

*Back from Bakersfield ...*

“What the fuck h-happened to me?” stammered Arthur Compton. “Where the fuck am I?”

The words were guttural and halting, slow to emerge, but at least they were words. At least Arthur’s vocal cords were vibrating, his diaphragm pumping air. Furthermore, his eyes were seeing, his fingers clasping and his legs, however clumsily, carried him forward.

He no more knew where he was going than molten lava “knows” where it is going. He was expressing some blind, primordial urge, a kind of Gravity of Desire. His paper hospital slippers had shredded on the rough pavement and fallen off, and his hospital johnny was flapping open as he lurched along.

By the first light of morning he was looser and more alert than he had been in Transition. The old Arthur Compton was starting to come back. Pedestrians bustling off to work glanced his way as he passed, but taking him for a homeless bum or a mental case, they quickly turned away. The wheels of commerce would turn for another day. Arthur kept walking.

When he smelled grilled sausage in the air, he realized he was gnawing hungry. He followed the aroma to a public house and paused at the door for a moment. The gilt sign above the doorway read “The Bucket O’ Blood.” The front page of a newspaper was taped to the inside of the window. He looked at it and saw a photograph of himself alongside that of a stranger.

“Hey! That’s me,” he growled. He pushed the door open and walked inside.

*Inside the Bucket O' Blood ...*

Colin the barkeep, damp rag in hand, stopped mopping the counter when he saw the man stagger into the pub with a wild look on his face, a sweat-soaked Johnny and bare feet. Besides Colin, there was only one other customer in the place, huddled in a corner over a laptop.

“Morning, sir. What can I do for you?” said Colin.

Arthur glared at him hatefully.

“Food! Water!” Arthur shouted. His throat was dry and his voice was hoarse.

Colin hesitated as he took in more of Arthur’s appearance and demeanor. He glanced at the telephone to make sure it was within quick reach, in case this turned out to be another of those fruitcake mornings where he had to call in the police.

“None of my business, sir, but is that all the clothes you put on this morning?”

“Shut up and bring me some food!” Arthur knocked over a chair to make his point.

“Don’t get upset now, mister. Calm down or I’ll call the cops.”

“What kind of food have you got?”

“Well, at this hour all we’ve got is bangers and mash.”

“Bring it!”

Colin took a closer look at the man’s face. There was a strange tint to the skin, as if there was no blood, or very little of it anyway, beneath the epidermis. It may have been the interior light, but Colin thought the face was a bit yellowish. Maybe the bloke had jaundice or some other exotic disease. Then he noticed something else.

“Hey, you look familiar. Haven’t I seen you on the telly or something?”

“Just bring me the bangers and mash.”

“All right, sir, I’ll bring it, but first you’d better tell me who you are. Tell you the truth, mate, you don’t look too good. And you can’t just walk into a pub knocking over chairs.”

“I am Arthur Compton.” This declaration was uttered with a strange mixture of Old Testament outrage and pride, but with a delivery that reminded one of Demosthenes on the beach, orating with his mouth full of gravel.

“Well, blow me down! I guess it’s true! I read the article about you in the paper. Look, it’s in the window right behind you. Do you know who’s sitting over in that corner?”

“No! And why should I give a damn?” Arthur spit the words out, like ash, but turned his head anyway. The dry skin on the back of his neck crinkled slightly in the process.

“I’ll tell you why, sir. That gent over there is none other than the latest Deathling Crown Lottery winner. He’s the bloke who won the prize. He’s famous, a big celebrity all over the UK!”

“Why should I care, for fuck’s sake?”

“Care? You mean you don’t know?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Sir. Mr. Compton. *You’re the prize.* And that bloke over there *won you.* He’s the one who’s narrating your replacement. He’s the one who gets to decide what you come back as.”

Arthur was finally turning red, but it should have been a warning signal to Colin.

“Hey, CM,” Colin called out. “Come say hello to Arthur Compton, your prize!”

As Colin turned back around Arthur sucker-punched him with a roundhouse right to the nose, fracturing bones in the process. Colin’s knees buckled and he dropped to the floor as blood began to spurt.

By this time CM had slid underneath the table of his booth, aiming for invisibility like a rabbit that freezes when a wolf is near.

Arthur roared and charged toward CM, who shut his eyes tight, held his breath, and pushed the SEND key on his email.

While this drama was unfolding, Colin had crawled behind the counter, picked up the phone and dialed the emergency number of the local London police.

*A reality stutter ...*

It should have taken a very few seconds for Arthur Compton to cover the distance separating him from CedrosCM—dodging chairs and leaping over spilled beer—but a curious thing happened instead.

It began, in fact, as soon as CM pressed the Send key on his laptop—pressed the Send key—on his laptop. The entire scene suddenly jerked and stuttered like an old scratched LP record—record—or a dusty digital disk skipping. Arthur Compton’s onrushing fists flailed through the air—the air—again, and his lungs bellowed forth—forth—a second time.

Then all was still. Time stopped, as if flowing water had turned to ice, and CedrosCM seemed to float above the scene as on a dream-like billow. Physical action stopped, or slowed to an indiscernible crawl, but the train of CM’s thought shot ahead faster than ever.

[DEAR READER: The following events might seem like so much pig-swill to those who are unaccustomed to thinking in terms of quantum physics on the one hand, and the bizarre reaches of the imagination on the other. Suffice it to say that, because we authors are not omniscient gods or magicians, we only have the limited testimony of CedrosCM to puzzle out what happened in the Bucket O’ Blood that day, and indeed happened many subsequent times in other situations. Let skeptics deny what they will. Our own view is that CM’s experience was *real*, whatever we might conceive that reality to be. Now to resume.]

In a flash one particular thought came to CM: “If I didn’t know better, I’d say I’m being pulled toward the event horizon of a tiny black hole.” His imagination leaped at the idea. “Sure, yeah, this is cool. It’s just like a black hole, or a bloody time-warp!” He

thought of the scene in *Babes in Space IV*—his favorite flick—where the crew were frozen in stop-action but the dialogue sped up while the ship slid over the edge of the event horizon. That’s where all the babes were waiting.

CM’s imagination may have been conditioned by the hundreds of cheap sci-fi books he had read over the years, but whatever was happening now—black hole, dream or something else—was real. So real, in fact, he had to will himself—no, he had to *think* himself—along a looping, tangential trajectory away from the deadly gravitational lip. It took a supreme effort, but he finally succeeded in thinking himself far enough away from the lip-like edge of the black hole, that he could float in “space” again and retrieve the thoughts that had flashed past so quickly.

“I don’t know why,” CM said, “but when I wrote a *narrative revision* and hit that Send button, it was like time got all jammed up, and then everything—me, old man Compton, the Bucket O’ Blood—went through a ... a *reality stutter!* Yeah, that’s it! Had to be. *It was a reality stutter caused by a bloody black hole!*”

CM was warming to his hypothesis, though he had zero data to support it. Sheer speculation is what it was. But one thing can be said about CedrosCM: Once his mind fastened on something, he was not about to let go easily. In this respect he was very much like Arthur “Bulldog” Compton. Yes, on that point he and Arthur were like two peas in a pod.

Another point of similarity between author and character was the deviousness of the two minds—if indeed they were even separate. It was not long before CM started calculating angles by which he could capitalize on this time-warp business, or whatever it was. He didn’t really care. He now was more interested in turning it to his advantage.

“HMMMM,” he muttered as his fingertips began to tingle. “I wonder if I can narrate Truffington into a country shit-house in Wales while I’m at it? Or write up a little dunk in the Thames for Brabazoom? Why not? After all, no limits on the narrative, right? Yeah, yeah, this has real possibilities if I can just work out the kinks—”

Kinks are exactly what were being worked out of CM’s limbs and joints as he ran through the list of fantasies. He felt like he had all the time in the world, and he did, but only in the manner of an entranced dreamer about to be awakened by a nasty snakebite. CM’s toes were now tingling, he had full feeling in his hands and up his arms, and he could feel his whole body starting to twitch and shudder. Still he pursued his fantasies.

“So when I punched the Send button, old fart-face Compton had *already escaped* from Transition, and here he is in the Bucket O’ Blood, right now, about to knock my bloody head off!”

Slowly CedrosCM began to realize he faced a dilemma. If he left the time-warp—or the dream-state—before re-writing the scene he was still in, Arthur Compton was going to arrive at the booth at full steam and would soon be clubbing him over the head, or somewhere more delicate still.

“Bloody hell! This means if I don’t figure out how to control these time-warp revisions this whole stinkin’ narrative business could come back to bite me!”

CM could feel himself taking on the heaviness of gravity. Before he had a chance to decide what to do he was sucked downward into a violent vortex and slammed back into the space he had occupied before the time-warp—crouching on the floor under the tabletop.

He looked up just as Arthur Compton, still roaring, tore the formica tabletop off its

post and began beating CedrosCM about the head—CM’s second thrashing of the day. This time, however, CedrosCM was saved by the timely arrival of two beefy London bobbies.

Arthur Compton, his hospital johnny flapping, flew ten or twelve inches off the ground, fists still flailing. He was followed closely by Cedros CM, both combatants having been hauled up by the collar by the enormous, scarred, and nicked hands of the two bobbies—former ruggers by the looks of them. The bobbies were, at one and the same time, rough, as befitted the occasion, and yet strangely unperturbed.

“Up against the wall now, you two! Feet spread, hands flat on the wall.” Then calmly, “All right, then, lads, let’s have a look at ye!”

Since Arthur Compton was clearly the aggressor in the *mélée* they had walked in on, he was the one they singled out first.

“And what about you, mate? You look like you just sashayed out of a mental hospital with that little bib you’re wearin’! Let’s see some ID, then.”

“My name is Arthur Compton! Do I look like I’m carrying my fucking ID?” Arthur was shaking, still indignant.

“Well, then, Mr. Arthur Compton, I allow as how you don’t look like you’re in compliance with Her Majesty’s Rules and Regulations Regarding Proper Citizenship! Does he, Duncan?” The talking bobbie glanced at his silent partner for validation. The latter continued the exposition.

“No, he don’t, Dalwyn,” and he turned back to Arthur. “You’ll have time to come up with a better story than that, mate, ‘cause I’m afraid we’re going to make a little visit to the station house for a nice long interrogation and a wee cup o’ tea.”



By the time the two bobbies got around to questioning CedrosCM he had decided to keep mum about what he knew of Arthur Compton, Transition, the Deathling Crown Lottery—the whole hog. No, he wanted to play his cards close to his chest on this one. See how many drops he could squeeze out of this lemon, maybe find some sugar in the situation and have himself a nice cup o’ lemonade. And since Colin was preoccupied with his broken nose and the medic team that followed hard upon the bobbies’ arrival, CM was going to play this smart.

“—know this gentleman?” the first bobbie was asking CM.

“What? Oh, sorry. No, officer, I’ve never seen him before in my life. I was just sittin’ here enjoying my bangers and mash when this here nutcase come over and attacked me—and over nothin’, it was!”

Since it was nearing time for their morning pasty and cuppa, the two bobbies quickly scribbled CM’s statement in their little spiral notepads, taking careful note of all his relevant info and numbers. Then they proceeded to march Arthur Compton out of the Bucket O’ Blood and into their ironically named “meat wagon.”

CedrosCM smiled at the sound of the totally unnecessary siren wailing off into late morning London traffic.

*CedrosCM needs a computer ...*

As the siren died away, the medics hauled Colin up off the floor and began escorting him out of the *Bucket O' Blood*.

“No way, you clowns. I can't leave the bar, ain't anybody to tend the place and I got payments to make and bills to pay and entertainments and ... ”

Colin's booming trailed off as he struggled free, putting himself in his boxer's stance which was second nature to him, having been a prizy for several years and recipient of what he called his “collection of broken snozzles.”

“You guys take your leave now before you get me famous left hook.” Colin poked his left fist toward the closest of the medics and they backed off.

“You must sign, sir. Refusing treatment against medical advice, this is, and we need you to cooperate at least with the papers the Queen's good service requires.” The man in white took a sheet from his clipboard, placed it on the bar, and stepped back. “Please sign, sir, so we can be on our way, and out of your hair.”

“Ain't signing no paper and the Queen ain't going to be bothered and I don't appreciate none your comment. You see any hair on this shiny head? Now be off with ya, before I get steamed.”

As the medics backed out of the *Bucket O' Blood*, CedrosCM saddled up to Colin and tapped him on the shoulder. Colin whipped around and led with his right, barely missing the jawbone of his best customer and sending himself into a heap on the floor.

“Damn your hide, Cedros, this ain't no time to be spookin' up on me like that. Jesus, I coulda killed ya.”

“If you had a right-cross to begin, with maybe so. But you couldn’t hurt a mosquito with that air ball now, and you know it. Listen, you got a computer in that crapper back there you call your office? Mine’s typing all funny now from the beer you spilled in it, and I gotta get to a computer quick.” CedrosCM held his hand out to help Colin to his feet, but succeeded only in being pulled down himself, sending his beer-soaked computer into the brass bar foot-railing. The resulting bang had death knell written all over it, if sounds can be said to be written on.

“What have we here?” The sweet tinkle of Jinny O’s voice washed over the heap of the fallen, but Colin was in no mood for sweet tinkles, nor was CedrosCM.

“Ain’t your business, Jinny, and why the hell are you late? Gonna dock you like I said the last time, which was only yesterday and the day before that and all the days stretching back to the cave days, seems to me. You partying too much, girl. It’s gonna cost ya a sweet penny, that’s what. Now get on back there and clean up that mess.”

Jinny O listened no better than she ever did to Colin’s threats, as she eyed CedrosCM’s laptop. “Looks ready for the trash pile, CM, that can’t be good with what you gotta do for your prize and all.”

“No need reminding me, I was just asking Colin here if he had a computer in the back.”

“No way, CM. Everything’s broke back there. Even the adding machines don’t work. Can’t imagine what the Queen would make of Colin’s books if she ever came calling. But listen up, CM. I just got me a new one so I can do my online business.”

Jinny O smiled that grinning grin of hers that was always the ticket to increased register jingles in the *Bucket O’ Blood* and why Colin never ever followed through on his

threats. She was his gold mine.

“Online business? What the hell you talkin about, girl?” Colin was up now, dusting himself off and giving CedrosCM a helping hand.

“None of your businesses, Colin. What I do on my own time is my own private turkey and you ain’t invited. But I am inviting Cedros. Wanna come, Mr. Big Prize?”  
Jinny O’ was grinning like she herself had won some swag. Perhaps she had.

### *The Queen's Interests ...*

The continued stripping of the monarchy of any semblance of power in the temporal affairs of state, or even as a bit player in the theater of politics, was unabated. Still, the whole charade could not be just dust-panned away. To solve this minor dilemma, the powers that be, or were, had delivered to the remnants of the House of Stewart, absolute control over what was now called the *Commission on Public Spectacle*, otherwise headlined in the tabloids as The Queen's CPS. The Queen commanded that all members of the CPS must be knights and they must meet monthly in the Throne Room at the great oblong table there. She fancied herself as Queen of Knights. The tabloids, not to be one-upped, had what they called field nights—all-night sessions devoted to the production of lurid, eye-catching, coin-attracting headlines, such as: IS BRABAZOOM LOSING HIS GRIP ON THE QUEEN? The papers were filled with rampant speculations concerning the Queen's exploits. Nowhere was this speculation more heated than in the case of Sir Lord Brabazoom of Tarara, Deputy Chairman of Her Majesty's Royal Commission on Sports and the Arts, one of the three sub-commissions of her CPS.

Brabazoom was the only member of all three sub-commissions and chairman of two. This not only caused toxic jealousy among the knight members, but was the basis of endless headlines, among them, such things as, IS BRABAZOOM THE QUEEN'S PET?

Indeed, Brabazoom was her favorite. She loved ordering him about. She demanded full and detailed reports of those activities under his purview, to be delivered by special courier, as the Queen had a morbid fear of computers, declaring them to be "obscene relics of the future." The Queen fancied herself quite a phrase turner, a literary engine in

this regard, tossing these declarations like gauntlets on the oblong table for her knights to carry forth to the furthest reaches of her queendom. The Queen fancied many things. It might be said, or may as well be said, that fancying was her chief occupation. She was damned good at it! Because of her literary lionization, she took special interest in the Narrative Section of her Deathling Crown Lottery and demanded of her SirB, as she affectionately called her High Commissioner, that the affairs of the lottery were to be made known to her in the most intimate detail on a daily, if not hourly, basis.

Unbeknownst to SirB, the Queen was fond of recruiting barkeeps as special agents to the crown, which she dubbed, to herself alone, Agents of the Queen's Interests, or AQI. The Queen was adept at acronyming and was constantly referring to her inventions when she lectured the knights at their gatherings about the oblong table. She found her *Commission on Food, Drink and Entertainments*, one of the three sub-commissions of her CPS, to be a rich source for recruiting her AQIs, and demanded absolute confidentiality from them under the penalty of royal ire. To date, no AQI had spilled the beans. Truth be known, she had a more informative network concerning her subjects, loyal and otherwise, than did M15, which in any case, had now evolved to M21.

She was now waiting for SirB to arrive. She had summoned her “right and good hand,” as she affectionately called him in private moments, of which there were an increasing number. The Queen, now all of 38 in both inches and years, was called TQ by SirB, some 30 years her senior, but of no matter to her. Her dalliances with seats of power, wherever and whomever this might involve, she fancied as explorations in search of a suitable consort and for this reason was suitably discrete as befits the royal person.

SirB arrived in full sartorial splendor, bowing as deeply as his girth allowed, with

his silver and gold walking stick held high. It might be difficult for someone to imagine SirB's black pin stripes, his top hat and bejeweled ascot as shining armor, but no one would have difficulty imagining that glorious walking stick as a Knight's sword. TQ had no difficulty imagining this and other things as well, and was enjoying fully the implications of her high commissioner having his "sword at the ready." She made allusions to this in her greeting.

But first, some business.

"SirB, what, pray tell, what is this Bakersfield nonsense? The papers are mocking you and through you they mock me. *Bakersfield*? How could you? I thought you had some control. Do I need to remind you—?"

"No, TQ, you need not. The matter is being taken care of, I assure you. But hold your royal irritations a moment, just a moment. I think these scandalous headlines actually serve her royal desire by increasing sales of the next installment. This will benefit the royal coffers. I need not remind you of the perilous state of—"

"No, SirB, you need not remind. TQ is well aware of the peril facing the monarchical economy. Why else would I take such an interest in this writing the dead back to life? It's not a queen's natural activity—at least as judged by other queens I know."

"I cannot accept that your interests are primarily pecuniary, my Queen. Surely, your literary interests dominate your fascination and your intrigue." SirB, standing now fully erect, was going into lecture mode, not a good sign.

"SirB, that goes without saying, but what saying it accomplishes, I cannot fancy. But it's not just this Bakersfield business. That is hard enough. What disturbs me with this new prize-winner is that he has taken up with a woman, and you seem not to be on

top of this development. This is trouble, SirB. I can smell it!”

“Speaking of smelling, TQ, whatever is that toiletry you are wearing? It is very difficult to keep to the business at hand, under its influence.” SirB was swaying as he spoke. He raised his lordly nose heavenward, taking in the aroma with eyes closed.

“No need to focus clearly, SirB, I’ll take these matters into my own hands soon enough, and sooner yet, if you will now busy yourself with the more important matters at hand.”

“At your service, TQ.” SirB laid his sword on the floor and began to busy himself with the royal buttons.

[NOTE: We break off the narrative here to allow TQ and SirB some GOFEP, or as TQ would spell it out, Good Old-Fashioned English Privacy, having full confidence that the royal gossip coffers would spill over into the morning headlines in a ceaseless effort to sate the voyeuristic demands of the public imagination, such as it is.]