

Arthur Compton flexes his—her—fictional muscles ...

By the time Arthur Compton, aka Nurse Agatha Crossworthy, let himself into his—her—flat with his—her—computer purchase in hand, his—oh, hell—*her* pancake make-up was streaked with sweat and her eye-mascara was smudged and running. So, she dropped the parcel on the small hide-a-bed couch and went immediately to the loo to check her appearance in the mirror.

After a few deft touch-up strokes with some pink cotton puffs she'd found in a glass jar on the shelf—and a quick whizz (American slang)—she felt refreshed and ready to write. This would be the beginning of her bold act of retribution against all the monsters at Deathling Crown Lottery—well-deserved punishment for their misjudgment of Arthur Compton, CEO of Reticular Medicinals, aka Nurse Crossworthy.

She opened the parcel, tossed the wrappings on the floor, and withdrew the various components of her—oh, hell—*his* purchase at the Apple store—cables, AC/DC adapters (hmmm, that's funny, thought Compton) and the like.

While alive, Compton had never been particularly adept at computers. He had been surrounded by secretaries and sycophants, and besides, he had his IT man, Germond Fauchet, the bloody Frenchman who was so good with all this electronic crap that Compton didn't dare dismiss him, which he would have dearly loved to do. But retaining Fauchet permitted Compton, as CEO, to concentrate on what he called “the big picture”—cooking up deals with the Canadians (Saskatoon had been a big winner), gaining market share among the Central American banana republics and, Compton's big dream, playing the “China card,” like Nixon.

As Compton watched the refurbished Transition laptop boot itself up, which seemed to take forever, he thought about how he was going to open his fictional narrative assault on DCL. He was about to formulate his first, devastating sentence when the computer, encased in pink plastic, made a pinging sound and a yellow smiley face appeared on the screen.

“Hi, what’s your name?” said the screen. “Do you have a moniker for me?” it continued, grinning fatuously.

Compton’s face started turning that old familiar bulldog-red that he’d been so famous for around the office.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he shouted at the happy face on the screen.

The obsolete hard-drive began to whirr and the happy face turned suddenly sullen, as if pouting. “Well, you don’t have to be so silly about it,” the face said. “We just need to establish your identity—for security purposes, of course.” Then the pout disappeared and the face began smiling again, hovering on the screen like a yellow balloon.

“What fucking security business are you in, anyway?” was Compton’s gruff retort.

Suddenly, in a humorless, authoritarian tone, the face said, “If you do not provide the proper identification within 30 seconds I will be forced to shut down this computer. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“Wait, wait! My fucking name is Arthur Compton, CEO of Reticular Medicinals!” Compton waited, glaring at the impudent screen.

“Mmmmm, nice try, Charlie, but not quite,” said the happy face. “According to my records your last name should start with a ‘C’, has eleven letters and ends in ‘Y’.”

“What?” said Compton. Then, remembering the credit card purchase with the stolen ID, he smiled broadly and winked at the screen. “Oh, yeah, I get it.” He ratcheted up the pitch of his voice, boosting his bulldog growl as much as he could into a more female range. “Yes,” he squeaked, “why, my name is Nurse Crossworthy.”

The happy face grimaced, but acquiesced. “Well, I don’t know anything about the nurse part, but ‘Crossworthy’ does match my records. OK, I’ll let you in this time.”

“Finally,” grunted Compton.

“Now,” said the face cheerfully, as if laying the table for a child’s birthday party, “what would you like your password to be?”

“My what?”

“Your password— P-A-S-S-W-O-R-D. Your private security code. Like a key. It has to be at least 8 characters long and include one number.”

“Oh, OK, OK. Let’s see, how about—‘*Compton 1*’?”

“Sorry. No capital letters and no spaces allowed,” said the face, sounding impatient.

“OK,” said Compton, wondering if he would ever get past this fucking face.

“How about ‘compton1’ then?”

“I’m sorry, but the password you have chosen is not strong enough. For security purposes, please select another. Otherwise, you might be in danger of contracting a virus, or worse.”

This went on for twenty-five minutes before the happy face on the screen finally accepted Compton's password, which turned out to be *betelgeuse_95zx?%\$*.

At long last, the smiley face said "Bye-bye, and have a great day, dude, or dudette—whatever!" And Arthur Compton was ready to start writing up his vicious assault on DCL. He typed a few keys and a stream of dimly lit letters slowly appeared on the dull screen. The effect was not exactly in-your-face striking, but at least the attack had been launched. Compton rubbed his hands eagerly and continued typing.

'Twas a dark and stormy night. Trees shook in the angry wind and the window-shutters banged loudly as Lord Truffington called for hot milk with brandy. Truffington had had trouble sleeping lately. It was because of this bloke Arthur Compton, who scared the shit out of him, and—'

Before Compton could finish his opening narrative, the phone rang. He looked at the device, another pink thing, this one decorated with frilly gold trim. Hesitating, he decided to brazen it out and answer the phone.

"Hel—" he began to grumble in his Compton bulldog voice, then quickly shifted to his Nurse Crossworthy squeak, repeating sweetly and hesitantly, "He—Hello?"

"My name," came the quivering, high-pitched, indignant voice across the line, "is Nurse Agatha Crossworthy. I believe you have my keys, my purse, my clothing, and are holed up in my flat like the evil fiend you are. What is your explanation?"

DCL 43 (RL) Commissioner Footman Booms ...

“Your Highness, in good conscience, I cannot put much needed resources into the arrest of a dead man.” Although the butt of many jokes about his propensity for foot-in-mouth gaffes, his many years as commissioner stood in him good stead with the Queen. He “straight-talked” her, as he liked to brag to his underlings.

“Listen, Clarence, good conscience is no matter to the Queen, but carrying out her direct orders is. Now get on with it and arrest Compton, dead or alive, and bring him here at once—likewise, dead or alive. I’ll deal directly with this faker who wants to tamper with my lottery. Now get to it before I have you sacked!”

The Queen was in high froth and Footman knew better than to argue, so he turned tail and left.

Standing outside the Queen’s chambers, Footman called in on his cell and gave orders to have nurse Crossworthy carry out the plan. Whoever was in her apartment would soon be shackled and brought to account by the Bobbies ready to storm in while the good nurse held the intruder’s ear on the phone.

“Yes, I’ll wait,” he boomed.

“OK! Go!” he boomed again.

Footman was fond of booming orders to his charges, but he was not liking what he heard next.

“What do you mean he’s not there? You heard him just now talking on the phone with Crossworthy. Dammit Kingsley, where’d he go? Vanished? What the hell do you

mean—vanished? People don't vanish, Kingsley. They hide in closets, they take a hike out an open window, hell, maybe they hide in the folds of a drape. Are there drapes there, Kingsley? Have you looked under the bed? Do I have to come there and do your bloody job, man?"

As Footman worked himself into a froth, the Queen's chamber door opened and when Footman swung around, he saw her majesty, hands a hip, glaring. "Well," she said. "Do we have good news, Footman?"

"No ma'am, we do not have good news, I am sad to say. Compton, or whoever the bloke is, has vanished. But do not worry, my best men are on it and I'm on my way myself to take direct charge. You'll have your man soon enough."

"This I doubt, Footman, as my intelligence sources have informed me that CedrosCM is writing again. How he found a computer I will discover in short order, but he may have simply written Compton out of there.

Crossworthy's temper ...

Agatha Crossworthy, a good Brit, was accustomed to suppressing her emotions in public, especially anger. Her dependence upon the good graces of her wealthy Arab client only served to increase her British reserve.

Except when alone. On those occasions, Miss Crossworthy would indulge her appetite for vulgar, lewd, malicious remarks. This she often did while making tea for her employer, a 90-year-old Saudi libertine who had fathered 38 children over his career. “Would you like some cat pee in your tea this morning, Sahib?” she would mutter viciously. But when she brought the silver tea tray into the sickroom where the old reptile was housed, she would curtsy in the most ladylike, dainty way. Arab petrodollars, after all, bought just as many pastries as proper Pounds Sterling did.

At the moment, she stood outside the door to her apartment building, glowering at the speaker grill on the door-buzzer panel. Her mood was far from traditionally British—the usual cheerio-pip-pip-stiff-upper-lip-old-boy attitude. In fact, her lip was not stiff, it was pulsing and swollen, such was her rage at Compton’s insolence, his refusal to explain himself. The intercom had gone dead, and the only ambient sounds were the throbbing diesel-engines of black taxis, or the screeching of crows in the canopy of trees on the mews.

“Motherfucker!” she fairly shouted; and grabbing a cast-iron boot scraper she hurled it through the frosted glass at the side of the door. After some ingenious wriggling, Miss Crossworthy managed to open the door without drawing blood, and soon was pounding on her own apartment door like an Old Testament prophet.

Arthur Compton, however, had disappeared.

“Hello, what’s this?” said Cedros CM to the computer screen in front of him.

Having casually slipped into the basement of the Chelsea Internet Café, he sat in one of several small cubicles. There, for a modest fee—a few pounds per hour—he could log on to a computer and narrate the day away. The peace of mind afforded by this relative anonymity was well worth the cost, especially since London was crawling with Her Majesty’s agents, all searching for him—the one, the only, CedrosCM!

He’d had his fill of the infringements on his narrative freedom and was determined to give this bastard Compton a good bash. But no sooner had he written Compton’s disappearance from Nurse Crossworthy’s flat, than the old biddy had come pounding on the door demanding to be let in.

Cedros stared at the screen in alarm. “How the bloody hell did she get in here?” he said, watching a stream of text unroll across the screen while his own fingers sat idle.

The cursor hopped across the screen and back, writing as it went. “Nurse Crossworthy ... kicked the ... door ... open ... and rushed into ... her flat.”

Then the cursor stopped, and like a little green pulsating eye, it sat there blinking on the screen. CedrosCM stared, waiting for it to move again. It seemed to him as if the computer itself were writing—well, *someone* was writing—even when his own fingers were not on the keyboard.

“Who the hell’s typing my narrative?” said CedrosCM to himself. “I just got rid of that bloke Compton and now someone else is taking over the story. Whose bloody narrative is it, anyway?” Cedros attacked the keys and wrote, “Who the hell’s ... typing

my ... narrative? And besides, whose narrative is it ... anyway?" He hit the Send key with an air of indignant satisfaction.

Suddenly the cursor jumped, skipping erratically across the screen.

"I ... am writing ... it," wrote the cursor. "And ... the narrative is ... *mine*."

Blink, blink, blink went the pulsing cursor as CM paused.

Cedros gaped at the offensive spot, which jolted into action again.

"Notice the ... *italics*. You ... can call me ... Your Majesty."

The cursor paused, then continued. "Commissioner Footman will ... be ... picking you ... up shortly."

The typing stopped, and the screen went dead.

The Queen's Finest Turn Tail ...

“What’s the bloody queen doing taking over my story?” Cedros’ loud shout-out caused even the blasé Chelsea Internet Café crowd to take notice and begin wandering over, tablets and smart phones and other sundry devices in tow, as CedrosCM became a non-virtual object of interest.

“Everyone freeze!” The bull-horned, gruffy command had its effect as everyone in the place froze in place, creating a tight and impenetrable knot around Cedros, rendering him invisible to the Queen’s men.

“Let me through! Let me through! Let me though!” Commissioner Footman’s triple command had little effect as there was nowhere for the crowd to disperse to, since the Commissioner’s forces were packing the crowd in tighter and tighter around Cedros. Footman’s outsized bulk could find no entry.

Meanwhile, Cedros pecked away with his two-fingered style on the keyboard while the crowd pressed in on him.

Then the spiders came down from the ceiling on thick webs making a definite hissing sound louder even than the noise of the crowd and Footman’s bellowing. They caught everyone’s attention. A cross between tarantula and wolf-spider, the things were quite sizeable, and getting larger as they swung back and forth. They were fierce-looking, as witnesses would later testify. They became numerous and thick, filling the air above the now panicked assembly, something on the order of a full bat-squadron taking aim at a huge food supply.

However, the spiders had little interest in the crowd, but keenly focused on Commissioner Footman and his men in blue. Footman had been knocked over as the

stampede of the crowd pushed out now from Cedros' table and everyone was caught up in an enormous scrambling tangle of bodies screaming and screeching. Several policeman were rabidly and wildly swinging their night sticks at the spiders, the whole scene looking like and sounding like some mad orchestra with too many conductors.

Footman could get no purchase on getting up, and his commands to lift him became just more din added to din. Footman, if truth be told, was deathly afraid of spiders and as they mounted his body he gave up the ghost and fainted away. As the air thickened with the hairy creatures, the Queen's finest turned tail and sprang away from the Chelsea Internet Café even more eagerly than they had entered. The crowd, too, bolted for the doors. And in spite of banged heads and bruised limbs, everyone finally escaped.

The proprietor, one Angus Stubbs, was under the counter, talking on his cell. As one of the Queen's intelligentsia, he knew his duty was to hold his ground, no matter what, and to call in his report.

“No ma'am, everyone is gone, 'ceptin' me and the spiders and the Commish.”