

Duckbill crashes the Cèilidh ...

A name alone will occasionally raise expectations, naturally, but Special Agent Fergus D. Duckbill, age 42, did not remotely resemble a duck's bill. His body possessed no elegant, duck-like curves to speak of—apart from his buttocks—but it was impressive enough, in a blocky, compressed way. His father was a retired bricklayer, and as a child Fergus served long hours as his unpaid hod-carrier—shoveling sand, unloading pallets of bricks and climbing scaffolds with the mortar-laden hod on his shoulder. His neck, shoulder, leg and arm muscles had bulked up in the process, and in this way Duckbill himself came to resemble a large brick—a quirk of adaptive evolution. Such morphology required specially tailored uniforms, an unwelcome expense for Duckbill, considering the pittance levied on behalf of Her Majesty's Special Agents.

With close-cropped ginger hair and red freckles, hooded eyes that

glistened within their folds like green olives, Duckbill projected a sleepy menace. Uncompromising attitudes flowed from the marrow of his bones, bestowing upon Duckbill a special edge, first in neighborhood boxing and wrestling clubs, then at the Naval Academy, finally at the Special Command Training Center west of the Thames. All served him well in the years he had spent in merciless pursuit of various miscreants and enemies of the State. Never one to flinch at the prospect of dislocating someone's shoulder or knee, Duckbill was relentless, fearless and without remorse. Behind his back, his fellow agents called him "the Terrier."

Still, he did pause before knocking on the door behind which the Ceilidh of Dreams was progressing, but only because the Queen, in her indirect way, had discouraged him from getting too deeply involved.

"Mind your manners on this one, Duckbill. No broken bones," is how she

put it. And Smithers, having notified him of the duty-assignment, all but forbade Duckbill's direct intervention by curtly announcing, "I'll handle it."

But Smithers had been ruffling Duckbill's feathers for some time, and Duckbill had had quite enough. In a wistful moment, he imagined he might have a shot at a Queen's Distinguished Service Medal, by exercising just a little initiative to break open the case of Owl Man and Heron Man, and this damned *cèilidh* that was causing such a knot of furor at the Palace.

Duckbill rapped commandingly three or four times, and the door inched opened. A face floated toward him like an unmanned ship from a fog-bank.^[1]

"What'll ye have, mate? Come to join the *cèilidh*, have ye?" Arthur Compton stood rocking on his heels, eyes unfocused, a wet grin on his face, the serving cart between himself and Duckbill. From the

background, a surge of chatter, laughter and song sloshed over the two men like an incoming wave.

“I’ll have you weigh anchor and cast a line to starboard, is what I’ll have, sir. Step aside, and move the cart while you’re at it, if you don’t mind,” and Duckbill moved assertively forward. Compton was not so drunk that he missed the dismissive tone, however, nor had he lost his essential bulldog character in the least, no matter how full his bilge or how tenuous his status among the living. He slammed the cart into Duckbill’s shins, provoking a feral howl from Duckbill, who launched a right cross that caught Compton on the left mandible and sent him tumbling on top of CedrosCM and Sally, who was teaching CM how to sing her special note.

Duckbill, stone sober, overwhelmed the tipsy Compton in a flash, pinning him against the mirrored wall—mirrors, which stood gleaming

and ready for the Tuesday yoga classes, whereupon Sir Randall Truffington III, who had served as Naval Liaison for years and held an honorary officer's rank, reprimanded Duckbill as he would any lowly tar.

“Stand down, you bloody fool, what do you think you're doing?”

Before Duckbill could answer, Truffington, who had actually worked with Duckbill in various official capacities, muttered, “Wait a minute. Is that you, Duckbill? What the bollocks are you doing here?”

The recognition was mutual, Duckbill being well familiar with Truffington's visage, especially given the photos of him and the Queen that were plastered all over the trophy case at the Special Service Main Office.

“Oh, it's you, m'Lordship. Beggin' your pardon, sir. The Queen sent me here on a special assignment—hush, hush, top secret, tally ho and all that. Can't really talk about it, sir. You know how that goes. Anything for

the Crown.”

Truffington’s temper, which served as a kind of biochemical boiler, instantly began burning off the excess alcohol from his bloodstream.

Whenever he wanted to clear his head in a hurry, all he needed was a righteous head of steam and—bang!—he was sober as a headmaster.

Which is the tone he used in dressing down poor Duckbill in front of Compton, who was stretching his neck and jaw, feeling around for fractures or lesions while calculating the potential for punitive damages.

Just then Truffington’s cell phone blasted out its ringtone—a racetrack bugle.

“Truff? It’s TQ. I’ve got Smithers here. Where’s Duckbill and what’s he doing?”

Truffington muffled the cellphone and rotated his head in search of Agent Duckbill, who had disappeared with Compton into the crowd. In

the uproar of the *cèilidh*, he spotted Duckbill, drink in hand, listening intently as Compton rolled up his sleeves to show off his IV scars from Transition. Before Truffington could respond to the Queen, Duckbill had rolled up his own sleeves and was showing Compton the scar from when his father dropped a mason's trowel onto his arm from the uppermost plank of the bricklayer's scaffold.

“Well, your Majesty, Duckbill is here but—” Truffington hesitated.

“But what? Out with it,” snapped the Queen.

“He and Compton are comparing scars.”

Good,” said the Queen. “Keep him there, and out of trouble. Get him drunk, if necessary. Smithers and I are on our way. Don't let anyone leave the premises, least of all Owl Man and Heron Man. I have a dream to discuss with them—it's a matter of national security.”

The phone clicked in Truffington's ear as TQrang off. Slipping the

device into his pocket, he once again scanned the group, this time in search of the two birdmen who, as it turned out, were sound asleep on the enormous beanbags, amidst the tumult.

The Queen's Dream ...

Duckbill's scream pierced the partygoers, even waking Owl Man.

Heron Man bolted upright at the second scream as Duckbill jumped atop a wobbling chair. Duckbill's fear of spiders was top-secret, but fully in view of all eyes upon his crouching figure pointing at the creepy-crawly which hard looking by those closest could barely make out. But Duckbill had sharp eyes, you had to give him that.

Grasping the situation at once, Owl Man went to steady Duckbill's chair lest the poor quivering man fall directly into the wee spider's path. Patting Duckbill gently on the back, Owl Man whispered in his ear. No one heard, but Duckbill stood straight up, grinning from ear to ear, muscles never used almost issuing forth a scream of their own. Duckbill was not a smiler. His reputation as "the terrier" was on the line, but he

jumped down yelling “Party On!” With his fist he was trying to do a high-five with the low ceiling.

Meanwhile, Owl Man, hardly noticed, with Duckbill’s antics taking center stage, coaxed the itty-bitsy creature into an empty glass and proceeded to the front door to release the critter into the wilds—as much as London hereabouts could be described as wild at all, except for the hooligans on some late night rampage.

He swung open the door only to be visited with a knock to his nose as Her Majesty, caught totally off guard, followed through on her determination to get the crowd’s attention with a Royal knock of her Royal walking stick.

“Rudolf! What’s the bloody meaning of this?”

“Rudolf?” Owl Man peered over the handkerchief that was doing its best to staunch the flow of blood from his nose.

“I’m so sorry, Owl Man, but Rudolf sometimes has a mind of his own. Please accept my Royal Apology.”

“No apology needed, Your Majesty. I should have known you’d named your walking stick Rudolf. I’m embarrassed to say that this detail had escaped my attention.”

Meanwhile, the glass Owl Man was carrying and had now forgotten had rolled back into the room, not catching anyone’s notice, as all eyes were now on The Queen as she was being escorted to the center of the room by the still-bleeding Owl Man.

“Now what’s this about having one of your famous Cèilidh of Dreams without inviting me? Now that may be unpardonable, my dear, so I must have an answer straightaway.”

“You were not invited, and Heron Man will bear me out on this, because we felt your presence here would endanger you. The rest I can

only tell you in private. Believe me, there could be no other reason.” Owl Man gestured to Heron Man, who nodded his head up and down, confirming Owl Man’s explanation. The Queen nodded her understanding.

“Well, that fits with why I’ve come. I’ve something to tell you and it too must be in private. Is there a place here where we may talk?”

“We may retire to the garden and I believe it will be privacy enough.” Owl Man gestured the way and the odd couple left the assembled, who were all standing with mouths agape and eyes bulging at the presence of The Queen at their party.

It was Duckbill who broke the silence, screeching away as he attempted to run through the crowd and in his panic managing to loosen many glasses from their imbibers’ hands, and managing as well to upend a few party times as well.

“What is it, Queensie?” Owl Man was one of the few people in the world who knew and was permitted to use the Royal Pet Name, and this because he was in truth one of her few genuine confidants in contrast to the Royal dandies who occupied most of her days, not to mention her nights.

“I’ve had a most disturbing dream, Owl, and it has caused me a terrible fright. You’re the only one I can trust with this and help me sort it out.”

“You dreamt that I told you in your dream that something was afoot and that steps must be taken at once to prevent calamity. Something like that, right?”

“Yes, Owl, it was you in my dream and you were warning me about a conspiracy that was about to take me down. But how did you know that?”

“Let’s put that aside for now. I am aware of the conspiracy, of some who are involved. The purpose of tonight’s *cèilidh* was to serve both as an attractor for those involved to come seeking us out, as well as to bring up others’ dreams to get a fuller picture. But that is why I did not invite you. You are in danger here. We all are!”

An Attack Upon the Person of the Queen ...

Owl Man accompanied Her Majesty to the secluded, brick-walled garden where the Queen poured out her soul to the solemn Owl, who listened patiently as the Royal Dream Narrative unfolded amidst frequent hiccups and sobs. Upstairs, the *cèilidh* rollicked along at full throttle.

Meanwhile, Hobbs, the Royal Chauffeur, remained stationed and at ease in front of the building. Leaning against a fender of the gleaming royal Rolls, he appeared to be innocently killing time. Ordinarily, the Queen never traveled without a full security contingent—Scotland Yard agents crawling all over whatever location Her Majesty would be visiting, sharpshooters placed on adjacent rooftops, streets blocked off, Bobbies hustling vagrants downtown for questioning. But on this occasion, Scotland Yard was strangely absent, having received no warning of the

Queen's impulsive, hush-hush outing. Only Hobbs knew of this particular destination, and that just a short time in advance. He was well accustomed to the Queen Mum's whimsical flights.

Spitting into his white handkerchief, Hobbs used the small cloth to wipe imaginary spots of mud and flecks of grime from the chrome headlight ring of the spotless Rolls.

Having buffed the metal to a satisfactory shine, Hobbs stared at a moving reflection in the windshield, glanced up and down the street, then waved his hankie in the direction of the near corner, where an obscure figure shrouded in a black canvas raincoat and a hounds-tooth driving cap had darted into a red call-box. Flashing a small electric torch in reply, the dark figure exited the call-box and scurried off in the opposite direction.

Hobbs nodded in satisfaction, then stuffed the handkerchief back into the side pocket of his royal

“I think you’ll find, my dear Queensie,” Owl man intoned gently,
“that dreams of ravens stealing shiny things are not so rare as you think.
Why, only last week I read in the Annual Proceedings of the Royal
Society of Dreams that—”

Owl Man’s anecdote was interrupted by a rustling sound in the thick
mantle of ivy that overhung the ten-foot brick wall enclosing the garden.
The masonry wall was surmounted by a two-foot cast-iron railing, barbed
with sharp spear points as a further security measure.

“Bugger all!” came a guttural cry as a heavy-set invader tripped on
the railing, slipped on the wet ivy and tore his trousers on a vicious spear
point before tumbling onto a large camellia bush growing against the wall.
“Oooomph! Bloody hell!” The stunned figure rolled on the ground in
pain.

As the Owl and the Queen turned toward the commotion, three

more intruders vaulted over the wall, grasping at the ivy but landing heavily and off-balance. They were all dressed in black, like ninjas, but without ninja grace. All wore black ski masks, but the narrow openings had slid over their eyes, effectively blinding them.

Owl Man snatched Rudolf from the hand of the Queen, stepped smartly toward the camellia bushes and proceeded to whack the three nearest scoundrels on their capped crowns. Grunts and cries accompanied the sounds of crunching bone. By this time the first assailant had drawn a large pistol from inside his coat, but before he could get off a shot, Owl Man himself had produced a chrome-plated derringer from the altered watch-pocket of his vest, and calmly fired one round into the miscreant's gun hand.

"Bloody hell! Look what you done!" the gunman complained, holding out his numbed and shattered hand for examination. Blood began

oozing from the wound. “You and your bloody cap gun!”

“Cap gun, you say? Mind your tongue, fool. There’s one more slug in this little palm pistol—a .38 caliber. And if I judge correctly, it’s just your size!” Owl Man held the little pistol steady, aimed at the man’s thick torso. The gun, barely visible, was dwarfed by Owl Man’s paw. “Perhaps you’d like to try a shot to the belly?”

“Oh my goodness, Owl Man,” squealed the Queen. “How positively dashing and manly of you!”

Owl Man bowed to the Queen, but without taking his eye off the fallen rogue. The others still lay unconscious—three dark hulks among the pink camellia blossoms, green leaves and mud.

“What the hell’s going on out here?” shouted Arthur Compton as he rushed out the back door. Compton’s hearing had been improved by the boys at Transition; thus, he alone had heard the sharp report from Owl

Man's derringer over the ruckus of the *cèilidh*. He was also instinctively attracted by the smell of danger.

“Just a little dust-up, Mr. Compton. Nothing to worry about,”
replied Owl Man.

Arthur Compton was breathing hard, his bloodstream awash with hormones and whiskey. Pausing briefly to sniff the bouquet of cordite still lingering in the air, he surveyed the bloodied figures on the ground, then turned a gimlet eye toward the Owl. Employing his menacing bulldog growl, Compton said, “Who the hell are you? And how do you know my name?”

“Call me Owl Man, Arthur, your guardian angel. I dreamed you up. But we'll discuss that later. In the meantime, I presume your old detecting skills haven't suffered from your, uh, revised status?”

“Detecting? Hell, I'm the bloody CEO of Reticular Medicinals, at

least I was. That's what we did over at Reticular—detect every bloody thing you could imagine.”

“Excellent. But first I need your help dealing with this mess. We don't want the co-conspirators to know what happened here, or that we were expecting something like this. So I need to interview these visitors of ours, once they're properly restrained. There should be some arborist's rope in the gardener's shed. Would you be so kind as to escort Her Majesty back up to the *cèilidh* and keep an eye on her? And send Agent Duckbill down here. You, Arthur, will be personally responsible for the Queen's safety until I return to the party. And one last thing: Not a word about this to anyone upstairs. We've obviously got a traitor in our midst.”

Arthur Compton, unschooled in royal protocol, curtsied before the Queen. She didn't seem to mind, so he kissed her extended hand. Then he gallantly held his arm for her to take. She seemed unperturbed by the

apparent attempt on her life. “Don’t worry, Owl,” said Compton. “Mum’s the word. Besides, nobody’s gonna touch a hair on the Queen Mum’s head!”

“It’s not hair, my good man, it’s a hairpiece,” complained the Queen.

“That’s fine, Arthur,” interrupted Owl Man. “Now go fetch Duckbill and send him down.”

As the couple moved out of the garden toward the door, the Queen spoke. “Compton, you say? Arthur Compton? Rings a bell. Aren’t you the lottery prize that’s caused so much trouble?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Why, how exciting! I’ve been dying to ask someone like you *exactly* what it’s like, coming out of Transition and all. I want *all* the details, and don’t *spare* the gore!”

Duckbill assists Owl Man ...

Having recovered from the attack of the spiders and been given orders by Compton, Duckbill tumbled headlong into the garden, nearly tripping over four trussed-up bodies, stacked like cordwood on the sod. Owl Man stood over the immobilized villains, calmly wiping his hands on a fresh painter's towel, which he'd found in the gardener's shed along with several lengths of tree-surgeon's rope.

"Ah, Duckbill, just in time," said Owl Man casually.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but it looks like you've been in Egypt collecting bloody mummies."

Owl Man chuckled at Duckbill's outburst of poetic imagery. "Well, I've finished interrogating these scoundrels and have no more need for them. Tell me, Duckbill, do you have ready access to a secure transport vehicle on short notice?"

“Aye, sir, that I do—leastways my unit does, but under my command. Say the word and Officer Squibb’ll deliver it here in a trice,” replied Duckbill.

“What sort of rig is it?” asked Owl Man.

“It’s disguised as an old furniture van, sir, but it’s loaded up with surveillance gear. Still, there’s room enough to haul off this bloody lot—*if* that’s what you were thinking, sir.”

“Good man, Duckbill. Call your van over, then, and remove this rubbish. I expect you’ll have to do a little patching up on that one. I want them alive, but they have to disappear for a few days. And Duckbill—”

“Sir?”

“I need hardly emphasize that this is a matter of the utmost secrecy. No one must know we’ve apprehended these buggers. Now, what about this Squibb of yours? Can we trust him?”

“Like the very Rock of Gibraltar, he is, sir. Trained him m’self.”

“Excellent, Duckbill. I’m counting on you. Now make your call and clean up this mess. When you’re done, you can exit through that old gate. I’ve got to re-join the *ceilidh* now and attend to Her Majesty.”

“Very good, sir, and don’t worry about a thing, sir,” said Duckbill who, having speed-dialed Squibb, was already addressing clipped orders into the phone. Owl Man turned away, whistling as he entered the building, swinging Rudolf in the air like a baton.

As the rumbling lift carried Owl Man back up to the *ceilidh*, he pondered the results of his interrogation, which only confirmed what he already suspected: The attempted assault on the Queen was a mere ploy, designed to draw attention away from the *real* attack on Her Majesty, a soon-to-be-revealed threat of higher order.

Rejoining the *ceilidh*, Owl Man helped himself to a glass of

sparkling water—no Macallan for the Owl. The ostensible purpose of the cèilidh was to give the characters a break and a chance to refresh themselves, thus invigorating their various narratives, but Owl Man was too intuitive not to feel a sinister darkness gathering like a noose, of which the bold intruders in the garden were just a foretaste.

For the moment, however, Owl determined to put his concerns aside and make a good show of it, allowing the revelers the full play of their well-deserved emotional release. Thus, he mingled among the guests like the quiet but gracious host of a wake.