

The story of
HOW HAGLING GOT RICH
or
"He who laughs last...."

Long ago and far away, Emperor Grim Longhair decreed that all things in Westworld belonged to him. This did not really surprise any of his subjects, who thought that anything worth having already belonged to the Emperor. Grim also decreed that if anybody wanted anything, he would have to exchange a token of value for it, even if the token was something as insignificant as a hen's egg or a small round piece of copper. And so the age of sharing and generosity was dead, and the Westworlders became mean and penny-pinching.

Emperor Grim enshrined these decrees, together with several others which are not relevant to this story, into a special law which was called the Grimlaw. The Westworlders thought this was very amusing, and thereafter whenever anybody had to do something unpleasant as a result of the Grimlaw, he would remark, "The law is Grim", and all his associates would roar with laughter, even when they were old and grey and had heard that particular comment so often that they would all say, "I wish I had a small round piece of copper for every time I've heard that one."

So with the publishing of the Grimlaw, a price had to be paid for everything, but a price was fixed for nothing, for the Westworlders soon

discovered that they loved haggling more than anything else, and many otherwise fruitful and productive hours were lost as they stood in the market arguing patiently over the value of some insignificant trifle, each trying to obtain a satisfactory price, before settling for a price that was satisfactory to neither.

Those Westworlders who proved adept at haggling were considered the most blessed among men, and were rewarded with the lofty if onerous honour of being sent out to do all the shopping, while those who were constantly taken advantage of by unscrupulous traders were deemed the most insignificant of creatures, along with accountants and lawyers, and were never invited to fashionable cocktail parties. All sorts of colleges sprang up to teach haggling abilities, and if they failed in their objectives they continued to remain popular, as the skilled hagglers who ran them were always able to convince others of their need.

And then one day a young and poor couple decided to confer the ultimate blessing on their infant child, and accordingly christened him Hagling, in the hope that he would live up to his name. With due consideration for subsequent chroniclers they kindly opted to spell it differently and omit the customary double g, although some rather disreputable historians have recently suggested that it may have had more to do with their poor education than their concern for posterity.

Hagling himself grew up, unfortunately, to be the worst haggler ever known in the whole of Westworld. He regularly returned home with some useless trinket for which he had paid a month's wages, and his

family had moved many times to increasingly smaller houses, before he was finally banned by them from going out unaccompanied. He was loved by the traders in the market, many of whom grew wealthy as a result of his ineptitude, and when they whispered excitedly to one another "Hagling's here", prices mysteriously rose and the merchants rubbed their itching palms in glee. Eventually Hagling's fame grew so much that if anyone was considered by his friends to have paid too high a price for something, it would be said that he had been shopping with Hagling, who, not being blessed with great intelligence, finally realised that he should let the rest of his family take charge of the finances and as a result very rarely ventured from home for many years.

But after many decades a strange thing began to happen. The Westworlders, being on the whole a rather superstitious people, began to think that the popular saying "You've been shopping with Hagling!" must have had at least some basis in fact, and that if they were in the market at the same time as Hagling, some of his bad luck might rub off on them. So on the very rare occasions when he appeared in the market, the other customers would slowly drift away, to the consternation of the merchants, who very quickly forgot that they owed their great wealth to Hagling and implored him, not always in polite terms, to go away.

And before long, all Hagling had to do was to appear in the vicinity of the market, and everybody who was in town to do business would instantly stop what they were doing and run home, and the merchants would reluctantly pack up their stalls in the certain knowledge that nobody would venture back to the market that day.

Hagling, who was (as I have already said) not blessed with great intelligence, finally realised that there was an opportunity to be had, and began to ask some of the wealthier merchants to give him money in exchange for not going to the market. If they refused, he simply went and visited their stall in person, which caused all the potential customers to flee the market place in terror, and before long the local Chamber of Commerce began paying Hagling several small round pieces of copper every day if he would deign to stay at home and never visit the market place at all.

Such a thing had never been known in Westworld before, and the payment became known as the "deign-geld", and the term was widely used for paying somebody you didn't like to go away, not just Vikings and other rowdy sorts, but also domestic nuisances like the bad violinists you get at tacky restaurants who play noisily in your ear just as you are about to whisper sweet nothings to the girl of your dreams.

Hagling soon realised however that copper is not worth very much, and since the merchants had once got rich at his expense he thought it not unreasonable that they should now return the favour, so he asked for several round pieces of gold instead, which after all, look much prettier. And the poor merchants could do nothing but agree, though they did ask in return that he should regularly visit all the other markets in the country so that their businesses could suffer as well. These markets in turn quickly began paying deign-geld to Hagling too, and very soon a bidding war had started, and wagons needed to be hired to move the small round

pieces of gold to Hagling's house. And Hagling grew richer and richer, until he was the richest person in the whole land, after the Emperor of course, who owned everything anyway, and Hagling lived in great comfort until the day he died.

Which all goes to prove the old Westworld proverb: he who laughs last, does at least laugh eventually.