Mary.

“Mercury you mean?”

“He’s just a messenger” said Saul. “They always send him to break bad news to us. It’s not a good sign, probably means they’ve spotted the coming trends too.”

“Anyone from the soul-refiners?” asked Peter.

“Well, Beelzebub, the chairman of Hell Refining, said he might drop in.”

“He just sits in the corner and smokes all the time” said Peter.

“It is pretty hot in the soul-refineries Saint. He just doesn’t have time to cool off. Anyway, it’s not certain he’ll turn up. After all profits are up, he’s getting a good return on his investment, as well as plenty of supplies to his refineries. You know what he’s like, only puts in an appearance when things are bad,” said Mary.

“Depends if he can see the evil times ahead. Any of the other refineries?”

“Not heard. Anyhow, I’m planning to simply report to them that profits are up, we’re going to pay out an excellent dividend, so they’re all getting great returns on their money.”

“What if they ask questions about future trends?” demanded Saul.

“Well, Peter’s schism should be well underway by then. He can deal with them. Can’t you Peter?” said Mary.

“Oh absolutely. Just leave it to me,” answered Peter.

The meeting continued on...

...“And that’s about it. Good meeting I thought” concluded Mary. “Just before we break up, I thought I’d mention I’ll be introducing my new financial controller to you tomorrow. I’ll bring him round to your offices.”

“What’s his name again?” asked Peter.

“Croesus. He was financial controller at Olympus Souls, until they closed down, and then he’s done a spell as FD with Four Horsemen. Of course they’re a pretty small outfit. Anyway you’ll meet him tomorrow, as I said. OK, meeting closed.”

Moses tidied up his tablets and left quickly. Peter, the keys clipped to his belt jangling noisily, left behind him promising to get right on with the schism.

“Mary, dear, do you think Peter really knows how to do a schism? You know what he’s like. Charges at things like a lion at a christian.”

“Well, we’ll see won’t we? Honestly, he was so rude to Moses at the start of the meeting. He’s getting so insufferable I’d quite like to see him mess up the schism, even if it is bad for business. He needs taking down a peg” replied Mary

“Deflating, you mean” retorted Saul waspishly as he left the room.

Chapter 2

“Good morning Ms Magdalene” said the smart young man at the door of her office. He had a soft New England accent.

“Good morning Croesus and welcome to Peter, Saul and Mary! There’s really no need to call me Ms Magdalene, we’re very informal here, Mary will do just fine.”

“OK, good morning Mary then!”

“Lovely. Look, I thought we’d start with ‘the tour’, show you around, meet Peter and Saul, understand the organisation. How does that sound?” asked Mary.

“Just great Ms Magd...err, yes great. Lead on”.

“OK, we’ll start upstairs in Operations. Follow me. Peter Fisher is Director of Operations. Everyone calls him ‘Saint’, you’ll see why after you’ve dealt with him for a bit. And we call his floor ‘heaven’, although only behind his back of course. It’s mostly a big call centre, hell to work in.” Mary headed out of her office and up the stairway to heaven.

They went in. The floor was almost entirely open plan, filled with endless rows of desks. Each desk contained a computer terminal and a telephone, and seated behind it was a generally bored looking operative. They listened into a call as they passed.

“Peter Saul and Mary Ltd Ann speaking how may I help youuuuu?” said the operator in one breath. “You’ve died and you want your soul taken off your hands right away? Fine, just give me the name, house number and postcode... You’re in Spain, OK just the address will do then... No problem Senor Felipe, a soulminer will be out to you right away... Oh less than ten minutes usually... Yes, yes straight to heaven, we’ve logged your details, the database says you’ve

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