

Truffington Puts Owl Man On A Leash ...

Truffington's natural impulse was to downgrade anyone who jeopardized his high view of himself. *Maintain your superiority at all costs*—was his motto—*except when dealing face-to-face with the queen, of course—and Brabazoom, the fool.*

But after Alfie and Giles had delivered their pathetic report in the club lobby, slinking off afterwards into the dark, he found himself curiously disturbed. *Something* about that vulgar cowboy from America was bothering him. More pensive than usual, then, Truffington returned to the second floor, to his companion Geoffrey, a re-lighted cigar and another brandy.

Ordinarily, Truff would snort contemptuously at anyone bearing such a name as Owl Man. “Ha! What a ridiculous name! I suppose he has *down feathers* below that silly collar of his!” would have been a typical Truffingtonian derogatory remark. “And that hat,” he would typically continue. “What kind of bird wears a hat, anyway?” At this stage of derogation, Truff always left his Enlightenment reasoning far behind.

Once upstairs, Truff and Geoff settled back into their interrupted conversation, periodically sticking their noses into the snifters, deeply inhaling the aromatic brandy fumes as plumes of equally aromatic cigar smoke formed formidable clouds around their aristocratic heads.

Just as smoke-like, however, were the vaporous words that drifted from Geoffrey's mouth into Truffington's ears—and right out again. Truff wasn't really listening to Geoff tonight—not much of a loss in itself, since boring repetition was

endemic to Geoff's soporific conversational style. Far better when Truff held forth with staunch opinions and Geoff did the appreciative nodding.

But on this occasion, a preoccupied Truffington let Geoff ramble away, in order to devote the calculating, back-room part of his devious mind to his "cowboy problem," and what to do about it. In his own Machiavellian way, Truffington was a superb in-fighter in the halls of power. Thus, he actually experienced a degree of *relish* as he took up his mental preoccupation with Owl Man. In a word, he was getting *pumped*.

"OK," he began his inner diagnostic monologue, figuratively rubbing his hands together. "What do I know about *the cowboy*? Not much, really, but I do know that he walked into my office with no appointment, no credentials and no letter of introduction. Then, in the breeziest way possible, he proceeded to extort my best bottle of Macallan from me—*as if it were his due!* That was impressive, I must say. Yes, very impressive. Score one point for Owl Man."

Holding that thought for a moment, Truff sipped his brandy and puffed on his cigar, still nodding vacantly while Geoffrey offered up his fatuous inanities.

"Next," resumed Truffington to himself, "he extorted from me copies of the entire DCL Arthur Compton/CedrosCM files—every last chit, stamped form and affidavit, plus every narrative word, syllable, comma and dot! Again, very impressive. Score another point for Owl Man."

Truffington was beginning to get excited, as the implications of Owl Man's audacity and brilliance came into focus, along with dim intuitions of a potential solution.

"Third," thought Truff, "I sent my two roughnecks, Alfie and Giles, to beat him up in his own flat on Ebury Mews, and they both came back battered, frightened and

whimpering, like the rodent-like idiots they are. Judging from their report, the cowboy apparently bested them fair and square, although they complained that *he seemed to know they were coming!* Does the cowboy have a spy in the DCL-NS? Is dear Darby the source of my leak? Does Owl Man know Brabazoom also? How far do his tentacles extend into the DCL? What power is it, exactly, that he wields? Or, *whose* power, should I say?"

At this point, Truffington reached his most startling and alarming speculation:

"Don't tell me! Is Her Majesty is behind this, as I suspected all along? After all, Owl Man *did* refer to her as 'Queenie.' Does *she* know the cowboy? Is *he* the horse she rides at night? Is *she* plotting my downfall, with *him* as her secret agent assigned to bring it about? Why else would he be so impudent to my face? Why so aware of my penchant for Macallan, walking in like he owned the place, demanding my best Single-Malt, walking away whistling and swaggering the way he did?"

This realization—the possibility that Queenie was lurking in the background, working the levers of power—was the most disturbing of all to Lord Truffington. It came upon him with all the unwelcome force of a sixteenth-century medical diagnosis—acute syphilis, say, or advanced gout. He may as well have been wearing a powdered wig, his swollen foot elevated on a gout-stool, for all the systemic medicinal defenses he could muster against his own thoughts, fantasies and realizations.

Truffington knew he was bordering on a helpless panic. At the same time, however, he had just experienced the first inkling of a saving epiphany, an inspiration worthy of Machiavelli's own convoluted imagination. In short, Truffington was closing in on a shockingly simple solution to his cowboy problem, to wit: *Get Owl Man on the DCL payroll!*

“What could be easier? Keep him under my thumb!” he blurted out to Geoffrey, who was still blathering on about the price of commodity shares, or the Labor Party, or the greatness of the Iron Lady.

“I’m sorry, Truff?”

“Oh, nothing, Geoff. I just realized you’re spot on there, everything you’ve been saying. We’ll trounce them at the mid-terms, get back on to an even keel, steady hand on the tiller, Nelson at the helm, so to speak.” Truffington piled on the irrelevant metaphors as he secretly delighted at his breakthrough insight—Owl Man = DCL payroll.

Later on, as Quirino drove Truffington from the club back to his elegant lodgings, he sat humming in the back seat of the Bentley. It was a bouncy tune from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Quirino glanced into the mirror, aware of the lightened mood emanating from his boss.

“*O senhor* in hurry get home?” said Quirino.

“No, Quirino,” replied Truff. “Take your time. I’m in no hurry at all.

The next morning, however, after his three-minute egg and dry toast, he speed-dialed Darby and asked him to make an appointment with Owl Man, ASAP.

“Tell him I said it’s urgent, Darby. Urgent!” said Truffington, in his own version of exemplary urgency.

Whose Fiction Is This Anyway?

Once Fex *took command of the story*—or tried to—subsequent events unfolded at such break-neck speed that it was hard for a disinterested observer, let alone the principal characters, let alone the two co-authors, to keep track. But there was one strange and curious fact: *Owl Man and Heron Man had little to do with the outcomes*. When Fex ran away with the story, he precipitated a cataclysmic series of disruptive consequences that seemed to blow the whole thing apart.

Forget Ling Bank. Forget Old Man Ling. Forget Shaman Song. Forget the heist. Forget, even, the Hasty Heisters, who had practiced so diligently under Heron Man's—and, on two occasions even, Coo's and Jasmine's, tutelage—the practice designated by Owl Man as “feathers.” All this, while Owl Man was off in Yucatán listening to thousands of birds at midnight in a dripping rainforest with an old Mayan shaman.

The simple truth is that Fex's interference with the carefully (or perhaps not-so-carefully) laid plans of Owl Man and Heron Man—we might as well say *Fex's bungling*—had the effect of wrenching whatever control the two novelists were feverishly trying to maintain over the flow of events, completely out of their hands.

But lest we lose our heads in sympathy for the plight of Owl Man and Heron Man, let us not forget that, in some mysterious way, *they* were the ones responsible for the entire debacle in the first place! *They* were the ones who had initiated it all, especially Owl Man, and his supposedly innocent meandering down to Seattle that day, his presumably innocent cup of coffee, his ostensibly innocent penchant for pondering the centuries-old musings of Goethe—the old man of Weimar in his stockings and powdered

wig, seeing a gentleman riding on horseback down the Sessenheim road, but in fact seeing *himself* as he would appear in exactly the same apparel, *years in the future!*

So, if there's anyone to blame for the outcomes, as noted above, it should not be Fex, just because he tried to take command and it went all *jabberwocky* on him. After all, *he's just a fictional character!* The blame goes to Owl Man and Heron Man. And while we're at it, let's toss Tully himself into the stew-pot, because Tully was so supportive of Owl Man and his quirks—a kind of mirror-effect, perhaps? Owl Man and Tully somehow mirroring one another? Entangled?

Or was there something else?

Perhaps we should consider, for example, the role of Jasmine and Helen in this rather rambunctious *dénouement* of the story. After all, Owl Man recognized and *admitted* the truth of Heron Man's claim that "Helen is the woman of my dreams," as he put it. And could we not say the same thing about Jasmine, in regard to Owl Man? Is she not the "woman of his dreams?" Who else could have accompanied him, as she did so steadfastly, throughout these adventures, even to the point of walking into the dragon's lair of Ling's office at the bank with Helen the Muse, aka Baroness Catherine Rothschild Van Renssalaer? So, what else could be Jasmine's function for Owl Man but that of a muse? Not a *succubus*—not entirely, anyway—certainly a companion. But didn't her companionship extend into Owl Man's psychic and emotional depths, down to the regions where muses normally hold forth? Of course it did. With almost equal certainty, then, Jasmine was as much Owl Man's muse as Helen was Heron Man's.

Which leaves us with this fictional-yet-very-real *quaternio* of, shall we say, unresolved, “evolving” characters—Owl Man & Jasmine, Heron Man & Helen—in which it may be impossible to say who plays whose muse, or whence derives the inspiration—from the author? The character? Some other agent? Who inspires more? Author? Character? Muse? And which is which anyway? Can we say with final certainty what role it is *we* play, and for whom we act, if we take seriously the life of the imagination— we, the so-called “audience”? Doesn’t the act of reading also invoke energetic intensities, which are drawn into the creative maelstrom?

In the end, perhaps the entire world is shot-through with evolutionary muse-potentials, and we can all serve as muses to one another, so long, that is, as we are willing and able to reach deeply enough into the realm of the muses, where stories and music and writing and poetry and dance are born. But for that, we must be willing to withstand the fires of creation. Then, and only then, we might be in a position legitimately to attend one of Tully’s monthly *ceilidh* parties.

Xhactu Vaporizes the D.C. Swamp

Long before Xhactu had hyper-located himself to Irma's Diner in Seattle—where he would take Irma into his many arms as “Bride of Xhactu,” from there to zoom with her on a long honeymoon through Inter-Galactic space—he had spent a long and frustrating hiatus in London.

The inactive period came about because his magnificent spaceship had been stalled for months on end due to a general loss of “narrative thrust” within the energy fields surrounding the rather pathetic planet known as Earth.

“No wonder the miserable Earthlings can't get it up,” muttered Xhactu more than once. “No narrative!”

While the great ship was stalled, and its giant intake ports were feebly sucking diesel-tainted London smog, Xhactu had amused himself with as many variations on the traditional probing protocols as he could imagine. Truffington and Compton were all too happy to serve as “guinea pigs.”

He put on a stoic face, as befitted the Commander of an Inter-Galactic Spaceship; but in truth, Xhactu was unhappy.

Until one day an unexpected flash message bounced across the consoles on the bridge, like so many pinball machines. It was an urgent dispatch from the Supreme Commander Zrrongo.

Bradhu knew Xhactu was in the probing center, and he was breathless as he told him of the news.

Xhactu! Come quickly,” said Bradhu. “Zrrongo is calling for an immediate audience.”

At this, Xhactu left the probing instruments dangling from the key Comptonian and Truffingtonian orifices, and scurried down the hallway, through the light-wall and onto the bridge.

“Zrrongo, Your Highness. To what do I owe this honor?” said a breathless Xhactu.

“I have a special mission for you, Xhactu.”

“But our ship is stuck without narrative thrust, Zrrongo. How can I carry out your mission?”

“*Don’ worry ‘bout it,*” said Zrrongo, who had been practicing Earth-slang. “Use the Earthlings’ own radio-techniques to carom off the ionosphere from London to Washington, D.C. Bounce your vaporizing beam in such a way that you vaporize the entirety of D. C. and the surrounding areas. No one is to be spared!”

“But won’t there be what the Earthlings call *collateral damage?*”

“That’s the point. Your mission, Xhactu, is to completely *vaporize the swamp.*”

“Yes, Zrrongo.”

“And Xhactu.”

“Yes, Sire?”

“Do it now!”

Historians and scientists of later eras and other planets argue to this day whether The Great DC Extinction Event of 2022 was caused by a giant asteroid from

the Oort Cloud, a vast Coronal Mass Ejection from the sun, or a “fictive burp” from one—or a group—of the many enraged writers plying their mysterious trade in the bowels of the so-called Internet.