

# JACQUES-OF-ALL-TRADES

"So! Whom do we have here?"

"M-my name is Jacques."

"Speak up!"

"Jacques!"

"You have an accent. Where are you from?"

"Er ... S ... Switzerland. I'm S-Swiss."

"So why did Mrs. Hunter toss you in here with us just now? For oiling and cleaning too?"

"I don't know. Maybe she wants to use me for something."

"Can't imagine what for when you consider your present company."

Jacques timidly surveyed his new companions within the four wooden walls of the crate and had to admit to himself that he had pondered the same question.

"Maybe she'll need to open a bottle of wine," he mumbled.

"Open a bottle of wine?" one asked. "With what?"

Jacques flipped over on his side and with squeaking difficulty, folded out a corkscrew.

The little crowd erupted into laughter.


"With that little thing?" shrieked a curvaceous clamp-like tool, and Jacques dejectedly put his corkscrew away. "Sorry to make fun, kid. My name is Klein, by the way. I'm a wire stripper."

"I can do that too," said Jacques inspecting himself. "It's here somewhere..."

"Never mind," said Klein. "So tell me, why would Judy Hunter want to use you, when she has our friend, Wing here?" She pointed to a cumbersome contraption with a lengthy corkscrew between its long arms.

"Hi, Jacques," Wing said, grinning confidently. "As you can see, I'm no ordinary corkscrew. I'm what they call nowadays a 'screwpull' wine bottle opener."





"He gets to hang out at all the swanky parties the Hunters throw," said Klein. "The pride of place at the bar."

"That's right," said Wing. "One time, they were having this real fancy do, and Jeff Hunter had been bragging about his reserve wine. He pulled out Enrico, a flashy little Italian corkscrew, but he couldn't get the darn bottle open ... the cork had dried up, so it just crumbled and broke in two. So, who does Jeff reach for in that moment of crisis?"

"You, I presume," said Jacques.

Wing smirked. "Yup. And 'pop,' everybody's happy."

"Anyway, I suppose we should introduce the rest of us," drawled a long fishing pole with an impressive reel, leaning against the wall. "It's the polite thing to do. My name is Rod Fisher. Jeff always takes me on his fishing trips. Can't catch anything without me."

"I've been used for a little fishing, too," Jacques timidly said.

"Yeah, but Rod can sure reel 'em in," said Klein. She then introduced Jacques to Phillips, a large screwdriver who had evidently been napping, for he barely opened one eye to peruse the new arrival.

"Oh!" Jacques exclaimed. "I've always wanted to meet a genuine dedicated Phillips screwdriver, as I dabble a bit with that myself."

"Let me show you..." he said, struggling to release the tool to no avail. He stopped, seeing Phillips had closed his eyes and had rolled back onto his side.

"Hey, I'm Stanley," interjected a stocky utility knife with a short gleaming blade. "They call me 'Stan the Man'!"

"*Bonjour*, Stanley," Jacques said glumly. "Actually, I've done some ... never mind. Anyway, I *can* be pretty useful."

"I honestly don't see how you can be useful when you are so difficult to open with all that rust," said Rod.

"Yeah, man," said Stanley. "Seems you have some difficulty demonstrating your, er ... attributes."

"Well, I *was* used—full time," said Jacques. "Back when Judith got me as a birthday present from her husband. She kept me in her handbag and I must have travelled everywhere."

"So what happened?"

"Things started to get stricter at airports, and I think she considered me to be too much of a hassle to take along."

"Nice excuse for involuntary retirement," Rod said with a snicker.

"So what had Judy used you for?" Wing asked.

"A bit of everything. Snipping, sawing, you know ... little fix-its and stuff."



"I see," said Rod. "A Jack-of-all-trades..."

"Master of none," the rest chorused in solemn finality.

"I don't like that term," said Jacques. "Never have."

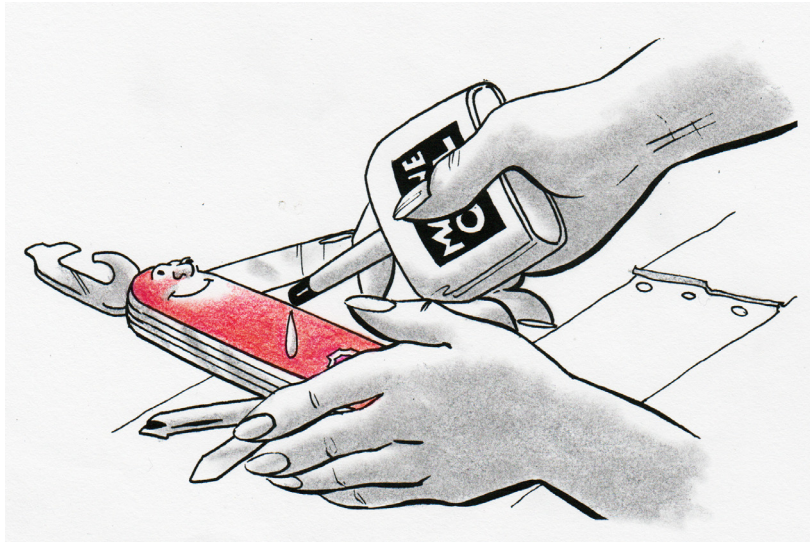
"Why?"

"Makes me feel umm ... useless."

Other than some clearing of throats, the tools and appliances responded to Jacques's remark with silence.

"But I wasn't useless! Like I said, Judith used me all the time."

"Whoever would want that?" said Phillips. "Too much work."



"Yes, but being laid off led to me not being cleaned and oiled," said Jacques. "That's why my joints became stiff and creaky. I wasn't used as much as I wanted to be."

"Sucker for punishment," Phillips said through a yawn. "Once Jeff has used me for some handyman project, I'm ready to kick back and do nothin'. If screwdrivin's your thing, stick to that, and only that. I don't believe in being overworked. Better a little rust than overwork in my opinion. Stay in your realm of expertise, that's what I always say."

"Me too," said Klein. "Otherwise you're too easily taken advantage of."

"But I actually *enjoyed* being used often..." Jacques said and smiled bashfully.

At that moment, the door opened and a tall, weather-beaten blonde woman entered with a skinny fair-haired girl of around eight years old.

"It's Judy again," Phillips whispered, "and her daughter Mavis."

The woman reached into the crate, pulled Jacques out, and laid him on the table. She took a can of machine oil from the shelf, carefully opened Jacques's knife blade and applied a drop of oil to its hinge. Methodically, she did the same with each of his attachments—carefully opening each one, applying a drop of oil then moving it back and forth until the squeaking stopped. It was painful for Jacques initially, but after a few minutes, he began to feel supple and sleek.



The phone rang in the house, and Judy put Jacques back into the crate.

"First in line for cleaning, Jacques," said Wings. "What's with all that preferential treatment?"

Jacques shrugged. "No idea. But whatever the reason, she took care of the rust, and I feel fabulous," he said with a beam as he whipped out one of his tools.

"Okay, but what on earth would Mrs. Hunter use you for now that you're thrown in with the experts?"

"I don't know," said Jacques. "Maybe to cut string, slice veggies ... lots of things."

The rest broke into peals of laughter.

"String and veggies!" Stanley howled with tears of mirth. "Show your stuff, Wilkinson."

A sharp slender hunting knife sprang to his feet and with a deft twist of his handle sent himself quivering deeply into the shed's wooden wall.

Stanley smirked and turned to Jacques. "Pretty impressive, huh?"

"That *is* impressive," said Jacques with a downcast expression.

"Can't imagine Wilkinson just cutting string and veggies, huh, Jacques?"

"Hey, you're not so bad yourself, Stan," said Wilkinson. "I've seen you cut a mean slice out of some hard wood chunks."

"Yup, and I've done me some whittlin' as well."

"Okay, so you're not so great on the slicing front, Jacques," said Klein. "But maybe you can ... er ... do something else?"

"Let's see ... I know how to open cans."

Klein raised a contemptuous eyebrow.

"A can opener?" she said, directing Jacques's attention up to the counter on which sat a large plastic apparatus plugged into a wall socket. "*That's* what I call a can opener. Right, Candy?"

"Right, ma'am. Whoosh, lickety-split, no muss, no fuss."

"That's why it's important to specialise," said Rod in a condescending tone. "You see, Jacques-of-all-trades, we here are ... er ... *experts*."

"Exactly," said Stan. "Precision specialised tools for one service and one alone."

"Masters one and all," said Candy. "Of a singular vocation, ability and service..."

"Besides," said Klein, "if you're too adaptable and available you never have a moment to yourself."

"On top of that," said Rod, "the result is never as good as it would have been if the carpenter or cook, for instance, had used the appliance, tool, or utensil most suited to the job—the specialized instrument."



"But what if the, as you call it, 'specialised instrument' isn't around?" Jacques asked with a pleading expression. "What does the poor human do?"

"I suppose," Rod replied, "he or she has to live with the feeling that the job could have been done better if only..."

"If only the can of peas had been opened quicker by Candy here, they would have tasted better?" Jacques interjected. "If only Wilkinson here had sliced the veggies,

they would have tasted better? Or the wine would have had a better vintage if—?"

"I think you have made your point, Jacques," said Wing. "I do feel, however, and I believe my fellow tools and appliances would concur, that you have a lot to learn from us experts in our singular specialities."

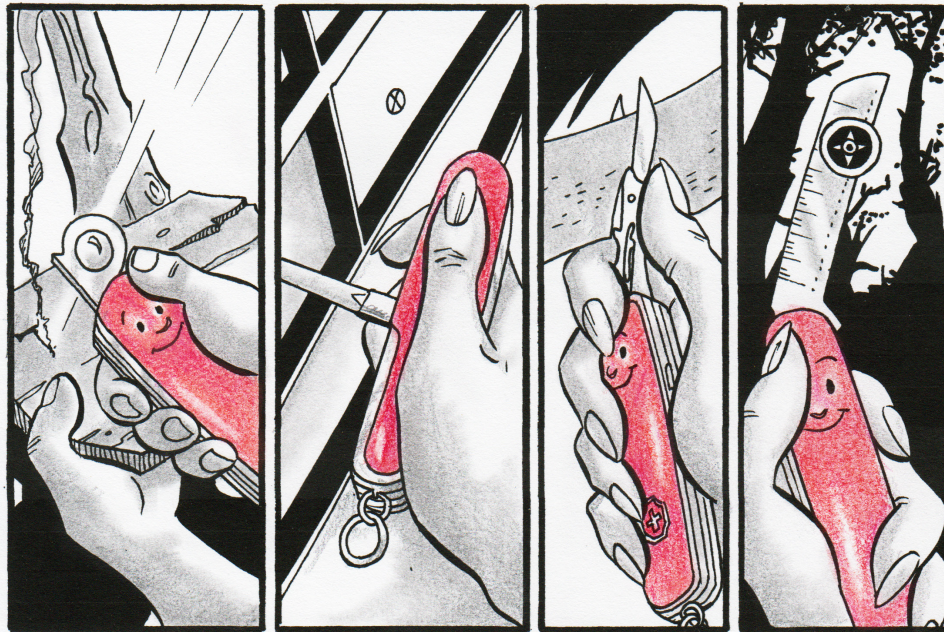
"I do not deny that," said Jacques. "But you have said it yourselves that I do not have the natural speed, skill and size, to match up to your ... I admit ... superiority in your individual fields."


"Then why bother?" Phillips asked.

"Exactly," said Stanley. "I mean, if you can't be the best of the best—like, at the top of the game—give it up and retire."

"I hardly think one needs to deliberate further," said Rod. "Our poor Jacques-of-all-trades must feel terribly inferior. But suffice it to be a lesson learned. Enjoy your involuntary retirement, Jacques."

The appliances and tools went back to joking and laughing amongst themselves leaving Jacques to ponder his seemingly useless future. He thought about his ability to magnify. He remembered how Judith's son, Jimmy, with the aid of sunlight, had used him to burn his name into that very piece of wood that Judith had sawed off an oak tree with Jacques's little saw.



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He chuckled wistfully as he thought of the time when a screw had fallen out of Judith's computer and she used him to put it back together! It seemed so inconsequential now, but once when Judith was alone on holiday, she was delighted to discover that she could use Jacques's gift of wire stripping to change the plug on the coffee maker. He recalled how Judith had been so thankful that she could use his admittedly small scissors to cut the bandage required for binding up a severe cut that Jimmy had sustained while hiking.

And what of his compass? On that same rather fateful trip, Judith had used it to enable her and Jimmy to make their way through the woods at dusk and onto the main road where they hitchhiked back to the campground. Such fond memories. But now?

The sun had gone down, the lights were out in the shed, and as Jacques lay in the crate listening to the others chat, his happy reminiscing turned to sadness.

Suddenly the door opened and the incandescent bulb burst into light. The tools piped down and wondered what Jeff Hunter was there for.

"Probably a last-minute carpentry job," Stanley remarked as Jeff rummaged through a toolbox.

"Or to fix a loose screw," Phillips whispered.

"Or maybe he decided to throw a late night bash," said Wing. "I heard him say he was going to invite some business acquaintances over this evening. Lots of wine bottles to be opened."

"If that was the case, you would have been out of here and up there already," said Klein. "They've been dining for the last two hours at least in case you hadn't noticed. No, I think it's more like an electrical emergency."

"Power outage," Phillips confidently concluded.

"He does have Mavis and little Jimmy with him," said Candy. "Maybe they need to open a can of peaches."

"Hmm. Kid-related," said Rod. "Could be getting ready for a fishing trip."

"If so," said Wilkerson, "then why is he looking through the toolbox?"

"Ah, now I remember," said Jeff, walking over and reaching into the crate. "Judith said she dropped it in here."

"Mavis, sweetheart, take this Swiss army knife to Mother. She cleaned and oiled it earlier in preparation for the trip tomorrow."



"Trip?" whispered Wing. "Jacques's going on a trip?"

Stanley shrugged. "I guess."

"Sssh," said Klein. "Listen."

"A backpack each," Jeff continued addressing Mavis and Jimmy, "is all we're taking for this walking tour. We don't want to be caught short in any emergency, so this little knife is going to be indispensable."

He stopped and smiled knowingly.

"Here's a good little example, children," he said, waving Jacques in their faces. "You can be like this little Swiss army knife."

"How, Dad?"

"Learn everything you can while you can, and you'll always be useful. Whether you train to be an expert in a certain job or not, it's important to learn other skills as well. You may not become an expert at all of them, but like this little knife here, you can be an indispensable jack-of-all-trades and master of ... not none, but *one*—a trait that's one of the best!"

"What's that?" Jimmy asked.

Jacques beamed as Jeff answered his son. "A *great* ability. *Adaptability*."

The End

- Adaptability is the willingness to change one's actions and/or learn new skills when situations call for it.
- Being adaptable makes you a valuable member of a team or community, and makes you easier to work with in order to achieve desired goals.

