

## THE HERMIT'S MUSE

Gribble Thwonk was a hermit, although a gregarious one. Unlike his colleagues, he could often be found at the local pub, the Take It Or Leave It.

“How is it you can afford to drink here then, Gribble?” he was asked by Dudley Tinkler one lunchtime. “I mean, you hermits aren’t supposed to be rolling in it, are you? No offence.”

“None taken,” said Gribble, who enjoyed a chinwag. “You don’t come in here on a Saturday night, do you?”

“No, well, my wife and I have a sort of routine on Saturday nights, you see.....”

“Yeah, well, good for you.....but if you did – come in here, I mean – you’d see how I can afford it.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Heard of Ox-Eye & The Morons?”

“Of course. Who hasn’t?”

“Well, I’m their bass player.”

“Ah, I see. No further explanations needed. So, you’re quite famous then.”

“Oh, no,” said Gribble, declining his head modestly. “I mean, who ever notices bass players?”

Gribble had not been entirely truthful with Dudley. Yes, Gribble did play double bass with that noted band, Ox-Eye & The Morons, but he was by no means a regular. That would not be permitted by the rules of the Secret Society of Hermits. But he could not tell Dudley that. Neither could he tell him that the Secret Society of Hermits paid him a secret salary to stick to the double bass. For that was the role of hermits on the magical island Arcania. Each

hermit was responsible for developing the sound quality of one single instrument. And Gribble Thwonk's job was to look after the double bass.

"It's a lonely old job, this," Gribble would complain now and again to fellow hermits.

"Ssssh," they generally replied, although occasionally one would point out that being lonely was pretty inevitable for a hermit. An occupational hazard, as Sage Waghorn, the trumpet specialist, was fond of saying.

But Gribble was not so easily reconciled to his situation. He would continue to grumble and mutter, so much so that the walls of his cave would rumble with his moans. He became so unpopular with neighbouring hermits that they would send deputations to Council meetings of the Secret Society of Hermits. Fortunately for Gribble, Council meetings were secret and the deputations never discovered where they took place.

One summer, Gribble felt more than ever in need of his annual holiday. He sub-let his cave to an itinerant gypsy violinist, packed his bow and double bass, and made for the seaside at Redcliff Bay. And one day, looking for a bit of peace and quiet away from the frolicking witches and wizards at the beach, Gribble found himself wandering around the craggier sections of the cliffs. Bit by bit, a beautiful sound met his ears. A wondrous, joyous, mellifluous sound. Following its trail, Gribble arrived at the entrance to a cave, almost invisible in the rock-face except to the seasoned cave-dweller.

Should he go in? No, he was too shy.

Should he call out? No, he might frighten the source of the sound away.

Should he knock? No, he would just hurt his knuckles.

Ah – he knew what to do. He might risk losing the bewitching sound or forget his way, but it was a risk worth running.

In thirty minutes that seemed like half an hour, Gribble was back. The sound was a little weaker, but it was still there, sweetening the air. Gribble rested his double bass on its endpin, sat himself on the rocks, flexed his bow and began to play, as softly as he could.

Initially, the sound stopped abruptly, like a startled fawn might have done, if it had an instrument. Then, tentatively, like a slightly more emboldened fawn, the sound resumed. Encouraged, Gribble urged ever fuller, richer sounds from his double bass, and the player in the cave followed his lead until they simultaneously broke out into a resplendent crescendo.

A year or so later, Gribble Thwonk again bumped into Dudley Tinkler at the Take It Or Leave It.

“Hallo Gribble, me old mate. Haven’t seen you in here for ages. Not with the Morons any more?”

“No, no, I’m seeking purer harmonies these days.”

“Oh, ah? Er, fancy a pint?”

Gribble nodded rapidly and Dudley got them in.

“Look, Gribble, I don’t want to cause offence, ‘cos I know how touchy you hermits can get, but is it really true that you got married?”

“Yup,” said Gribble. Dudley caught the merest twinkle in his eyes.

“But I didn’t think you were allowed.”

“No, well, normally we’re not, but because we were both practising hermits and because Euterpe also plays the double bass, we found a loophole. Mind you, we have to keep to our own caves, although Euterpe was able to move into an adjoining one, so that was lucky. I’ve been thinking of knocking through, actually.”

“Blimey,” said Dudley, and he sat back with his pint for a moment to muse silently on the serendipity of it all.

“So,” he said at length, “No more playing in a band for you, then?”

“Oh, yes – well, no, not in a band exactly....but Euterpe and I are going on tour next month, actually. Come and hear us if you get the chance. Look out for the posters – we’re ‘The Harmonious Hermits’.”

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