

## *If a **job's** worth doing, it's worth doing well*

THIS IS ANOTHER pompous proverb, originating in a letter from Lord Chesterfield written in 1746 and now used only by smartarses. Yes, of course you should do things properly – the Welsh also point out that ‘A work ill done must be twice done’ – but modern management theory thinks highly of delegation, so you could always get someone else to do them for you (see ‘Procrastination is the thief of time’).

## *Never **judge** a book by its cover*

SADLY IN THE book trade this is a complete no-no: everyone judges a book by its cover, and if you don't like the cover you aren't going to bother to pick it up and find out if the insides are any good. All that glitters may indeed not be gold but anything that glitters is still going to catch the eye. A twentieth-century expression, this is as true of people as it is of books; there is a world of truth in the sorrowful dictum of the late Sir John Mortimer that ‘no power on earth ... can abolish the merciless class distinction between those who are physically desirable and the lonely, pallid, spotted, silent, unfancied majority’.

## **Knowledge** is power

BACK TO THE Bible,<sup>25</sup> where the book of Proverbs points out that wisdom, understanding and knowledge are more powerful than evil or mischief, even if the evil and mischievous people don't play by the rules. Bizarrely, it goes on to say that one of the things that knowledge teaches you is to eat honey, because it is good, but if you were brought up on *Winnie the Pooh* you know this already.

On a more practical note, anyone who has knowledge of how to put up a bookshelf, stop the kitchen tap dripping and avoid the computer crashing just when I've forgotten to save something would wield great power in my house and is welcome to send me a business card.

But there's a dilemma here: if knowledge is power, what about ignorance being bliss? Power or happiness? The choice is yours.

## *It's the **last** straw that breaks a camel's back*

WHEN PEOPLE FIND something after an exhaustive search, they often say – in all seriousness – ‘It's always in the last

<sup>25</sup> The dictionaries of quotations attribute ‘Knowledge itself is power’ to Francis Bacon, but he meant God's knowledge and power, which is not what we are talking about here.

place you look, isn't it?' Of course it is, I want to say: you stop looking after you've found it.

For pure silliness, 'It's the last straw that breaks a camel's back' isn't quite in this league, but it's close. Once the camel's back is broken, you're going to stop loading it, aren't you?

There is a 1655 variant suggesting that it is the horse's back that will break or that it is a feather that will do the breaking; an equivalent expression in French says that a pitcher carried too often to the well will finally break. All stating the obvious, you would think, but there is a grain of a message in amongst all this chaff: the tiniest little thing may tip someone over the edge if they are close enough to it, so don't push your luck.

## Laugh and the world laughs with you

*...weep and you weep alone;  
For this stolid old earth  
Has need of your mirth,  
It has troubles enough of its own.*

SO WROTE THE prolific American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox in the early years of the twentieth century. This improving work was so popular as a music-hall monologue that 'Don't you Ella Wheeler Wilcox me' became a colloquialism for

'Don't preach at me'. She's more or less forgotten, now, poor woman, but she wasn't a barrel of laughs even in her prime.

Not only that, but this is another example of the proverb-makers contradicting themselves, because they also maintain that 'Misery loves company'. But I think the point is that if *you* are miserable, you want to share your misery with others; Ella was suggesting that those others may not be so keen to listen to you.

## He who **laughs** last laughs longest

A MODERN EQUIVALENT of 'He laughs best who laughs last,' like a lot of proverbs, this can be interpreted in more than one way: either there's an element of getting your own back on someone who has played a trick on you (*see* 'Revenge is sweet'), or of biding your time to see if an investment (not necessarily financial) pays off. In either sense, it's a bit smug.