

# CODE OF THE GOLDEN AGE

by Mike Sennott

Kyle ran down the grassy hill towards his village. The morning sun was shining, a common enough occurrence, though it would have been quite remarkable just a few generations earlier. Modest buildings of wood and stone were scattered in the tall grass, connected by dirt roads, but not by any recognizable pattern or order. This assemblage was bordered on one side by a river, providing water for the agriculture that occupied the time and minds of most of the village's residents. Besides a string of lofty forested hills to the north, there was nothing but rolling fields as far as the eye could see. This relative isolation ensured that the village was none too current on contemporary technology. The occasional waterwheel or plow, innovations of local craftsmen, were the lone hallmarks of any such ingenuity.

In such a small village, children must develop imaginations to survive, and Kyle had proven to be exceptionally successful in this endeavor. He was able to entertain himself for hours just thinking over each of the wonderful tales and legends related to him by his grandfather. At thirteen years of age, many children would give up such activities in favor of ostensibly mature pursuits, but Kyle was still prone to wandering off, as he had done quite literally in this situation. He had headed out to play with some other children, but lost in thought, he ambled beyond the village border. By chance, he had come across a mildly interesting trinket partially obscured by a few layers of dirt. The dulled gray artifact certainly had no practical use, but Kyle picked it up nevertheless in hopes of inspiring another story from his grandfather about ancient times. His grandfather was second to none in the village when it came to telling tales passed down through the generations. Though he had heard countless legends from his grandfather, the thought of one more was enough for Kyle to set off running home.

At the edge of town, Kyle came across a group of children sitting around in a circle. He slowed to a stop as he neared them, waving hello.

"How's it going, Kyle? What's the big hurry?" asked Brandt, a boy a few years older than Kyle, an amused look on his face. Kyle opened his mouth to reply, but was promptly interrupted by another question.

"What's that in your hand, Kyle?" wondered Mary, barely old enough for her parents to allow her to play with the other children.

Kyle proudly displayed his finding to the group. Some of the younger children gasped in excitement, though most appeared unimpressed. The mystery object was rounded and flat, like a pebble, and fit nicely in Kyle's hand. One side was smooth, and the other was partially covered by symmetric rows of raised symbols. A thin indented line ran along the edge between the two sides, at one point widening into a small, jagged-toothed circle, as if there used to be some thin obstruction. Turning to Mary, he offered an explanation. "It's a talking stick. I saw one that my uncle found a few years ago. My grandpa said that way back in the Golden Age, talking sticks could light up and make noises, like magic, and that they used to use them to talk back and forth."

"Aah, those things don't do nothin'," Brandt added, "My dad found about a zillion of those things, and I've never seen one make a peep." He attempted to resume talking with the other children, but was interrupted by Kyle.

"No, it's true. See, look, right here is where the lights appear, and the sound comes out right here," Kyle protested, gesturing vaguely towards the front of the talking stick.

Brandt grinned. "Man, Kyle, what is with you and those stories? I hate to be the person to tell you this, but that magic stuff is for babies. The Golden Age is gone, and it probably wasn't even that good in the first place. Look at the talking stick. There's no magic. Let it go for once. Come on, we're gonna go play ball. You should come, it'll be fun."

Kyle bit his lip and surveyed the faces around him. He was dismayed to find no shock, horror,

disappointment, or even disapproval. Even the kids younger than Kyle wore traces of smirks. Not knowing what to say, he turned and ran in the direction of his home. Once he was safely out of earshot, Mary took it upon herself to quip, "What a weirdo."

As he approached the door to his family's home, Kyle stopped to catch his breath. His house was a squat rectangular building made of faded gray stones. It had only a few rooms, but was by no means small compared to the other houses in the village. He threw open the door. There was a dining table in the middle of the room, lit by the light from a few rounded windows and the open door, but it was currently unoccupied. Alone, in a comfortable chair in the room's far corner, Kyle's grandfather smiled widely. He was one of the oldest people in the village, with all the feebleness and wisdom entailed by that distinction. His vision worsened every day, and his hair had passed white and turned slightly yellow. On the positive side, his experience granted him all manner of legends, anecdotes, and life lessons that his booming voice was still able to express. He was always willing to share his stories with whoever was in the area, his wrinkled hands deliberately punctuating every turn of phrase, and his enthusiasm was generally appreciated. Kyle threw the talking stick onto the table and slumped down in an empty chair without saying a word.

"Hey there, Kyle" his grandfather said tentatively, "What seems to be the matter?"

Kyle stared at the ground. "Oh, nothing," he eventually replied.

His grandfather looked perplexed, and allowed the silence to continue for another few seconds before affecting an enthusiastic tone. "Hey, what's that there on the table? Looks like you found a talking stick. I remember back when your uncle found one much like that a few years ago. They say that someday the talking sticks will become magic again."

Kyle sighed emphatically. "Grandpa, are the talking sticks really magic?"

"Oh, goodness, yes, Kyle. People used to use them to talk with each other all the way across the

world. It was the same magic that let them build fantastic flying machines, and make moving pictures dance in the sky, and -"

"Grandpa," Kyle interrupted sternly, "It's okay. You don't have to make up stories for me anymore. I think I'm too old for that stuff."

"Ah, so that's the problem. Those other kids have been telling you that the Golden Age was a bunch of rubbish, eh? Well, I believe what my grandfather told me, and what his grandfather told him. They aren't just stories, Kyle, they're the legacy of our family. As long as people remember the Golden Age, there's always hope that magic will return to this world."

"Yeah, you've told me all the stories. People lived in peace according to the Code of Bureaucracy, and everyone was able to accomplish great things. They used their magic for the good of all mankind and built towers that reached to the sky. But... how do I know it was real? It seems too fantastic to be true, and the talking sticks are just rocks. What good is the Golden Age anyhow?"

"Oh, don't say that. Just look at everything you've learned from the tales of the Golden Age. You can't say..." he trailed off as he saw Kyle's frown deepening. Kyle's grandfather also frowned, stroking his chin thoughtfully. Suddenly, he threw up his hands in the air. "You know, the power of the Golden Age saved this village once."

"Really?" Kyle sounded skeptical, but had an inquiring look in his eyes.

"Oh, definitely. When I was just a boy. I saw it with my own two eyes. Hey, if I tell you the story, will you maybe change your mind about the Golden Age?"

"Sure," Kyle replied casually, trying to contain his excitement. His grandfather started narrating.

\*\*\*

Now, back when I was your age, I was a curious boy, always asking questions about the world. It drove my parents crazy, but they knew it was important for me to learn. So when this village had an

emergency town meeting, they let me tag along. It was at the home of the village chief, old Calson. I think they use it as an inn now. The room that they used was gigantic, with a grand arched ceiling. Come to think of it, I'm not sure why they would need a ceiling that high. Anyhow, the place was a commotion even when we first arrived. Maps and official-looking papers were scattered all about. There were lots of chairs and tables, but everyone was standing in a big crowd and yelling at each other. But when my father asked, "What's wrong?" it got strangely silent.

Mr. Green, a small, bookish sort of fellow who had come to settle in the village just a few years before, was the one who spoke up first. "Mr. Lowell was off down the river a little ways," he said, "looking for talking sticks, when he saw a dragon. He ran as fast as he could back here to tell us, but we think that the dragon might arrive here within the next day."

Kyle, we haven't seen a dragon here during your lifetime, and I thank my lucky stars for that every day. My parents told me that a few years before I was born, there had been a dragon near the village. It tore down four houses, and ten people died trying to protect their homes. Let me just say this: there were no dragons in the golden age. They were just harmless little buggers back then, but during the long winter that came after magic left the world, they had to grow and learn to hunt to survive. What? Don't roll your eyes at me like that, it's true. What? Fine, I'll just get on with the story.

I think it was Mr. Lowell himself who spoke to us next. "*We've tried thinking of a way to fend it off, but it looks hopeless,*" he said, just like that, real quiet and exhausted sounding. "It seems like our only option might be to pack up and leave the village." Mr. Green felt the need to add, "Which seems quite sensible to me, but some people around here apparently have a different opinion..."

I was kind of angry at him for saying that, because the thought of leaving the village had hit me like a ton of rocks. I couldn't imagine leaving the village, it was where I had spent my entire life, just like my father before me and his father before him. My parents had kind of a grim look in their eyes, I could

tell they were thinking the same thing. A lot of people looked that way, actually, but some were just looking scared or desperate. At that point, a withered old man in the back of the room yelled out, "I would rather die than leave this village!" There was a round of applause, and a lot of shouting in approval. Mr. Green still disagreed, though, screeching, "This is madness! If we don't leave, we'll surely all be killed. Is this bunch of houses, this plot of grass by the river, really more important than your lives, your family?"

He just didn't understand. The village was like family to us. After a bit more arguing, Calson finally spoke up. "Well, I suppose we can't just leave people behind. We'll just have to think of some way to defeat the dragon. But how?"

Mr. Lowell, I think, said wistfully, "If only we had the magic of the Golden Age..."

I suddenly got an idea. I jumped to my feet and started talking as excitedly as I've ever talked. "I know! We might not have the magic that they had back in the Golden Age, but we can still do great things. We just need to work together like people did back then." Surprisingly, nobody interrupted, so I went on. "Back in the Golden Age, people banded together in groups called corporations. Sure, people might have had the power of magic. But the real reason they were able to get things done was because they lived according to the Code of Bureaucracy. The Code said that before they did anything, they had to get approval from at least a dozen other people. Because of the Code, the only things that people ever did were great accomplishments that would benefit everyone, like build skyscrapers. People called middle managers wore shining business suits and planned the course of these great corporations. They communicated in secret codes called Mission Statements so that evil spies wouldn't steal their plans. Everyone was responsible for managing someone else, like a great tower made of people working together. There was something called the Budget, where heroic wizards tried to outsmart a greedy tyrant named 'IRS.' An ancient order called the Efficiency Experts knew secret techniques that they used to

make everybody smarter. Oh yeah, there were also these workers called engineers. I'm not really sure why the corporations had them, because I heard that whenever something good happened, it was to the manager's credit, and whenever somebody made a mistake, it was the engineer's fault.

"If we work together like they did back in the Golden Age, we can do great things too. All we have to do is make a corporation here according to the Code of Bureaucracy, and we can definitely think up a way to defeat that nasty dragon! And maybe, just maybe, a little bit of that Golden Age magic will come back."

Now, after my speech I was expecting people to blow off the idea because I was just an idealistic young kid, maybe even to be a bit angry at me, but instead there was just a very grave awkward silence. I didn't know what to think, so I just sat down.

Mr. Green was the first person to respond again. He had a thin, reedy voice that somehow always stood out in a crowd, like this: "Ahem. I appreciate your... passion for history, young man. But I need not remind everyone here that the so-called Golden Age died out for a reason. The Code of Bureaucracy presents a comically flawed system, and I cannot imagine that an attempt to utilize it would provide better results than, well, asking the dragon nicely to go away."

"No." Calson stated firmly. "Mr. Green, I apologize for not informing you of this sooner, but... just the opposite of what you said is true. We may not know exactly why the Code was successful; that much has been lost to the ages. What we do know is that it remains the most effective form of governance known to mankind. Evidence can be found everywhere, from the intricate design of the talking sticks that we have found, to the tales of legendary skyscrapers that have been passed down through the generations. In fact, the reason for the fall of the Golden Age was that the Code of Bureaucracy may have been too efficient. The sheer power that corporations had back then may have been enough for them to destroy entire nations of people. This is why, the legends say, magic left the world. However! This is a desperate

time, and the risk of any future corruption is exceedingly trivial compared to the immediate dangers that we face.”

“Mr. Green, I am touched that you show so much care about the value of human life. But many of those lives are children and elders. If we abandoned the village, surely some of us would be unable to survive a life of wandering. People of our village, remember our great ancestors, who each wandered for generations before our parents and grandparents found this village. Who knows how long our families would have to wander? On the other hand, we can derive a powerful plan of battle from the wisdom of the Golden Age, and I submit that refusing to do so would be foolish.”

Well, everybody respected Calson’s word, and the man spoke good sense. His speech just about settled it. From that point on, he took charge, granting himself the title of Chief Executive Officer. His house became the corporation headquarters. The windows in the great hall were all shuttered off, and dozens of candles were lit to increase the focus on the task at hand. Tables were set up with seats facing each other in rectangles, like the legendary Conference Table of the Golden Age. On the raised platform at the front of the hall, Calson had set up a large table, which he deemed his office. He appointed Mr. Lowell as Chief Financial Officer. Since the village did not have currency to speak of, this job entailed overseeing and rationing supplies. Mrs. Lowell became the Executive Vice President of Finance, and their son Max became the Associate Director of Financial Operations. My own father accepted a post as President of the Ethics Subcommittee, and my mother was named Special Vice President of Operations. Every other citizen in the town filled in the hierarchy of management as set forth by the Code of Bureaucracy, even the youngest children, who were placed on the board of ergonomics. My wise old grandfather and I were each given the most prestigious position of consultant. We were both overjoyed beyond words for the opportunity to finally put to use the lore of the Golden Age that we had passed down through the generations, our family’s legacy.

Mostly everybody was satisfied with their position. However, no matter what he attempted, Calson was unable to convince Mr. Green to accept any position. Green would simply fold his arms and call the operation "juvenile poppycock." Finally, not knowing what else to do, the frustrated Calson named Green an engineer. Mr. Collins - he was quite the character, we called him "Old Drink and Sleep," - skipped the meeting to drink and sleep, so he was named the second engineer.

Only a few hours later, Mr. Wagner, the Knowledge Acquisition Officer, submitted through the proper channels information that the dragon was spotted at the edge of the village. It was time to put our plan into motion. "It looks like we may have a problem here, gentlemen," Calson said, cracking his knuckles. "There is a dragon at the edge of town that may very well be destroying homes as we speak. How do you recommend we go about solving this problem?"

He asked that directly to my grandfather. He was so happy! With a wavering voice and a single tear of joy in his eye, he whispered, "I suggest we form a focus group in order to evaluate our core priorities." With those words, two men, three women, and two brave children ascended the steps to the table at the front of the room. A hushed silence fell over the crowd as the seven members of the group debated quietly amongst themselves for no less than ten minutes. Suddenly, the eldest of the women cleared her throat and stood up. "We have arrived at the conclusion that a group must be assigned to the project of slaying the dragon. And!" she continued, speaking the last word sharply like that to cut off the noise from the crowd, "A second group should be assigned to the project of distracting the dragon so that the first group might kill it with increased expediency."

Calson thanked the group for their time and effort, then called for order. "According to the code of bureaucracy, this plan will become valid if it is independently approved by no less than a dozen managers. Project managers, what say you to this course of action?" Five, I think, of the appointed project managers raised their arms and gave a signal of approval, their thumbs raised to the sky.

“Personnel managers, what say you to this course of action?” Eight, maybe, of the personnel managers signaled their approval. I forget the exact number, but the important thing is that it was enough to pass. Everyone clapped and cheered.

Then, one of the project managers stepped forward. “I will take on the responsibility of leading the team that will kill the dragon. If you would, personnel managers, I must be assigned a team of managers and an engineer.” The lot of us were divided up between the two projects. Well, because I personally was a consultant, I walked between the two teams, hearing out ideas and offering suggestions. There weren’t enough people in either group to officially ratify a decision, so the children ran back and forth, seeking approval from people too busy and muddled to keep track of everything going on. It was adorable. By the end of all the deliberation, it was decided that the engineer of the second team, Mr. Collins, would distract the dragon by using the small amount of gunpowder we had to make a small explosion. At the same time, Mr. Green would sneak up on the dragon and - bam! - skewer it with a spear.

Mr. Green turned white like a ghost when we told him about the plan, though. “Me? You want me to attack a dragon with a spear? I should wonder if I am able to lift a spear at all!” “Let’s not get too ahead of ourselves, Green,” replied Mr. Gorings, one of his project managers, “First we have to requisition a spear from the Financial Department.” Gorings commanded one of the other managers to establish a communication with the Financial Department. Unfortunately, he came back empty-handed a minute later, because Mr. Lowell was out of his office fixing a snack. Mr. Gorings decided to take matters into his own hands. He puffed himself up and marched across the hall to confront Mrs. Lowell, who they had left in charge of the Financial Department. Max and I just watched as he blustered and stomped his feet, only to have her dismiss him real quick, just like that. Then Max went to get his father from the kitchen.

A little while later, I was talking to my father. As head of the Ethics Subcommittee, he was very concerned about the safety of the engineers involved in the operation, bless his heart. He had started the

day looking and sounding just exasperated, and gone downhill from there. He had been all on board with the plan at first, but the risk we were taking seemed to have struck him at some point. "You know that people might die if we go through with all of this, right?" he asked me. "I just can't get over thinking that maybe this whole plan is a mistake after all. I don't know if I can let this happen." He sounded so tired, but I was so full of energy that I wouldn't let anything bring me down. "It's alright, Dad," I said, "We can work together to find a way to make this plan work so that nobody has to die. I heard that nobody ever died from following the Code of Bureaucracy, and it's our job to make sure that it stays that way." My father sighed one last time before my smile caught up with him. Together, we brainstormed ways to make the operation safer. Mr. Collins could throw a makeshift bomb containing the gunpowder from behind a nearby building, staying safely out of sight. Mr. Green could even throw the spear from a safe distance. By the time we thought of all that, my father was refreshed and happy as ever. He even went to tell the engineers himself.

Finally, everything was prepared to face the dragon. The supplies were assembled, and everything had been approved according to the Code of Bureaucracy many times over. The ergonomics board had even fitted the spear with a soft woolen grip. We handed Mr. Collins the explosive and wished him good luck. He was happy enough from, well, from his activities before arriving that he found no reason to complain. He stumbled a bit as he stepped out the door, but he exited to roaring applause. In spite of this hero's treatment, though, Mr. Green stayed unwilling to do his part in saving the village. "Absolutely not!" he bellowed shrilly, "I have not agreed with a single part of this plan, and I will protest this particular until my last."

Calson always knew what to say. He placed one hand over his heart. "Mr. Green, I beg of you," he entreated, "If you do not do something soon, the brave Mr. Collins will encounter certain doom, and there is little doubt that our entire village would soon follow. For the sake of everyone here, please help

us.”

But even then, Green answered rudely, “I can not and will not do such a thing.”

“Mr. Green, you must do your part.”

“I most certainly must not. If you need this done so badly, I suggest that you do it yourself.” Mr. Green threw down the spear right at Calson’s feet and started to storm off! But then he caught one glimpse at the horrified and disgusted crowd and completely deflated, retreating into an empty seat in the far corner of the hall. Calson drew himself up as tall as he could, cutting an impressive figure. But just as he turned towards the huddled Green, the double doors swung open.

Mr. Collins entered, with glazed eyes but a large smile. “Hey, ev’rybody,” he exclaimed, “The dragon’s gone.”

We all felt a bit doubtful, because, well, it was Collins. Calson voiced the doubt, saying, “Surely you do not mean that you have defeated the beast yourself.”

“Nah, I never saw it. But I looked around the whole village and I’m pretty sure that there’s no dragon.” He shrugged, and muttered, “My house’s gone, but I was prob’ly just gonna rebuild it anyways. Green’s house looked pretty bad too, but everything else looks just fine.”

I was just overjoyed. Who wouldn’t be, with great news like that? Oh, right. Mr. Green stood bolt upright when he heard. “Everything is just fine? My house is ruined, and you say that everything is just fine? How could this happen? I swear, I will have revenge on that dragon if it’s the last thing I do.” He stormed out of the building, not even taking the spear with him. Most people didn’t even notice him go, though, and the rest of us just ignored him.

My grandfather spoke up. “It’s better than we could have hoped. After destroying two of the houses, the dragon must have thought we abandoned the village. Since we shuttered all the windows, it was probably unable to see or hear us in here. I think that it is safe to say it won’t try looking back here

again for quite some time.”

Calson himself ventured outside to see if it was really true. Slowly, we all emerged from the hall, looking around as if waking from hibernation. We were all still a bit nervous, so there was no great feast or celebration. Myself, I was pretty sad about the whole deal. I wanted to see the magic at work, and... I kind of wanted to be a hero. But looking back, what's important is that the village was saved. And it never would have been saved if it wasn't for believing in the Golden Age and the Code of Bureaucracy.

\*\*\*

Kyle was sitting up with a pensive look on his face. His grandfather smiled warmly. “Well, that's how the Golden Age saved our village.” Kyle continued staring into space. After a few moments, he spoke quietly yet firmly. “Well, to be honest, that was nothing like what I was expecting. The Code of Bureaucracy didn't seem to accomplish that much, and there wasn't any magic. But... somehow, that makes everything easier to believe.” He laughed. “And I guess you're right that it all turned out okay. Thanks a lot, Grandpa.” He gave his grandfather a hug, then ran off to play ball with Brandt and the others.

Kyle's grandfather stood to pick up the talking stick. He turned it over, tapped it a few times, and held it up to his ear. Smiling, he wandered off to take a nap.