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Tighten the Screw!

Behind castle walls, a somber man wearing black tightens the screw...

John had worked for the company for twenty years, a friend tells me. During that time, he never saw the Executive of Trade and Human Resources. He once glimpsed the Secretary of Management and Production, but that happened when the electronic locks on the side doors malfunctioned and all the C-Class managers left through the back door, the Executive class noting a contractual clause which reserved the front doors for themselves.

Therefore, when a messenger came to tell John that the Executive of Trade and Human Resources wanted to see him, he became very excited. After he endured so many years of solitude inside his cubicle, anything might have excited him. He patted the guard-dog's head as he followed the messenger through the hallway.

"Don't do that," said the messenger.

"Why?"

"You might lose your hand. The you are useless."

The labyrinth of hallways was very ordinary: white walls, a white floor and a white ceiling dotted by the occasional security camera. An hour or more passed before John and the messenger came to a great, wooden door with gold handles and a guard standing on both sides. These guards drew their firearms as John and the messenger approached them.

"Wait here," said the messenger. He slowly drew a paper from his shirt pocket, and he held it in front of his face. Of course, he did not move suddenly because that may have ended his life. One of the guards snatched the form from him and read it. A long interrogation followed

before each of the guards and the messenger signed the form. One guard inserted a card into a slot in the wall, and the big doors opened.

"You may come now. Not too fast! Come!" After they searched John for weapons, and after he had tipped both guards, he walked into the office suite. Walking past several desks, each with its own secretary who watched him suspiciously, he came to the door of the Executive of Trade and Human Resources. He knew this because he read the plaque hung on the door. The messenger told him to enter immediately.

When my friend told me this story, he did not relate any formal description of the office, but I imagine that it looked like every other executive office since my own brief careers have generated the need to visit a few. They always appear so different, so unlike, the company they represent. It's hard to imagine a relationship between these offices and the places where people actually work.

The offices are large and clean, with plush carpets and leafy ferns on enormous tables. Photos and paintings, neatly framed, adorn the walls, each of them depicting beautiful landscapes and old buildings with tourists smiling and walking past. These offices seem so different than the gray, cement compartments crowded by machinery in the factories, or the plastic cubicles where clerks become mad with boredom to pay the rent. The greatest difference, however, one wall of the executive office always has a clock. Always. I suppose that workers shouldn't burden themselves worrying about time; the lunch whistle is enough.

A gray-haired man turned from his synthetic window and faced John.

"You wrote a letter," he said.

"A letter?" John replied.

"Don't lie, boy!"

"I don't remember any letter, sir."

I will read it to you," he said, and he picked up a paper from his desk. "Dear Sirs,' you write, 'I have noticed that my job requires me to turn a screw a quarter rotation to the left. I do this in order to force a supposedly defective connector on your product number 4835-AA. This added-pressure, my supervisor tells me, allows the connector to make better electrical contact, and thus ensure your fine product's performance. I have performed this task with other workers of my section, section 85-7F, during my entire career. However, it has come to my attention that the workers in section 22-1D perform the seemingly paradoxical service of loosening the same screw by a quarter turn to release excess pressure and thus prevent the connector from malfunctioning. It seems that these two work-sections perform a counterproductive service. Nobody should lose his job; perhaps you will move these employees to another work section, since our production remains eight to twelve years behind schedule. Yours truly, John David.' That is your name, isn't it, boy?"

"Yes, Sir Is is," John said with a shiver. His body wasn't accustomed to air-conditioning that actually worked on hot days. "I had forgotten. I wrote that letter five years ago. I assumed somebody lost it, sir."

"We don't lose things at Mirror Industries Incorporated, my boy! Is that what they have told you?"

"No. Nobody tells me anything. I --"

"And what about this section, what is it? ah, here it is, section 22-1D. Have you spoken with somebody from there?"

"I spoke with a gentleman from that section, if I remember correctly, sir."

"You do know that such conspiracy with other associates without the written permission from the company and a signed letter of intent is illegal and punishable by discharge? Don't you?"

John was scared. He knew what discharge meant. It not only removed a person from the company with retroactive loss of pay, but it precluded the fact that one may never find legitimate work again. Once a name is written on the Gray List at the Employer Information Center at the offices of the United Betterment of Worker/Employer Relations and Affairs in Washington, all chance to earn legitimate income vanished.

"It snowed," John tried to explain. "His car wouldn't start, and I offered him a jolt from my battery. He told me about his job in 22-1D."

The executive stood from his chair and hovered over his desk, his face red and quivering. "Did he volunteer the information? Or did you ask him for it? Did you beat it from the poor bastard?"

"No, no! We had only mild conversation. He volunteered his words. He told me about his hopes for a promotion if the factory resumes its schedule."

"I see," said the gray-haired man as he sat down again and poured some whiskey into a glass.

"I apologize," said John. The gray-headed man swallowed his drink.

"Perhaps it is you, boy, who seeks a promotion."

"No. I mean, I work for it, of course. But I never openly desire it. I understand the policy."

"Good. I dismiss you from this office, for the moment. The time spent here will be deducted from your pay. Now, get back to work."

Actually, a rather substantial amount of money was added to John's pay and credited to his Account of Initial Permanent Debt, presumably because someone made an error at the Payroll and Accounts Pending Office, and honest John wanted to inform them of their error. Ultimately though, he knew not to start another mess. After the meeting, he left the office suite

and returned to the work area unattended. The next shift had already arrived by the time he found his way.

My friend tells me that hundreds of years ago, another John screamed behind castle walls. A somber man wearing black stretched him on a rack and tightened the screws. Others heard his screams. They gathered, and they shook the castle walls until the stone crumbled.

Bryan Lindenberger's "A Turn of the Screw" originally appeared in *Pirate Writings*, 1995.