

CedrosCM in a pickle ...

CedrosCM, henceforth to be known as HM Detainee # 1997188426, slunk out of Her Majesty's presence in a jumbled state. Half of him strode proud and defiant—a one-armed literary Lord Nelson on the bridge of HMS Victory—while the other half simultaneously sidled out like one of Fagin's ragged pickpockets, sweating green drops of fear. Darrold Hornby, who had seen everything, guided poor CM with regal equanimity out of HM's conference room and into the waiting handcuffs proffered by one Officer Euan Crannach.

“I reckon it'll be the dainty bracelets for him, then, will it, Mr. Hornby?”

“Yes, Crannach, and see to it that they're nice and snug. His wrists don't appear to be very stout. Not exactly rugby flanker material.”

“Aye, you're smack on there, sir.”

CedrosCM was in shock and his bowels had gone to water, so he gave no peep of resistance to Officer Crannach's expert attentions. It seemed as if Lord Nelson had slipped below decks.

Outside, shafts of sunlight penetrated the scattered clouds like Swiss pikes. CM tried and failed to block the glare but could only dip a shoulder or twist his neck, because Crannach had cuffed him behind his back.

Though CM had arrived in a polished Bentley for his audience with the Queen, the only vehicle awaiting him when he stepped outside for his return trip was a grimy, gray, box-like diesel affair, sitting at idle like an armored truck before a bank. One-inch-thick bullet-proof glass filled the tiny portholes that served as windows, and the massive, steel-

jacketed tires had been pumped full of polyurethane foam to thwart terrorist projectiles.

Hornby, having performed his transfer duties, had slipped away in the Bentley to an early cocktail appointment with Truffington. CM, for his part, was beyond protest.

“In you go, then, and watch your head,” said Officer Crannach. “Ye must have insulted the Queen like a bugger to deserve this treatment. Well, yer lucky they’ve got a new facility for ye, New Highgate, not like the Tower o’ London. This one’s all fancy colors and doilies. Not to my taste, no sir. I say, Lock ‘em up and don’t be worryin’ about where ye throw the key.” This was a rare streak of garrulousness for Crannach, who in his off-hours was accustomed to sitting at the Boar and Hound sipping away at a barrel of stout with only a “humph” or two for conversation.

CM sat chained to a welded $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch iron bar running horizontally behind the perforated metal bench that served as a seat. As for words, the few that came to him had drained from his lips to join the bile settling in his lower regions, there to shake and froth during the un-sprung ride back to London and the waiting facility. Crannach, appointed to guard CM, sat on the opposite bench, eyeing him suspiciously.

By the time the vehicle rolled through the heavy gates behind the New Highgate facility, CedrosCM in his misery had fouled himself. Crannach opened the heavy padlock and practically threw CM to the ground outside in disgust.

“Here’s yer prisoner, Fergus, a real blighter, if ye ask me. Yer gonna need a fire hose fer this one. He’s gone and soiled himself proper.”

The intake desk was mostly scratched paint over steel with a nicked battleship linoleum top. CedrosCM now stood woodenly before it, his handcuffs having been shifted to the front, which provided a bit of relief, but with the unwelcome addition of

ankle chains to his ensemble. He had indeed been stripped and hosed off by Fergus, and dressed in a rough grey jumpsuit with black and orange stripes, with disposable paper slippers. He resembled a hobbled Halloween cat.

^L_{SEP} The intake clerk looked at him, shook his head, and duly noted on a form the ID number on the tag stapled to his sleeve.

“Charge?” he said wearily.

“What charge? I haven’t done anything wrong, just stood up for my narrative freedom rights as a writer.”

At this insolence, Fergus, who stood close behind, cuffed CM on the ear, almost knocking him over. Gruffly, he added, “You heard the gentleman, now state the charge!”

“But I don’t know what I’m being charged with,” CM whimpered.

“Says here,” Fergus intoned, “right on the ticket: Insolence to Her Majesty the Queen, refusal to alter narrative thrust. Detention until recants and rescinds ridiculous aliens, etc., or, if not recant after 24 hours, or fails to submit 100-word narrative on schedule, Detainee to be delivered to Transition for preparation as next DCL Grand Prize. No computer privileges.”

“Oh, that’s quite an honor now, ain’t it?” said the intake clerk mockingly. “Wish I could be a Grand Prize. Yeah, get meself all narrated *back to life* as some bloody fool. Maybe Heathcliff or somethin’ grand. Or maybe I’d be cleanin’ out pig sties. Nice.”

“What do you mean ‘back to life’?” said CM nervously.

“What did I mean? Well, you know what it means to be a Grand Prize, don’t you? It’s simple. Before they can write you back to life, first you got to be dead. Oh, they take care of all that at Transition. But don’t worry, I hear tell it’s painless. Not like the old

days, when it took some time. You won't even know what hit you.”

The intake clerk carefully finished filling out the forms, then directed Fergus to escort CM to a large, fluorescent-lighted, vinyl-tiled room, about 40 x 40 feet, with several large flat-screen TVs on every wall. Each TV was tuned to a different channel, for the viewing pleasure of the detainees who sat handcuffed to molded plastic chairs that had been bolted to the floor. In an enlightened, experimental approach—a pet project from Her Majesty's Corrections and Rehabilitation Bureau—the detainees could watch whatever program they desired, commercial messages included. All volumes had been adjusted upward for the hard of hearing. Several channels were devoted entirely to shopping.

HM's Entertainment Hours ran from 8 AM until 10 PM, after which time CM would be escorted to his cell. In the morning, he was told, an agent from the Narrative Section would arrive to interview him. The purpose of the interview, of course, was to see whether or not he had recanted. If so, he could forever strip the heretical aliens from all his submissions and be free to resume his old life. Or, if not, it would be off to Transition, and a new life, for Cedros CM.

A Slight Slipping of the Gears ...

Owen Darby tapped lightly on Truffington's office door—lightly, because his master and commander had just returned from his trip north where he had met with Darrold Hornby over early cocktails. Darby knew that Truffington was most likely dozing in his chair with a file on his lap in case of interruption.

“Sir?”

“Hummmph?” mumbled Truffington with a start. He quickly flipped open the file as if he'd been studying it but was just resting his eyes.

“Sorry to barge in on you, sir, but I think you'd better see this.”

“See what, Darby? Can't you see I'm busy?”

“Of course, sir, yes, of course. It's just that this was forwarded from Narrative Section Security Desk, marked URGENT, and they're screaming for guidance as to what action to take.”

“What the hell is it, man? Just unzip the body bag and show me the bloody body, will you?” Truffington kept a tight rein on his post-prandial naps and did not take lightly to interruptions. He also enjoyed the occasional excursion into coarse language.

“Seems there's some nut loose over at Transition, sir, and he's stirring up a fuss about 'authorial attributions,' 'validations' and whatnot—a whole series of legal accusations against the entire Narrative Section from the looks of it. He's particularly worked up about the CedrosCM case Her Majesty has taken under her wing. Claims he's had a clairvoyant dream, of all things, and has proof that this whole thing is a '*blinking fraud*'—his words. Threatening to go tabloid, apparently.”

“*What* whole thing, Darby? Will you just spit it out?”

“Sorry, sir, I’m trying to spit, honestly; but you’ll see that it’s bloody complicated, if you’ll pardon the expression.”

“Very well, Owen, I’ll humor you. Give me the kindergarten version. Assume that I’m a bloody six-year-old, and start at the beginning.”

“Yes, sir. Seems that around 0600 hours this morning Hartwell at the Security Desk received a fax transmission, several pages, hand-written, detailing a rather disturbing hypothesis. A bombshell, frankly, if it were true, which I’m sure it’s not, but you never know. Anyway, the sender claims it started with a dream he had. Next thing, he’s doing Internet searches and insists he’s unearthed a conspiracy that throws everything into doubt. It sounds crazy, I know, sir, and I’m sure it’s just a fluke; but he insists that the whole Narrative Section enterprise, yourself included, up to and including Her Royal Majesty’s interest, is *pure invention*. He’s not just talking about the aliens, sir. He’s talking about CedrosCM, DCL , the whole lot, *even himself*. It’s all fiction. Sounds like he’s steamed proper, too.”

“Preposterous! Outrageous! Fool’s top is obviously spinning off its axis! Totally off his bobbin!” Truffington was wide-awake now, gathering his own head of steam.

“I agree entirely, sir. I’m sure it will blow over. Meanwhile, Harwell is waiting for instructions. He’s not quite sure how to handle the dream part.”

“Wait a minute, Darby. Did I hear you say ‘himself’? As if he’s claiming to be fictional as well?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Who the bloody hell are we talking about, Clive? Who filed this beastly farrago of

accusations, anyway?”

“Arthur Compton, sir.”

“Compton? He’s dead, for Christ’s sake.”

“Technically, yes, sir. But he *was* the Grand Prize, after all, and we *did* bring him back.”

“But I thought he was back at Transition!”

“Not clear from the report where he is at this precise moment, sir. Escaped again, perhaps, or returned to custody—I can’t exactly say.”

“Lovely, just lovely. If this gets out the Queen’s going to have my head on a platter. A bloody mess!”

“Your head, sir?”

“No, you idiot! This Compton mess!”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Read the rest of it to me!” commanded Truffington, his chest swelling with manly determination.

“Yes, sir. It’s sketchy, of course, like most dreams, I suppose. I’ll read Hartwell’s summary to you.”

Darby straightened the papers in his hands, adjusted the distance for focus, and began reading.

“Subject Compton claims he dreamed of two birds, during dark of night, windy. Both birds turn into men, then men turn back into birds. And so on and so forth. Birds staring at subject throughout dream. Subject frightened, wakes up in sweat.”

Owen Darby chuckled to himself.

“Bloody hell are you laughing at, Darby?”

“Oh, nothing, sir. Just a comment Hartwell appended to his summary, penciled in the margin. He says, ‘Sounds like stinking balderdash to me!’”

“Well, we don’t pay Hartwell for his opinions on dreams, now, do we?” said Truffington. “We pay hefty fees to our own professional consultant for *his* dream opinions.”

Truffington fiddled with the file in his hands. It was his habit to use his hands as part of his display of command. Calm, steady, sure-handed Truffington, was how he liked to be known. Owen noticed the fiddling, of course, which did nothing to ease his own disquiet.

“Is Owl Man still on the payroll, Clive? Our own dream expert?” asked Truffington in a measured tone. “You know who I mean.”

“Yes, of course I do. Well, in fact he *is*, sir,” Clive said tentatively. “But perhaps I’d better read the rest of Hartwell’s summary first, before you call in the Owl Man. There’s just a slight chance of a conflict of interest. According to Compton, Owl Man may be implicated in this “conspiracy”—bestly accusation, of course. No one finer than Owl Man. Anyway, Compton closes the dream text by identifying the types of birds—bird-men, that is—that were staring at him in the dream.”

“Types of birds? What bloody difference does that make?”

“Well, sir, it does figure, slightly. The dream birds, it states here, were an owl and a heron, according to Compton.”

“Owen, you’re making no sense at all,” said Truffington, suddenly all sweet reason

and indulgent generosity. “Now, read the rest of Hartwell’s bloody little report, will you, my dear, and let me form my own opinions?”

Darby complied with Truffington’s order, and quickly read the salient points Hartwell had harvested from Compton’s madman ravings: “After writing dream down, Subject Compton conducted Internet searches for ‘owl-man’ and ‘heron-man.’ Claims to have found reference to ‘Owl and Heron Press,’ location unknown, co-publishers and co-editors listed as Owl Man and Heron Man, noted co-authors of *Fex & Coo*, heartwarming fictional work of genius.”

“Surely that’s not *our* Owl Man, is it, Owen? Our dream consultant?”

“Well, how many Owl Men are out there, sir? There *is* a chance, I suppose, that this one is ours.”

“Hmmm, yes. This could be delicate. If the Queen finds out it will be my—”

“Head, sir?”

“Precisely, Owen, precisely.”

Darby pulled at his collar, in sympathy with his boss’ dilemma.

“Still, there’s no mention there about DCL, is there?” Truffington offered hopefully. “No real link. Just the blinking gibberings of a psycho, right, Owen? And a dead one at that! How can that hurt us?”

“Well, sir,” Darby proposed delicately, “there *was* one detail that’s a bit of a bother.”

“Now what?”

“I’ll read it to you, sir. ‘Upon navigation of aforesaid Owl and Heron Press website, Subject Compton claims he found reference to a current project, with invitation to

register name and email address to receive sample chapter in PDF format. Subject Compton claims proposed title of this current fiction project is ... *The Deathling Crown Lottery.*”

“Oh, sweet Jesus,” cried Truffington, swiveling in his chair toward the grimy window overlooking the Thames.

At this point Darby wisely left Truffington to his torturous thoughts and backed out of the office, like a minor ambassador taking leave of an angry Caliph and the gleaming scimitars of his guardians.

Truffington Calls Owl Man ...

Truffington pecked *owl* into his cell phone's address book and Owl Man's number popped into view. Without hesitation the head of the Narrative Section hit the call button. Owl's voice mail answered on the first ring with the words: "Two hoots in hell at your service ... leave a message and I may get back to you. If not, forget that you called."

"Listen, Owl Man, it's Truffington, and I jolly well expect you to call back at once, or I'll shred your contract quicker than you can say Cock Robin—no offense, but you get the drift, I'm sure. We have a situation here and we need your assistance, but I'm led to believe you may be at the root of our problem. I've a meeting this evening with the Queen and I know you may be busy flapping your wings and all that, but get back to me at once or I'll be forced to tell the Queen my suspicions, and I don't think you want that, do you? Good day, sir."

Truffington was pumped. He had never threatened Owl Man before and discovered it felt bloody good. He balled his hand in a fist and waved it in the air in triumph. He realized it was only Owl Man's answering machine and that he could never best Owl that way, face to face, or "beak to beak," as Owl referred to personal meetings. He did not want to think through the ramifications of what Clive had reported of Compton's ravings. Surely it was just madness, some glitch in the process at Transition. He pushed the button on his intercom to get Owen Darby to return.

Darby responded almost too quickly, as if he'd been earing the door.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Listen, Owen, I want you to get me a full report on CedrosCM and what's transpired at New Highgate. I need to fill the Queen's ear with progress and I may need

to embellish a bit as usual for the Queen's pleasure. So any tidbits you can gather up, get them to me quick as a Royal Flush so that the Queen's olfactory propriety is not affronted."

"Olfactory propriety, Sir?"

"Don't bother your mind with subtleties, Darby. Makes one lose focus, you know. Now here's something else, if I may pile on two commands in one go. Get with your contact at Transition and find out anything you can about whether there has ever been any glitch before in the Deathling Crown Lottery process. Don't create any suspicions, but see what you can glean from those morbid coots. Is there anything about this that's not clear, Owen?"

"Clear as a foggy's evening, sir. But I'll get you what you need and that's the important thing, right, like the bingo number that completes a row. Just one question, sir, if I may."

"You may, Darby, you may. Ask away and then be off with you."

"Well, sir, I been wondering. What happens to me retirement pay if all this is, well, if all this is only a bloody story?"