

THE CRACKED BLACK CROCK-POT II THE OBLIGATORY LAME SEQUEL

BY CORY POULSON

LESS INTENSE ACTION!

FEWER EXPLOSIONS!

UGLIER ACTRESSES!

So the first one wasn't bad enough for you, eh? Well, unbuckle your seat belt, because you're in for the least thrilling ride of your life. Some of your most hated characters from the first story are back for another round of gross stupidity—only this time the action is lousy, the effects are pathetic, the humor is even more banal, the plot is...well, there is no plot...and the predictable ending is utterly anticlimactic.

So get ready to be bored out of your skull by a story that tried (and miserably failed) to compete with the original by going way over-the-top, just so the author could make a few bucks without using much actual creativity.

I: At the Sign of the Lamé Pony

or

Down Once More

Bob sat despondently in the Lamé Pony Tavern, listening to a tinny piano being played by a one-eyed fellow who was either tone-deaf or had only three fingers. He moodily swirled his Fruitopia, wondering what he could do that day to make him forget where he was.

Denver wasn't such a bad town, he guessed, compared to the rest of this crazy place. At least it had a nickel arcade, even though it actually charged quarters, and lots of them. Luckily Bob was not short on cash; after being abandoned at WillyCorp by Gandarph, he'd raided the company vault, which had been locked with a popsicle stick and a rubber band. That had been three weeks ago, and he'd since found his way to Denver, after narrowly avoiding another run-in with the LUSR™.

The piano came to a stop, and Bob, unable to resist, drawled, "Play it again, Sam."

The piano player, who by some freakish coincidence really was named Sam, launched into his tuneless plunking again. Bob sighed, looking down at his drink.

Someone else entered the tavern, but Bob didn't look. Whoever it was clumped over to the bar, mumbled something Bob didn't hear, and after a moment walked toward Bob's table. Before Bob could look up, the person coughed loudly, and then gasped, "Goodness, that burns going down!"

Staring across the table, Bob's jaw dropped. "Gandarph?" he demanded incredulously.

The old wizard was looking distastefully down at his drink. It was a putrid shade of orange, and was smoking. "I don't think this grapefruit juice was really freshly-squeezed," he said.

Bob couldn't help but chuckle. "Trust me," he said, holding up his Fruitopia, "this is the only drink you can order around here and really get what you asked for."

Gandarph shrugged. "Well, Alice my boy, you're looking well."

"Been better," Bob replied.

"Excellent, excellent," said Gandarph absently. He dropped a penny into his drink, and it immediately dissolved. "Oh, dear."

“So what are you doing here, Gandarph?” asked Bob. “I thought you sailed across the sea.”

“I tried,” Gandarph replied. “But I couldn’t find a boat shaped like a bird. Wandered along the seacoast for weeks. Oh, but it’s just as well.” His voice dropped into a conspiratorial whisper. “A matter of great urgency has come to my attention.”

“I’ll bet,” Bob muttered. “And let me guess—I’m the only one who can stop whatever great evil is threatening the land, right?”

Gandarph shook his head. “Not this time, Alice. Actually, I’m sure any number of unlikely heroes could be coerced into accomplishing this mission. However, knowing as I do your courageous spirit and indomitable will to win…”

“Are we talking about the same person here?” Bob interrupted.

Gandarph blinked. “I don’t know. Who were *you* talking about?”

“Never mind,” Bob said with a sigh. “So what’s the deal?”

“We need to gather a company of stout companions and travel to Paris,” said Gandarph.

“What’s in Paris?”

“A nursing home.”

“Uh… I see.”

“But this is no ordinary nursing home,” Gandarph said in a hushed voice. “They say it’s haunted.”

“Right.”

“A Phantom wanders its halls and old abandoned mansion-sized sewers, dressed all in black, face hidden by a mask, and wherever he goes people inexplicably burst into song. He has an incurable crush on one of the young nurses there, even though he’s like a hundred years older than her. He is intent on making her Head Nurse before dragging her down to his black lair for the rest of her life.”

Bob stared. “The Phantom of the Nursing Home?” he said in disbelief. Just when he thought he’d heard it all…

“I see you’ve heard of him,” said Gandarph.

“In a way,” Bob replied vaguely. “So… does this Phantom guy try to sabotage the other nurses, or what?”

“Oh, yes,” intoned Gandarph mournfully. “All manner of vile and evil machinations. Cherry bombs in the garbage cans, shorted sheets, Kool-Aid in the shower heads... Why, just last week he placed a whoopee-cushion on the chair of a very respectable old nurse there. She was mortified!”

“Sounds dangerous,” Bob said in a perfectly neutral tone.

“Oh, the plot goes much deeper than that,” Gandarph said. “He is getting more and more desperate, and finally, just last week, he created something that could destroy this land forever!”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“A virus,” Gandarph said. “A horrible, genetically-engineered virus.”

Bob, shocked that something that actually sounded serious had come from Gandarph’s mouth, said, “A virus? What does it do? How fast does it kill?”

“Kill?” said Gandarph with a blink. “Oh, it doesn’t kill—it does something much, much worse.” Leaning forward, his voice dropped even more, to the point it could barely be heard over the ridiculously loud background music. “It only affects stupid people, infecting their brains and mutating them into respectable pillars of the community. You can imagine the havoc that will wreak on society.”

Bob shook his head. “Truly there is no end to the fiend’s malfeasance,” he said dryly.

“I’m glad you understand the seriousness of the situation. Now, Alice, this is where you come in—since you’re the only person here who isn’t stupid, you’re the only one who can withstand the virus.”

“I thought you said any number of people could do this,” Bob objected.

“Did I?” Gandarph said in surprise. “I don’t remember that.” He looked suspiciously down at his drink.

“So, about these ‘stout companions?’” asked Bob.

“Oh, yes,” said Gandarph. “I thought I’d pick up Philip Philip the Rat, but I hear he’s still very busy at his new job.”

“But with Willy gone, isn’t WillyCorp pretty much toast?” asked Bob.

“Oh, yes, WillyCorp is no more. But Philip Philip the Rat rose very quickly in the confusion that followed Willy’s demise, and he took over the company and renamed it RatCorp. Doing

better than ever, now. They've opened a branch in the nuclear arms department, and are making a handsome profit selling to questionable men with dark glasses and no last names who lurk in alleys and government offices." He paused with a slight frown. "Rat did mention several million dollars had gone missing from the company vault, though."

Bob coughed uncomfortably. "Really? Um...so is Pilsbury coming along?"

"Of course!" Gandarph exclaimed. "He's outside right now with Duke the Duke, procuring passports to Paris."

"Duke's here?" said Bob. "Good."

"There are also two others we must find to come with us."

"Who?"

"I'm not sure." Gandarph looked a little guilty. "I seem to have misplaced my scripts before I had a chance to study this one very well, so I don't remember exactly how this is supposed to proceed."

"Oh," said Bob. "You dropped one at WillyCorp, but I threw it away."

"Oh, well," sighed Gandarph. "It was probably the wrong one anyway."

II: The King
or
The Museum of Elegant Dirt

“So,” said Bob as he and Gandarph left the Lane Pony Tavern, “where are we headed first?”

“We’re off to find the first new member of our company,” replied Gandarph.

“Yeah, but where?”

“Um...” Gandarph’s eyes wandered aimlessly in different directions as he concentrated.

“I...uh...don’t remember, exactly. Although I’m pretty sure it’s London...or somewhere close to there, anyway. I seem to recall it not really being a city—more of a long row of large, opulent mansions, or castles, or something, for the man we are looking for is a king.”

“Camelot?” guessed Bob.

“Ah, ha!” Gandarph exclaimed, snapping his fingers. “Camelot! Of course! What better place to find a king?” But then he paused, thought for a moment while some ridiculous song drifted in from an unknown distance, and then said, “On second thought, let’s not go to Camelot. It...”

“...is a silly place,” Bob finished with a sigh.

“Why, yes!” said Gandarph. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.”

“Wait!” Gandarph snapped his fingers again, dislocating the joint of this thumb. “Ouch! I remember now—it’s the Valley of the Kings!”

Bob was about to mention that the Valley of the Kings was in Egypt, not near London, but then he thought better of bringing it up. “Well, sure,” he said. “Should’ve thought of that myself.”

“To London!” cried Gandarph, wincing as he popped his thumb back into place.

Pilsbury and the Duke were walking toward them, and Duke waved. “Howdy, pilgrim.”

“Hey,” said Bob in return.

Pilsbury looked unhappy. “I couldn’t get the passports,” he said to Gandarph.

“What?” said Gandarph. “Why not?”

“The travel agent said Paris is closed for renovation.”

“Renovation?” asked Bob. “An entire city?”

“The mud in the streets dried up, so they’re bringing in more water,” said Pilsbury.

Bob decided not to think about that. “Say,” he said, “why do you even have to have passports to go to Paris, anyway? We’ve never needed passports to go anywhere else.”

“Well, it’s Paris!” exclaimed Gandarph, as if that should explain everything. “Of course you have to have passports to go there!”

“So what would happen if we just walked in without passports?” asked Bob. “Would there be agents who’d stop us or something? Would we get thrown in jail? Turned out of the city? Would they shoot us, or what?”

“Oh, goodness, no,” said Gandarph. “Nothing like that.”

“Then why should we bother getting them?”

“It’s Paris,” said Gandarph. “You just have to have passports to get to Paris. Otherwise we couldn’t pass the port, and you can’t get to Paris without passing the port.”

“Port?” asked Bob.

“Yes,” replied Gandarph. “The giant man-eating port that guards Paris.”

Bob shook his head. “Never mind. I’m sorry I asked.”

Gandarph sighed. “Well, perhaps by the time we’ve found our other two comrades, Paris will again be open. All right, then, off to London!” He pulled a shovel from his robe and began digging in the middle of the muddy street.

“Uh...what are you doing?” asked Bob as he watched.

“It’s around here somewhere,” muttered Gandarph. He scooped out another shovelful of mud, his hole by then about a foot deep. When he jammed the shovel down again, the tip hit something hard. “Ah, here it is!”

Within a few minutes Gandarph had cleared the mud away from his target. It was a manhole, surrounded by asphalt. “There’s a real street under the mud?” Bob demanded.

“Of course,” replied Gandarph. “Why do you think we have all this dirt hauled in?” He took a crowbar from inside his robe and pried the manhole up. “All right, here we go!” he said.

Before he could move, though, a chipmunk came flying up through the manhole, screeching loudly. It landed in the mud and immediately sank out of sight.

“Darned rodents,” muttered Gandarph. He then jumped into the manhole.

Bob stared down into the dark hole, and glanced at Pilsbury. “Um...after you, Pilsbury,” he said.

Pilsbury sighed. “I hate this part.” Plugging his nose, he jumped into the hole.

Duke and Bob stared down into the hole for a moment, and then looked at each other.

“Um...after you, pilgrim,” said Duke.

Bob shook his head. “I’m still expecting myself to wake up in a hospital with bandages around my head any moment now,” he muttered.

Duke’s brow wrinkled. “Why?”

“Never mind.” Bob took a deep breath and jumped into the hole.

He half-expected to be teleported into some alternate dimension, but instead he found himself splashing into waist-deep sewage. “Oh, gross!” he exclaimed, slogging away from the opening so Duke could come down. “What the heck are we doing down here, Gandarph?”

“Going to London,” replied Gandarph.

“Through the *sewer*?”

“Well, of course. You can’t expect to have a story about a mysterious Phantom without doing a lot of wandering around in sewers.”

The four of them waded through the sewer for a long while, at one point stopping to wait while a man with a lantern herded a great horde of rats past. Gandarph led the way confidently, and after a couple of hours he said, “Ah! Here we are!”

They rounded a tunnel, and ahead of them was a gigantic sign, picturing a woman in a top hat holding a bundle of cash and a deck of cards. Neon letters underneath her proclaimed, ‘Welcome to London.’ Underneath the sign was a rusty iron door, which Gandarph pushed open.

Through the door, they found themselves in an absurdly posh casino. Gold and jewels decorated the walls and slot machines, and the floor was carpeted with very expensive velvet that probably at one time had been red, but was now more green and brown. Sewage-soaked patrons were milling about, repeatedly losing all of their money and being thrown out by muscular bouncers. Occasionally some actually won, and the bouncers promptly bashed them on the head and dragged them into dimly-lit secret passages, never to be seen again.

“Ooh, a bar,” said Gandarph.

“Never mind,” said Bob firmly. “Let’s get to the Valley of the Kings.”

Gandarph looked longingly at the bar, but then sighed. “Very well, Alice.”

As they walked through the huge casino, Bob remarked, “So this is London, huh?” Nearby a man pulled the lever of a slot machine, and nickels began pouring out. Immediately a dozen other patrons and several bouncers pounced on him. Bob thought back to the collection of straw huts that was Vegas, and shook his head with a resigned sigh.

They finally made it through the casino, arriving at a rope ladder that led up through a manhole. A loud sign next to the ladder proclaimed, “This way to the Valley of the Kings!”

“Really?” said Gandarph.

“Really,” said the sign. “Be sure to visit the Museum of Elegant Dirt while you’re there.”

“You’re a very loud sign,” said Gandarph, rubbing at his ears.

“Well, sorry,” said the sign in a quieter, slightly miffed tone.

“Shall we?” said Gandarph, and started up the rope ladder.

The Valley of the Kings was a dead-end, dingy alley between two monstrous buildings. Piles of garbage, some in sacks but most not, lined both sides, and at uneven intervals along both walls were set unlit, unkempt, and uninviting doorways. Most of the doorways had faded signs hanging crookedly from them. The first said *The Emperor—no clothing allowed*. Across the alley from that door was one that said *King Midas—amazingly lifelike gold sculptures, cheap!*

“Let’s go this way,” said Gandarph as he pointed down the alley, which was an easy decision to make since it was the only way to go.

They passed another door, this one of enormous proportions, reading *King Kong*. There was a very small door next to it, with the name *King Louis* painted on it. Across from those doors was one that was pincushioned with arrows, and a broken-off sign reading *King Richard*, with those words crossed out and *Prince John* scrawled underneath, lay on the ground near it. Hanging on the wall next to that door was a stuffed deer head, with a sign under it saying *The Great Prince of the Forest*.

“Ah, here we are,” said Gandarph, pointing at a door next to the deer head. “The Museum of Elegant Dirt.”

“What?” said Bob. “We’re actually going there? Why do we care about dirt?”

“The sign said to go,” said Gandarph.

“But we don’t have to!”

“But we should! The sign was an omen!”

“What? An omen?”

“Yes, an omen! A portent, a token—a sign! Didn’t you see the sign?”

“I saw the sign,” Pilsbury piped up. “And it opened up my eyes.”

“I saw the sign,” agreed Duke.

“Fine, fine, we’ll go in!” Bob exclaimed.

The Museum of Elegant Dirt had little to do with its name, at least from first appearance. When they walked in Bob immediately had a deep suspicion about who they were about to see, and he looked around at the glass cases full of guitars and white jumpsuits with something close to fear.

“Elegant Dirt,” he murmured. “Oh, boy.”

Just then someone appeared from farther back in the museum, and all of Bob’s suspicions were confirmed. “Hello, there!” the man said with a lopsided smile. His black hair had a full pound of mousse in it, and he was wearing a jumpsuit that was probably also white but was so covered with sparkling sequins that no actual cloth could be seen. “What can I do for you?”

Gandarph immediately prostrated himself on the floor. “Oh, great one!” he cried. “You are he whom we are seeking! By what name may we call you?”

“My name’s King,” he replied. “*The King*.”

“You shouldn’t have said that,” Bob groaned.

“Oh, King the King,” cried Gandarph, “we have come to seek your aid in a most dangerous quest!”

“Sweet, baby,” said the King. “So who are you? And hey, you mind getting off the floor? I just had it waxed.”

Gandarph got back to his feet. “I am Gandarph, the Wandering Wizard, and these are my companions, Alice in Wonderland, Pilsbury, and Duke the Duke!”

“Duke, huh?” said the King. “Guess that means I outrank you.”

“Wanna bet?” Duke growled, resting his hand on the butt of his pistol.

“But hey, baby,” said the King, “why wave a title around? It’s no big deal! Inside I’m really just a hunka-hunka burnin’ love!”

“Right,” said Duke. “Keep it to yourself.”

“Oh, great King the King,” said Gandarph, “will you help us?”

“Did I mention I was a hunka-hunka burnin’ love?” asked the King.

“Yes, O mighty one!”

“Sweet. I’ll help you, then. What are we doing?”

“We must track down the infamous Phantom of the Nursing Home and stop his foul plot!”

“Ow!” cried the King. “Sounds exciting, baby! Let’s rock and roll!”

“I’d rather not,” Bob muttered under his breath.

III: RatCorp

or

Bad Acting

“And now to find our last companion,” said Gandarph as he led them back out into the Valley of the Kings.

“Who’s he?” asked the King.

“I’m not entirely sure, King the King,” replied Gandarph. “All I know is that he is called simply the Persian.”

“Sweet, baby,” said the King. “Do we know where he is?”

“No,” said Gandarph. “But I know someone who might.”

“Here we go again,” muttered Bob.

“Who?” asked Pilsbury.

“We must journey to WillyCorp and defeat the evil Willy!” Gandarph cried dramatically.

“The final path will be three-fold. To enter the Bronx, we must pass through the dreaded Takslah Mire, which is infested with Sadistic Odditers and is fed by the poisonous waters of Lake...”

“Hold on there, pardner,” the Duke interrupted. “That was the last story.”

“Oh,” said Gandarph. “Right. Sorry—I said WillyCorp and just got carried away, I guess. Anyway, we *do* have to journey to WillyCorp—I mean, RatCorp—to see an old friend—Philip Philip the Rat.”

“Rat knows where the Persian is?” asked Bob.

“I think so,” Gandarph replied. “The journey to RatCorp is long and dangerous—we must be strong and...”

Bob rolled his eyes. “Just summon Shadow-Fax and get it over with, okay?”

“Oh,” said Gandarph. “Right.” He sucked in a great breath, and this time Bob covered his ears before the whistle permanently damaged them.

For a moment there was silence, and then a door some distance down the alley, along with a great deal of the wall around it, shattered as Shadow-Fax crashed through.

It paused, rearing up on its hind end and letting out a loud ring tone as the wind played

through its telephone co...

“Hey!” said Duke. “Stop copying and pasting from the old story! That’s cheating!”

“Sorry,” said the author.

“All aboard!” called Gandarph, climbing into Shadow-Fax. Bob shuddered and followed him.

Within moments they were all standing in the foyer of RatCorp. It hadn’t changed much since Bob had last been there, except that there was a ten-foot poster of the Rat, grinning and holding a billion-dollar bill, hanging on the wall next to the main doors.

“Onward!” cried Gandarph, marching toward the doors.

No Fierce Beast reared its ugly heads this time, but something possibly even worse did. A girl popped up in the window next to the doors, and Bob stopped short, staring in disbelief—it was the bubble-gum-chewing Flor-Mart cashier! “Hey, sweetie!” she said, grinning her purple-toothed grin at Bob. “What can I do for you?”

Bob took a step back. “You!” he cried. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Gee, toots, I don’t really know,” she said. “When you let me keep the change I ran after you to show my appreciation...” she batted her eyes at him... “but then there was, like, this big black car and you were, like, hit! I screamed and tried to grab you, but it was, like, too late, and we both got hit instead. I woke up in some dump called, like, the WillyCorp Complaint Department, or something.” She sighed dreamily. “That’s where I met Phil.”

“Phil?” asked Bob. “You mean the Rat?”

“Yeah,” she said. “He’s such a hunk.”

“Hey, baby,” said the King with another of his lopsided smiles, “he may be a hunk, but I’m a hunka-hunka-burnin’ love!”

She clasped her hands in front of her, batting her eyes again. “Wow, I’m, like, so honored to meet you! My name’s, like, Sally. Can I have your autograph?”

“Sure thing, sugar,” said the King.

“Can we get going?” Gandarph asked impatiently. “We’re on, like, an important mission.”

“Oh!” said Sally. “To get inside you have to, like, pass the Admittance Quiz.”

“What quiz would that be, baby?” the King asked, still grinning as he smoothed his hair back

with a handful of grease.

Sally batted her eyes at him with a long, decidedly moony sigh. “You just passed.”

“Sweet,” he said, winking and blowing her a kiss.

She let out a loud squeal of delight as she pretended to catch the kiss, and then fell in a dead faint on the floor. Gandarph peeked through the window down at her, and then said, “Well! I suppose that means we can go. Onward, stalwart companions!”

They found Philip the Rat in Willy’s old office, and he smiled broadly as they entered. “Welcome, my old friends!” he said cheerfully. “It’s good to see you!”

Rat’s voice sounded very different than Bob remembered, which was appropriate in view of the fact that the Rat himself looked nothing like what Bob remembered. “You’re Philip the Rat?” he asked.

Rat’s smile became a little strained. “Why sure, Bob—it’s me, your old pal, remember?”

“Um...no. You don’t look or sound at all like him.”

Rat’s face fell. “You can tell, huh?”

“Don’t push the issue,” Gandarph whispered to Bob. “The old actor quit, so they had to get another to fill in for the sequel. He’s very sensitive about it.”

Bob blinked. “Oh—right. Sure. Hey, Rat, how’s it going?”

“Fine, just fine,” Rat said, his face brightening again. “How ya been, pal?”

“Good, I guess.”

“Good, good! Well, what can I do for you all?”

“We are on a dangerous and anomalous journey!” said Gandarph. “We seek the Persian, who will aid us in our quest.”

The Rat jerked back in a horribly overdone show of surprise and fear. “The Persian!” he screamed. “Wherefore seekest thou a companion of such foul repute and loathsome disposition? Forsooth, I verily would that such an one as he had never befouled *terra firma* with his iniquitous being—to wit, I refuse to aid thine unseemly request, yea, even if it so be that ye beseech me with all thy soul!”

Gandarph blinked. “Um...uh...well...” He paused for a long moment, and then said, “What?”

The Rat sighed. “Sorry,” he said. “I used to do Shakespeare on stage, and sometimes things

just slip out, you know?”

“He said the Persian’s a really bad dude and he won’t help us find him,” Pilsbury said to Gandarph.

“Oh,” said Gandarph. He looked worried. “But you have to, Philip Philip the Rat. You *must* help us!”

“Ha!” cried the Rat. “I bite my tongue at you, sir!” He stuck out his tongue and bit firmly down on it, wincing.

“I think you mean ‘thumb,’” Bob said dryly.

“Oh—right,” said the Rat. “Thumb. Thanks. But I still won’t help you.”

“I thought the Persian was a good guy,” said Gandarph.

“Well, you thought wrong, buster,” said the Rat, holding one eye mostly closed and adopting a twisted sneer. “Seems like I have the upper hand, wouldn’t ya say, Mugsey? Now get yer mitts off my dame—and drop the lettuce while you’re at it. You’s got three seconds to blow this joint before I introduce you to my friend Tommy.”

Gandarph stared down the barrel of the nonexistent gun and began slowly backing away. “Okay, okay, pops. Don’t get excited. I’m droppin’ the dough, see?”

Duke pulled out a real gun and pointed it at Rat. “Lose it, hombre, or I’ll put a hole in you big enough to drive a mule team through.”

The Rat immediately ‘dropped’ his ‘gun’ and raised his hands high in the air. “Very well,” he said. “You’ve uncovered my deception, and I have no choice but to give you all the information I have concerning this matter. The Persian can be found in Brooklyn—but beyond that, I fear I can be of no further assistance.”

“Thanks,” said the Duke, holstering the gun.

Gandarph frowned at the Rat. “You don’t imitate the original Philip Philip the Rat very well.”

“I know!” cried the Rat, collapsing into an exaggerated pose of poetic despair. “I am a failure! My art is worthless—worthless! I have nothing left to live for!” He jumped to his feet, snatching an imaginary dagger from an imaginary sheath. “Goodbye, cruel world!” he shouted. “Have done with me!” He raised the ‘knife’ high into the air.

Abruptly he jumped a little to the side, turning to face where he had just been. In a high-pitched voice he cried, “No, Maurice, no, don’t do it! Please don’t do it!”

Jumping back to his original place, he cried, “You cannot dissuade me, Josephine! My mind is made up!”

Jumping to the other side, he cried in a deep bass voice, “Maurice, think of your family!”

“Ah!” he cried, jumping back. “*Et tu, Bruté?* Then fall, Maurice!” He plunged the ‘dagger’ into his heart, and collapsed on the floor gasping for breath for several long, drawn-out moments before ‘dying.’

Gandarph shook his head solemnly. “Crazy old Maurice,” he said. “Well, my stalwart fellowship, let us leave this unfortunate scene and be on our way to Brooklyn.”

“I don’t want to go to Brooklyn!” cried Pilsbury. “You can’t make me! I don’t *want* to go to Brooklyn!”

“None of us want to, bud,” said Gandarph, “but we all gotta go sooner or later.”

“Bye!” the Rat called cheerfully from the floor.

They left RatCorp via the giant company fax machine, and to Bob’s relief the Flor-Mart cashier was still unconscious. They returned through Shadow-Fax, which by then had wandered from the Valley of the Kings to greener pastures on the outskirts of yet another muddy village.

“Ah,” said Gandarph, peering at the village. “Buenos Aires, home of the Purple People.”

“If you say so,” sighed Bob.

“Come,” said Gandarph. “We must pass through Buenos Aires to reach Brooklyn.”

Buenos Aires looked much the same as most towns in wherever this place was, except most of the population consisted of three-foot-tall people with dark green skin. “I thought you said it was the home of the Purple People,” said the Duke.

“Oh, they are Purple People,” said Gandarph. “They just paint their skin green.”

“Why?” asked Bob.

“Because they used to be under the awful oppression of the tyrannical Green People. The Purple People rebelled and destroyed the Green People some time ago.”

“But then why do they paint their skin green?”

Gandarph shrugged. “Well, what better way to prove you hate someone than to become just

like them?”

“Uh...that doesn't make any sense.”

Gandarph waved dismissively. “Of course it does. Happens all the time. Why...”

He was interrupted as bedlam erupted farther up the street. Purple People ran every which way, screeching at the tops of their lungs, as a huge monster swooped down from the sky and began gobbling them up one by one. The beast was hideous, with a single bulbous eye and a long horn protruding from its forehead. “What the heck is that?” Bob demanded, taking a step backward. Then he paused, blinking, and said, “Um...never mind.”

They stood watching as the monster feasted, finally waddling off when it was too full to eat any more. “All right!” Gandarph said brightly. “Off we go. On to the Bronx!”

“Brooklyn,” Pilsbury corrected.

“Yes!” cried Gandarph. “Brooklyn! I knew that!”

IV: The Persian
or
The French Secret Policeman?
or
Madame Gyrie?
or
Who The Heck Is This Guy, Anyway?

When they arrived in Brooklyn, which consisted of six straw huts huddled around a community Port-a-Potty, Bob said, “So...why is Brooklyn so far from the rest of New York?”

Gandarph gave him a look that clearly said, ‘What the heck are you talking about, crazy man?’

“Never mind,” Bob sighed.

They were greeted at the outskirts of the ‘city’ by a cheerful-looking girl in the first hut. A sign that read, “Information,” hung above her window. “Hi!” she said. “My name’s Iphigenia.”

“Really?” said Gandarph. “That’s odd. Most Greek scholars that I’ve talked to seem unaware that you ever were in Brooklyn.”

“Oh!” she said. “Well, that’s nice. How can I help you?”

“We’re looking for...” he dropped his voice conspiratorially, “the Persian.”

“Ba, ba, ba, bum!” said Pilsbury, trying unsuccessfully to make his voice deep and menacing.

Iphigenia gasped in dismay. “The Persian!”

“Yes,” said Gandarph, picking his voice up from where he had dropped it and brushing the mud off. “Do you know where he’s to be found?”

“He never stays in one place very long,” she said quietly, casting nervous glances around to make sure no one was listening. “You’ll have to search the whole city to find him!”

Bob looked past her hut at the handful of others, and said, “Um...that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Thank you,” said the King, winking at Iphigenia. “Thank you very much.”

“We’ll start right there!” said Gandarph, pointing at a straw hut near Iphigenia’s.

“All right,” said the girl, “but you’d better watch out for Earl.”

“Who?” asked the King.

“Earl,” she repeated. “His name is actually ‘the’ Earl, but he just goes by Earl. He’s a very bad man and will certainly try to stop you.” She looked over at the Duke, who had already walked past her hut to visit the Port-a-Potty. “What’s his name?”

“The Duke,” replied the King.

“Duke! Oh! Well, you’d better warn the Duke of Earl. He doesn’t like other noblemen invading his territory.”

“That’s all right, honey,” said the King. “I’m the King.”

“The King!” she cried. “Oh, Earl won’t like *that* at all! He hates invading royalty even more than invading nobles! He’ll probably try to kill you!”

“Hey, babe, don’t worry.” The King winked. “I’ll take care of it.”

After the Duke finished his business with the Port-a-Potty, they all made their way to the first hut. It turned out to be, not surprisingly, a bar, and was much bigger inside than it looked. The bartender was a thin old man with a bad goatee, and as they entered he said, “What’ll it be, gents?”

“I’ll have a Generic-Brand Lemon-Lime Soda,” said Gandarph, squinting at the sign behind the counter.

“Sorry,” said the bartender. “All we have is Strawberry Suprees.”

“Su-what?”

“Suprees.”

“Oh. I’ll have one of them, then.”

“So,” said the bartender as he handed out drinks, “I understand one of you is a Duke and one of you is a King.”

“That’s right,” said the King with a lopsided grin. “I’m the King.”

“I see. Here. Have a drink.” The bartender handed him a Strawberry Suprees.

“Thank you, thank you very much,” said the King, draining the cup.

“How did you know who we were?” asked Gandarph.

“Word travels fast in this town,” said the bartender.

“Evidently,” murmured Bob.

“I also understand you’re looking for the Persian.”

“Yes,” said Gandarph. “We are. Any suggestions?”

“As a matter of fact,” said the bartender, “he’s across the way at Molly’s Bingo Parlor. If you hurry, you might catch him.”

“Good!” beamed Gandarph. “Off we go, then!” He rushed out the door, and everyone else, including the bartender, followed.

Molly’s Bingo Parlor was about five feet square on the outside, but inside was the size of an average theater. Dozens of people were sitting around playing bingo, and Gandarph looked around. “So which one is the Persian?” he wondered aloud.

They wandered deeper into the bingo parlor, looking around at everyone. As they were nearing the far wall, though, the King suddenly stopped. “Hey,” he said, “I don’t feel so good all of a sudden.”

“Hah!” cried the bartender behind him. “That, my foolish friend, is because I tainted your drink with an Incredibly Deadly Poison, the antidote to which I alone have!”

The King gasped. “You poisoned me? What for?”

“Because,” cried the bartender, raising his finger into the air dramatically, “I am Earl, and I hate anyone who outranks me! Unless you renounce your title I will not give you the antidote!”

“No way, man,” said the King.

“You must!” screamed the Earl. “I am the ultimate power in this city!”

“You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog!”

“Then you will die!”

“Not so!” said Gandarph smugly. “You’ve overlooked one important detail.”

“And what is that?” demanded Earl.

“I am not left-handed!” Gandarph declared triumphantly.

The Earl sneered and opened his mouth to say something, but before he could Bob said, “Wait, let me guess—you’re not left-handed, either.”

Earl scowled. “Thanks for ruining my comeback,” he grumped.

“Hey, no problem,” replied Bob.

Gandarph looked pleased. “Wonderful work, Bob. By correctly deducing the Earl’s comeback, you have placed him at a serious disadvantage.”

Bob blinked. “I have?”

“Of course. Now is the time to strike! Duke the Duke, strike!”

“Wait!” cried Earl, holding up his hand. “Before you strike, you should know one more thing!”

“And what is that?” asked Gandarph.

Earl sneered. “I don’t really have the antidote! Strike if you wish, but the King will still die!”

Gandarph (which here means ‘a wizard with very little brains’) blinked (a word which here means ‘closed his eyes and opened then again very quickly’), and (a word which means ‘also,’ but was used because ‘also’ doesn’t make much sense in that place) said (a word which here means ‘uttering something probably very foolish indeed’), “What (which is a word that is commonly used to begin a question) do (a very big word which sometimes means ‘the first and eighth note of a major scale’ but here means ‘perform an action’) you (a word which here refers to the Earl) mean (which the Earl is, but in this case the word simply means—oh, there it is again!—‘signify’), you (which is a word you should know by now) don’t (a word which is a contraction of ‘do’ and ‘not’) have (which here means ‘possess’) the (a very big word which, simply put, is used to make a generalized reference to something rather than identifying a particular instance) antidote (a word which is a combination of ‘anti’ and ‘dote,’ which, if you take the literal meaning of both words, means something like ‘against being extremely fond,’ which sort of makes sense because it’s supposed to nullify the poison, not be nice to it, but that’s not actually where the word comes from, and here it simply means ‘a medicine used to counteract a poison’)?!”

I would dearly like to tell you that Gandarph caught the Earl, wrested the location of the antidote from him, and saved the King’s life, but I fear I cannot do so, for that is not really what happened. Earl turned and ran, and somehow all of the onlookers failed to catch him, so he made good his escape and will probably return soon and do the whole thing over again. Meanwhile, the King fell to the floor and expired.

“The King is dead!” someone cried. “Long live the King!”

“I’m not dead yet,” said the King, looking up from where he was lying on the floor.

“Of course you are,” said Gandarph. “You’ve just ingested an Incredibly Deadly Poison.”

“Actually, I’m feeling much better,” said the King, and he rose to his feet.

“Don’t be silly,” Gandarph said. “Well, my stalwart companions, we have suffered a grievous blow with the loss of King the King, but we must press on.”

“The King is dead!” someone cried. “Long live the King!”

“I’m not dead!” insisted the King, but no one paid any attention to him.

“Come,” said Gandarph. “We must continue our search for the Persian.”

“So you’re looking for the Persian, eh?” said a familiar voice from behind Gandarph. They all turned to look at the voice’s owner, and Bob, shocked, found himself looking at the actor who’d replaced the Rat.

“Well, yes, actually,” said Gandarph, apparently not recognizing the man.

“Then look no further,” the man said, “for I am he!”

“Wait,” said Bob, “aren’t you supposed to be the Rat?”

“Shush!” Gandarph hissed quickly. “You’re not supposed to notice that! The original actor quit over a pay dispute.”

Rat—or the Persian, whichever—rolled his eyes. “Sometimes I hate being a stand-in,” he muttered.

Bob held up his hands in resignation. “Right. My bad. So...you’re the Persian, are you?”

“Yes!” said the Persian. “What do you want of me?”

“We’re looking for a way to defeat the Phantom of the Nursing Home,” replied Gandarph.

The Persian sneered even wider. “Hah! Good luck with that one. He’s not so easy to defeat.”

“That’s why we need you,” said Gandarph. “You’re the Phantom’s only friend—you could help us.”

“And why should I?” the Persian demanded.

“Because if you don’t,” said Gandarph in a grave tone, “he will unleash his virus upon the world.”

The Persian went pale. “He...he actually *finished* it? He’s mad—doesn’t he realize what that virus could *do*? Why, it could put an end to this entire series!”

“That may not be such a bad idea, actually,” Bob muttered.

“You’ll help us, then?” said Gandarph.

“Yes!” exclaimed the Persian. “I can lead you straight to his secret lair in the sewers beneath the Paris Nursing Home!”

Gandarph beamed. “Wonderful! Let’s be off, then!”

“Wait,” said the Persian. “First we need to locate some old allies of mine—they could be useful in our endeavor.”

“Who are they?” asked Duke.

“They’re a rebel gang of extremist political revolutionaries,” said the Persian. “They call themselves the Free Radicals.”

“I’ve heard of them,” said Gandarph. “Where are they to be found?”

“In San Francisco,” said the Persian. “Just up the road from here.”

“Wonderful! Let’s be off, then!”

They all left the bingo parlor, the King trailing despondently behind them. As there was still quite a bit of daylight left, they set out immediately.

For a while they walked in silence, but then Bob said, “So, Persian, do you have an actual name, or what?”

The Persian ignored him.

“Hey,” Bob said, prodding him a little.

The Persian looked at him, and in a very badly done French accent said, “I’m sorry, are you talking to me?”

“Uh...yeah,” said Bob. “Is ‘the Persian’ your real name?”

“Don’t be seelly,” said the Persian. “My name ees Inspector Clew-Sew of zee French Secret Police!”

“Oh, please,” Bob groaned, looking up at the sky. “Please, no!”

“What kind of a stupid play on words is *that* name?” the Duke scoffed. “I mean, how many people these days even know what a clew *is*?”

“Hey, it vas zee best I could come up veeth on short notice,” the Persian protested. “I...”

He was interrupted as Gandarph, in front of them, let out a loud exclamation. “Oh, no!” he

cried in an overdramatic voice.

Bob came to a quick stop and looked ahead, where he saw Gandarph standing in front of a ten-foot boulder in the road. “What?” he said. “What is it?”

“There’s a boulder in the road! What are we going to do?” He turned around, staring into the distance, and said, “We need *your* help to jump over the boulder in the road! Will you help us? You can? Great! Stand up, and say, Jump! Jump! Jump! Come on, let’s go! Jump! Jump! Jump!” He turned back around and took a flying leap at the boulder, slamming into it face-first and falling flat on his back with a bloody nose.

Bob stared down at him. “Um...are you all right?”

“They didn’t jump with me,” Gandarph mumbled, standing up and wiping the blood from his nose with his cloak. “The little traitors. Now how are we supposed to get past this boulder?”

“Why don’t we just walk around it?” said Bob.

Gandarph stared at him for a moment, and then said. “Why...the thought had never occurred to me! Brilliant! We’ll walk *around* it!”

As Gandarph gleefully circled the boulder, Bob said, “What was that all about?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” said the Persian in a high-pitched squeak.

Bob looked at him. “Why are you talking like that?”

“I always talk like this,” squeaked the Persian.

“Uh...no you don’t. You weren’t a minute ago.”

“Well, that was Inspector Clew-Sew, not me,” said the Persian.

Bob blinked. “Uh...so...who are *you*?”

“Madame Gyrie, of course,” he said.

Bob shook his head. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t head that and just keep walking.”

V: The Next Chapter
or
I'm Running Out Of Ideas

And then some more stuff happened, and there was this guy, and all that jazz. Yeah. And then there was another guy, and he must have done something...uh...and the author spent a lot of time writing empty, useless filler to make the story longer, and...uh...

Well, anyway, after the mind-bending encounter with the boulder, Gandarph and Co. continued on their merry way to San Francisco. The Persian, or whoever he happened to be at any particular moment, led the way.

“So who are the Free Radicals, exactly?” the King asked. “I get that they’re political revolutionaries, but what is it they’re trying to revolutionize?”

“I can’t talk to you,” said the Gyrie-Persian. “You’re dead.”

“The King is dead!” someone shouted. “Long live the King!”

Bob shook his head. “I’ll ask him,” he said to the King.

“Hey, thanks, man,” said the King.

“The King wants to know what the Free Radicals are trying to revolutionize,” said Bob to the Persian.

“Politics, of course,” said the Persian. “I didn’t know you could commune with the dead.”

Bob sighed. “It’s a hobby.”

“The Free Radicals live in a very seedy, run-down neighborhood of San Francisco,” said the Persian. “A most disreputable place.”

“There’s a shocker.”

“The place is actually called...” In mid-sentence he switched to the Clew-Sew-Persian...
“Oxidant Place. Zee Free Radicals are struggling against a rival gang who hate Oxidant Place and want to burn it to zee ground. Zey’ve taken to calling zemselves...”

“Let me guess,” said Bob. “The Anti-Oxidants?”

“Why, yes,” said the Persian in his own voice. “How did you know?”

“Health class.”

“Really? That’s peculiar. At any rate, the Free Radicals might take some convincing, because in their absence the Anti-Oxidants will surely destroy Oxidant Place. We will have to convince the Free Radicals that our mission is more vital than their beloved home.”

“Come, there’s no time to lose!” cried Gandarph. “On to Oxidant Place!”

When they arrived in San Francisco, Bob was surprised to find that the ‘run-down’ Oxidant Place was actually quite the nicest place he’d been to since his unfortunate run-in with the Rolls Royce. It was a quiet, pleasant neighborhood, lined with luxurious mansions with well-kept, vibrant flower gardens and emerald-green lawns. “Wow,” he said. “I thought you said Oxidant Place was run-down and seedy.”

“It is,” the Persian said distastefully. “It’s disgusting. I feel contaminated just by looking at it.”

“Uh...you do?”

“Don’t you? Look at this place! They don’t even have proper mud on their street!”

Bob looked down at the gray asphalt road they were walking on. “Wow. That’s a first.”

“So where can we find these Free Radical folks?” asked Duke.

“Right there,” said the Persian, switching to his Madam Gyrie voice. He pointed at a particularly large mansion ahead. “That’s where we can find Zipper-Q Monkey Dung.”

“What’s that?” asked Gandarph.

“*He* is the leader of the Free Radicals,” said the Persian. “But you can call him Z-Dung for short.”

“Uh...he wouldn’t be a rapper, by any chance, would he?” asked Bob.

“That’s right,” said the Persian. “He’s actually a distant relation of Rappin’ Robin in the Hood. He was kicked out of the Married Men, though, because—well, for one, he wasn’t married, but besides that he was a conscientious objector.”

“He’s a pacifist?” asked Bob.

“What? No, of course not! He objected to Robin’s music because some of the lyrics were intelligible.”

“Oh,” said Bob. “I see.”

As they approached the mansion, Bob heard a loud song coming from inside. It sounded suspiciously like a rap rendition of the *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* theme song.

Before they could reach the door it opened to reveal a pasty-white gangster inside. He had a greasy mullet, pink horn-rimmed glasses that looked just like Sunflower's...

"Low budget," explained the author. "We had to reuse some props."

...and solid gold braces. About sixteen gold necklaces hung around his neck, which appeared to have given him a slight hunchback over time, and his fingers could not be seen due to being completely covered with huge diamond rings. He was about four feet tall, and the baggy diamond-studded football jersey he was wearing hung to his ankles. "Yo, G-dawg," he said, trying to flash a gang symbol but failing because he couldn't bend his fingers, "what you doin' in this hood, yo?"

"Yo, Rummy String Bean D-Bottom," said the Persian. "I'm looking for Zipper-Q Monkey Dung."

"Yo, man, he upstairs, yo, yo, y'know! He workin' on his Radical Manifesto, yo!"

"Yo, uh...dawg-man, yo!" said the Persian. "Can I chill in yo crib, yo, till, like, yo, Z-Dung can...uh...yo-talk with my homie-yo's and me, yo? Look, do you mind if we cut the 'yo' talk?"

D-Bottom shook his head. "All right," he said. "Look, Persian, I'm not entirely certain you're aware of what it means for Z-Dung to be working on the Manifesto. It could be days before he finally gives up and comes down again. Last time he did this he was up there for a week."

"He still hasn't finished it, huh?" asked the Persian.

D-Bottom sighed. "He still hasn't *started* it. He says it's writer's block, but personally I think it's because he never learned to read, much less write."

"Well, this is very important. We need to talk to him right away."

"The fate of the entire world is at stake!" Gandarph said.

D-Bottom rolled his eyes. "Well, just hope he isn't in one of his 'the world needs to be destroyed so we can start over' moods. Come on in. H@m \$&w!(h3z is in the back baking some oatmeal cookies with Hwaca-Slip."

"Hwaca-what?" asked Duke.

"Slip. It's supposed to mean something, but he won't tell anyone what." D-Bottom lowered

his voice and said, “He thinks he’s all that, but everyone knows he’s just an idiot.”

As they entered the house the rap song ended, but only moments later a new one began blasting through the house. Most of the lyrics were completely incomprehensible, but Bob could have sworn he caught the words ‘doe, a deer,’ after which he firmly stopped listening.

When they entered the kitchen there was another bling-bedecked man there, busily mixing something in a large bowl. Unlike D-Bottom, this man was at least six feet tall, and all sorts of food was wedged among the links of his many gold chains. He was mixing with one hand, and was using the other one to hold up a pair of baggy shorts that were obviously much too large. The music was coming from a six-foot boom box that apparently also served as the door of the refrigerator.

“Yo, D-Bottom!” the man said as they entered, bellowing to be heard over the music, “grab me some eggs from the Boom-Frij, dawg!”

“Hey, H@m, where’s Hwaca-Slip?” shouted D-Bottom as he opened the Boom-Frij.

H@m said something in reply, but the music was rapidly growing louder, so no one could make out what he was saying. He and D-Bottom started talking in gang-sign language, but before they’d gotten very far Duke pulled out his pistol and put a bullet into the Boom-Frij, which immediately went silent.

“Thank goodness,” murmured the Gyrie-Persian.

“Dude, sweet piece,” said H@m.

“I like it,” Duke replied.

H@m looked back at D-Bottom. “So, dawg, I was sayin’ that Hwaca-Slip, he split like ten minutes ago, yo.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know, cat.”

D-Bottom frowned. “Dude, you know you aren’t supposed to say that.”

“Right, dawg. Sorry.”

“What’s wrong with cats?” asked the Gyrie-Persian.

“Cool people haven’t been ‘cats’ for decades,” said D-Bottom. “Now cool people are ‘dawgs.’”

“Oh.”

“Hark!” cried a voice from the other end of the kitchen. “What knavish non-homedawg hath put an end to the music, yo?”

Another man appeared from around a corner. Like the others, he was bedecked with far too much bling, but the resemblance ended there. Rather than baggy shorts he was wearing tight red hose, and in place of the jersey was a medieval tunic. A pointed, feathered cap perched on his head.

“Z-Dung!” exclaimed the Persian. “Glad to see you—D-Bottom said you might not be down for a while.”

“Not so, dawg!” said Z-Dung. “Verily, dude, I have completed the most awesome Radical Manifesto!”

“Dude, you finished it?” exclaimed H@m.

“Yea, verily, dawg!” said Z-Dung, proudly holding up a sheet of paper.

D-Bottom took the sheet and squinted at it through his horn-rimmed glasses. “Hear ye, hear ye, homies and non-homies alike,” he read. “Verily, I hereby proclaim that the most righteous Free Radicals are and shall ever be the most awesomest and phattest dudes in the world, and whosoever shall contest this shall ever be considered most un-cool.”

“Dude!” cheered H@m. “You rock, dawg!”

D-Bottom looked up at Z-Dung. “So you *can* read.”

“Verily,” said Z-Dung. “Now, anyway, Persian-Dawg, wherefore art thou in my crib, yo, and who are thine homies?”

“We are here for your help!” said Gandarph before the Persian could answer. “I am Gandarph, the Wandering Wizard, and these are my stalwart companions. We are on a quest to stop the nefarious plan of the evil Phantom of the Nursing Home, and we need your help.”

“Whoa, dude,” said Z-Dung. “Verily, I would that I might help thee, dawg, but, like, we’re busy.”

“I assume you mean your battle against the Anti-Oxidants?” asked Gandarph.

Z-Dung blinked. “Uh...no, dude, I was referring to H@m’s cookies...uh, forsooth and verily and that stuff, you know? But verily...Hey, do you mind if I just talk normal, now? This is

getting annoying.”

“Yes, please,” said Bob.

“Cool. Anyway, thanks for reminding me. The Anti-Oxidants are scheduled to conduct a raid this afternoon.”

“Scheduled?” asked Bob.

“Yeah, it’s a pretty regular occurrence,” said Z-Dung. “Every second Thursday afternoon at three o’clock, actually.” He glanced at his watch. “Oh, my, look at the time. They should be here any minute. So I’ll tell you what—once we fend off this raid, we’ll have a couple of weeks to help before we have to be back, all right?”

“Agreed,” said Gandarph. “Then we will help you defend your most righteous crib against the Anti-Oxidants!”

“Hey, thanks,” said Z-Dung. “All right, then! H@m, D-Bottom, battle stations! Where’s Hwaca-Slip?”

H@m shrugged. “He took off. Didn’t say anything.”

Z-Dung shook his head. “Can’t get reliable help anymore these days,” he said.

There was a sudden fanfare of trumpets from out front, and D-Bottom jumped. “They’re here!”

“To arms!” cried Z-Dung, reaching behind him and pulling something out of the back of his tights. Bob only got a fleeting glance at it as Z-Dung rushed from the room, but it looked remarkably like a squirt gun.

H@m and D-Bottom hurried after Z-Dung, and Gandarph said, “Onward!” and followed.

“Why do I really not want to get involved in this?” sighed Bob.

The Duke shrugged, drawing both pistols as he followed Gandarph. Pilsbury grabbed a nearby rolling pin and also left the kitchen.

“What can I use to fight with?” asked the King.

“You can’t fight,” said the Persian, grabbing a rubber butcher knife from the counter. “You’re dead.”

“The King is dead!” someone shouted. “Long live the King!”

“I’m not dead!” the King screamed.

The Persian ignored him and left the kitchen.

The King looked at Bob and sighed. “So, uh...after you, I guess.”

Bob looked around the kitchen, but couldn't see anything to use as a weapon. He left, the King following him, remembering that he'd seen a coat of arms with swords on it in the hallway. He took one of the swords and went to the front room.

The Anti-Oxidants were in the front yard. They appeared to be a collection of elderly women, who were marching back and forth with picket signs while others threw eggs, rocks, and balls of yarn at the house.

The three Free Radicals were on the porch. “Have at thee, knaves!” Z-Dung was shouting, slipping back into his odd speech. “Dost thou desire a piece of me?” He was holding his squirt gun above his head, turned sideways, and was firing what appeared to be red Kool-Aid at the old ladies.

“Down with the Free Radicals!” screeched one particularly gnarled old crone, heaving a molding Rueben sandwich at Z-Dung.

D-Bottom, armed with a garden hose, directed the spray of water at the woman. “Take this, you...” He hesitated, and then glanced at Z-Dung. “What's this story rated, anyway?”

“PG, I think,” replied Z-Dung.

“What?! That takes out half our vocabulary!”

“Deal with it.”

“Oh, fine. Take this, you mean old lady!”

Duke was staring at the old women, and then he looked down at his guns. After a moment he holstered them. “I'm going to grab a nap,” he said, heading farther back into the house.

One of the old women ran toward the house, holding what looked like a needle in her hand. D-Bottom, who had his attention on a different woman, didn't notice her approaching, and as she drew near she jabbed the needle into his arm. “Hah!” she screeched, before being thrown backward by Pilsbury's rolling pin.

D-Bottom straightened, dropping the garden hose. “Oh, my,” he said, drawing out a golden pocket-watch and looking at it. “I'm late for the town council meeting!” Replacing the watch, he walked briskly away from the house.

Gandarph gasped. “The virus!” he cried, pointing at D-Bottom. “The Anti-Oxidants have the virus! Don’t let them near you!”

It was already too late for H@m, though. One old lady threw a needle-studded yarn ball at him, and several of the sharp points pierced his skin. His eyes instantly glazed over, and he smiled. “Bye!” he said cheerfully. “I’ve got a strategy planning meeting to attend.”

As H@m walked away, everyone else retreated back into the house. As they did, another man appeared from a different room. He was tall, immaculately groomed, and dressed in an impeccable business suit.

Z-Dung gasped when he saw him. “Hwaca-Slip!” he cried. “What are you doing in that monkey suit, dude?”

Hwaca-Slip smiled evilly, holding up a syringe. “I’ve got something for you, Z-Dung.”

“He’s infected!” cried Pilsbury.

Hwaca-Slip lunged at Z-Dung. The rapper tried to fend him off, but during the struggle Z-Dung was scratched by the needle. Immediately he straightened, looking around. “Hmm,” he said. “I think I’ll go run for President.”

“No!” cried Gandarph as Z-Dung and Hwaca-Slip left. “The Free Radicals are no more! How could this happen?”

“Apparently Hwaca-Slip has been under zee Phantom’s influence for some time,” said the Clew-Sew-Persian. “He obviously didn’t vant us to bring zee Free Radicals veeth us. Eet doesn’t appear zat he’s found a vay to make hees virus airborne yet, but it’s steel a deadly veapon.”

Gandarph sighed heavily. “Well, it looks like we’re on our own now. We’ll have to make do the best we can without them. On to Paris!”

VI: Mastication, Expectoration, & Defenestration
or
Chew 'Em Up, Spit 'Em Out, & Throw 'Em Out The Window

“So how far is it to Paris, anyway?” asked Pilsbury as they trudged down the dirt road. Oxidant Place was already several miles behind them.

“Oh, not far,” replied Gandarph, squinting into the distance. “We’ll reach the humble town of Saigon in a couple of hours, and after that we’ll take a train to Kathmandu. There we will ride a raft down the Amazon River, which leads straight to Paris.”

“Right,” said Bob.

The trek to Saigon was uneventful, but as they began to approach the outskirts of the town Gandarph brought them to a halt, looking at the ground. “Hmm,” he murmured, bending down to get a closer look.

“What is it?” asked Pilsbury.

“Tracks,” Gandarph muttered. “Tracks I recognize.” He followed the direction the tracks were headed with his eyes, straight toward Saigon. “Something wicked that way went,” he said.

“Who was it?” asked Pilsbury, looking frightened.

“If I’m not mistaken,” said Gandarph, “the maker of these tracks is none other than Sarooman of the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcloak!”

“Wait!” Pilsbury cried. “I thought you’d already defeated him!”

“Of course I had,” said Gandarph. “But in sequels old bad guys have this habit of turning out to not really be dead after all. He is undoubtedly in Saigon now.”

“Maybe we just avoid the city,” said the Persian. “I don’t think this is a time to be distracted by old enemies, do you?”

“We must go to Saigon,” said Gandarph. “We’ll lose weeks if we don’t catch the train there.”

“All right, then,” sighed Pilsbury, “here we go again.”

Saigon was a large city, filled with huge white stone buildings of decidedly Roman architecture. They entered the city cautiously, noting with concern that the streets appeared to be deserted.

“I don’t like the look of this,” muttered Duke, his hands on his pistols. “Feels downright creepy.”

“Odd, indeed,” said Gandarph. “Usually this city is quite bustling—Sarooman is at work. Look!” He pointed ahead to a large square, where a massive stone statue of a dancing pig rested. “The Great Stone Piglet is not spewing forth honey!”

“Honey?” asked Bob.

“That statue normally pours honey out of its mouth,” said Gandarph. “It must be broken.” He gasped. “No! Look, its curly tail is missing! Sarooman has removed the Sacred Tail from the Great Stone Piglet!”

“Yes, Gandarph,” said a sinister voice. There was a melodramatic clap of thunder and a burst of black smoke, and from the smoke emerged a tall, white-haired old man in a rather psychedelic robe.

“Sarooman!” growled Gandarph. “I thought you died when Mazzarine collapsed the Shrine of Nix upon you!”

“Indeed, Gandarph,” said Sarooman with a sneer. “Then I’ll wager that you thought you’d seen the last of me!”

“I have seen the last of you!” said Gandarph, raising his staff.

“Oh, no!” moaned Bob. “Duck and cover, everybody!”

He and the others barely managed to get behind a nearby row of stone pillars before the entire area around Gandarph erupted in a random series of explosions and bad sound effects. Sarooman was unhurt, however, protecting himself with a shield of magic.

He thrust his own staff forward. “Abracadabra!” he shrieked, and a rainbow of color burst from the staff and struck Gandarph in the chest. Gandarph fell heavily to the ground.

“At last!” howled Sarooman. “My old enemy is in my hands!”

“Where did you learn that spell?” Gandarph gasped weakly, apparently unable to move. “That is the most secret and carefully-guarded spell in the world!”

Sarooman held up a small amulet he was wearing around his neck. “Recognize this?” he said in a taunting voice.

Gandarph gasped. “An Abracadabra Amulet! But how?”

“I got this from an old acquaintance of mine—in exchange for help in creating this!” Sarooman drew a syringe from within his robes.

Gandarph’s eyes widened. “The virus!” he cried. “No—don’t do it!”

Duke stepped out from his pillar, both guns in his hands. Sarooman, though, waved his hand in a wide sweeping motion, and Duke froze in his tracks, unable to move. Bob, the Persian, and Pilsbury were similarly frozen. Only the King remained free, because he was...well, dead.

“Bwahaha!” shrieked Sarooman. “Now you are all in my power! But never fear, old friend, I have no intention of using the virus on you—I have a much crueler fate in mind!”

“What?” Gandarph asked apprehensively.

“I’m going to transform into a terrible black beast and devour you all!”

“No!” cried Gandarph. “Stop, in the name of the King!”

“The King is dead!” someone cried. “Long live the King!”

“I’m not quite dead,” protested the King, but no one heard him, for at that moment Sarooman shouted a dreadful spell, throwing his arms up into the air (which must have hurt quite a lot) as black smoke spewed from a smoke machine underneath the concealed grating he was standing on. In the blink of an eye Sarooman became a terrible black...

Just then the narrator let out a loud belch instead of saying ‘beast,’ so Sarooman instead transformed into a terrible black burp. “Oh, dear,” he said before dissipating into the air.

“Whew!” exclaimed Gandarph. “That was a close one.”

Finding themselves freed from Sarooman’s spell, Bob and the others emerged from hiding. “Hey, what’s this?” asked Bob, going to where Sarooman had been standing. On the ground there was a large spring from a box-spring mattress. He picked it up.

“That’s the Sacred Tail of the Great Stone Piglet!” exclaimed Gandarph.

People were emerging from the buildings all around them, converging on them. “The Sacred Tail!” one of them exclaimed, going to Bob. “Oh, no, this is a disaster! The Tail has been broken off of the Great Stone Piglet!”

A great moan of despair ran through the crowd. “What shall we do?” someone cried. “Without the Sacred Tail the honey will not flow, and as it is our main export, we shall surely experience catastrophic economic disturbance!”

“Lad, what is your name?” the first man asked Bob.

“His name is A...” Gandarph started to say.

Bob interrupted him. “Bob,” he said quickly.

“Bob, the tail you have in your hand is the key to our humble village’s survival,” said the man. “Can you fix it, Bob?”

Bob glanced down at the Sacred Tail, and said, “Uh...I’ll give it a shot, I guess.”

“Oh, thank you, Bob!” the man gushed. “Please hurry!”

Bob went over to the Great Stone Piglet and, spying a hole in the pig’s backside, stuck the end of the Sacred Tail into it. There was a deep rumbling sound, and honey suddenly began spraying out of the pig’s mouth, soon filling the fountain in which it stood.

“It works!” someone in the crowd shouted. “He’s done it! He’s done it!”

“Bob,” said the first man joyously, “you have fixed the Great Stone Piglet! As a token of our gratitude, I, as mayor of Saigon, hereby bestow upon you the honorary title ‘the Builder.’”

Turning to the crowd, he raised his hands into the air. “All hail Bob the...”

“Oookay, that’s great,” Bob interrupted quickly. “Fine. I...uh...have to go, now.”

“Farewell, Builder!” said the man. “We will honor your memory forever!”

“Great,” said Bob. “Uh...bye.”

“This way to the train station!” said Gandarph, pointing dramatically and striding down the street. All of his companions followed, and they soon left the rejoicing crowd behind.

The train station was empty of both trains and people. Gandarph selected a bench near the platform and sat down. “Well,” he said, checking his watch even though he didn’t have one, “it’ll be a while. Might as well get comfortable.”

“How long, exactly?” asked Bob.

“Night,” said Gandarph. “The train to Kathmandu only travels at night.”

“Of course,” muttered Bob.

VII: Murder on the Night Orient Express Train to Kathmandu
or
Death of an Annoying Character

After darkness fell, a train rolled into the station. As it came to a halt Bob saw large letters on the side reading, 'The Orient XPress.' He watched the others climbing in, and then, muttering, "I have a bad feeling about this," he followed them aboard.

Inside, there was a map of the train on the wall. It had six cars, labeled Up, Down, Charm, Strange, Top, and Bottom. They were currently in the Up car, and standing in the middle of it was a man with a monocle holding a hole-punch. "Tickets, please," he said pleasantly.

Gandarph blinked. "Uh...tickets?"

"Yes, sir."

"We...uh...Pilsbury! Be a good lad and run and buy some tickets!"

Pilsbury sighed. "Okay," he muttered, leaving the train.

Presently he returned with some tickets, and he handed them out to Bob, the Persian, the Duke, and Gandarph. The conductor punched each one, and then looked at the King. "What about you, sir?"

"Oh, he doesn't need a ticket," said Gandarph. "He's dead."

"The King is dead!" someone shouted. "Long live the King!"

"Ah," said the conductor. "Very well. Your cabins are in the Strange car. Thank you for riding the Orient XPress."

They made their way to the Strange car, finding their cabins. The King, being in his current state, was not provided one, and he sat despondently in the hallway instead. He pulled a guitar out of his pocket and began strumming a mournful tune on it.

After a few moments the train began moving again. Bob sat on his bunk, wondering if it was safe to catch some sleep. Eventually he gave in and stretched out, closing his eyes.

It seemed like only moments later that he was awakened as the train came to a screeching halt, tossing him out of his bunk. "Ouch!" he cried, massaging his smarting shoulder.

Pulling open his door, he stepped into the hall. The King was still there, looking around with wide eyes, and then the Duke, Pilsbury, and Gandarph also appeared. “What the devil happened?” the old wizard grumbled.

The door of the car opened, revealing the conductor. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but the train has been delayed by a large herd of reindeer. Our trip will resume shortly.” He closed the door again.

Suddenly a high-pitched scream came from the Persian’s room. They all rushed to it and opened the door, finding the Persian standing in the corner, pointing at the floor with terror in his eyes. “Look!” he squeaked in his Gyrie voice.

“Great Caesar’s ghost!” cried Gandarph. “It’s...uh...what is it?”

“It’s the Persian!” cried the Gyrie-Persian. “He’s been murdered!”

“Great Scott!” cried Gandarph.

“Someone killed him!” shrieked the Gyrie-Persian.

“Jumping Jehoshaphat!” shrieked Gandarph.

“I’m going back to bed,” muttered Bob, turning to leave.

“Hold on there, pardner,” said the Duke. “We’ve got us a mystery to solve.”

Bob sighed. “All right, fine.”

Abruptly adopting his French alter-ego, the Persian said, “Eet appears he has been stabbed four hundred thirty-six times veeth a spoon.” He crouched beside the nonexistent ‘body,’ carefully ‘examining’ it.

Gandarph frowned. “Why a spoon?”

“Because it’s dull, you twit!” said the Gyrie-Persian. “It’ll hurt more!”

“But who could have done such a thing?” asked a white-faced Pilsbury.

“Zee butler, of course!” proclaimed the Clew-Sew-Persian. “Eet ees always zee butler!”

“But without the Persian, how will we ever find the Phantom?” said Gandarph. “This quest is turning into a disaster!”

“It started out as a disaster,” said Bob. “But look, there’s no one there. The Persian is still alive.”

“Still alive?!” exclaimed Gandarph. “But look at the body! No one could survive that!”

“There’s no body! The Persian is right there!” Bob pointed at the Persian.

“Vat?!” exclaimed the Persian. “I am Eenspector Clew-Sew of zee French Secret...”

“Stow it,” growled Bob. “You’re the Persian. If the Persian was really dead, you’d be dead, too, because you’re all the same person!”

The Duke scratched his head. “Say, there, pilgrim,” he said, “I think you’re on to something. I did think they looked a lot alike.”

“That’s it!” the Persian burst out. “I’ve had it! If you don’t like the way I act, then I quit!” He opened the window and leaped through, sprinting into the darkness making loud whinnying noises.

Gandarph glared at Bob. “Nice. I *told* you he was sensitive! Now what will we do? How will we ever solve this mystery without the awesome deductive powers of Inspector Clew-Sew?”

The King spoke up. “He already solved it, remember? It was the butler in the train car with the spoon.”

The wizard, of course, ignored him, because...you know.

Gandarph sighed heavily. “This is awful. The entire script will have to be hastily re-written to accommodate this unexpected change in the cast.” Then he suddenly brightened. “Wait! I have an idea!”

“What?” asked Bob warily.

“We have to have the Persian to find the Phantom, but the Persian is dead. We happen to have a spare man here,” he indicated the King, “who is also dead. We can just have King the King take over the role of the Persian, and our mission can continue smoothly!”

“Sweet, baby!” said the King. “I’m not dead!”

“But he *was* dead,” said Pilsbury. “Remember? How can he be alive all of a sudden?”

“That’s simple enough to cover up,” said Gandarph. “We’ll simply have King the King leap out of concealment and loudly proclaim that, contrary to what everyone believed earlier, he is not, in fact, dead!”

“I’m not dead!” proclaimed the King, leaping into the room with his arms spread wide. He wagged his hips back and forth a few times. “The King is in the building! Ow!”

“Well, butter my backside and call me a biscuit!” exclaimed Gandarph. “Look, everyone! King the King, contrary to popular belief, is still alive, and by lurking under cover all this time he

has somehow learned the Persian's secrets, which he will use to help us find the Phantom!"

"Yay!" cheered Pilsbury dutifully.

"Welcome back, pardner," said the Duke.

"Thank you," said the King. "Thank you very much."

Just then the train lurched back into motion. "Ah!" said Gandarph. "We're on our way once more. By morning we shall be in Kathmandu."

Kathmandu was in the middle of a broad, low valley. The train screeched into town during the early dawn, plowing over an empty wooden shack that had been erected over the tracks. After demolishing the shack, the train plunged down into a large pit of mud, derailing. The Charm car quickly decayed into another Up car, and it, the other Up car, and the Down car collided, forming a proton, which bounced down the street and smashed several more shacks. The Top and Bottom cars careened off in opposite directions, but the Strange car, strangely, remained on the tracks.

"Ah!" said Gandarph, stepping out of the train, "we're here! Now for some refreshment!" Before anyone could stop him, he walked into a bar near the tracks.

Inside they found him peering around the bar, searching for something. "What can I do for you?" asked the bartender.

"Do you have a menu?" asked Gandarph.

"We don't have menus here," said the bartender.

"Why not?"

"Because 'menu' starts with the word 'men,' which some women find offensive. So menus were abolished."

"Um...how about some water, then?" asked Bob, who was feeling a little thirsty.

"I'm sorry," said the bartender, "you can't drink water here."

"Why not?" asked Bob.

"Because some people don't like water."

"Uh...I do."

"Too bad. Your drinking it might offend those who don't like it."

"Okay, how about milk, then?"

“Sorry, you can’t drink milk here. Some people don’t like it.”

Bob sighed.

“Sorry,” said the bartender, “you can’t sigh here.”

“Why, because some people don’t like it?” said Bob irritably.

“That’s right,” said the bartender.

“That’s ridiculous! I’m leaving!”

“Sorry,” said the bartender, “you can’t leave. It might offend someone.”

Bob frowned. “But if I stay, that might offend someone, too.”

“Quite right,” said the bartender. “You can’t stay here.”

“Well, if I can’t leave and I can’t stay, what do I do?”

“Neither. They might offend someone.”

“But...”

“Sorry,” said the bartender, “you can’t say ‘but’ here. Some people don’t like it.”

“How do you survive if none of you can do anything because someone might not like it?” demanded Bob.

“Sorry,” said the bartender. “You can’t question our way of life here. It might offend someone.”

“Yeah?” said Bob. “Well, I don’t like how you don’t let me do anything here! How about that?”

“Sorry,” said the bartender. “That doesn’t matter.”

“Well, why not?” Bob demanded.

“Because *most* people don’t like it,” he said.

Growing more confused, Bob said, “But...if most people don’t like it, why do you do it?”

“Well, obviously,” said the bartender in a condescending tone, “if *most* people think one way, we have to do the *opposite* to protect the interests of the few who *don’t* think that way.”

“What?! That’s the stupidest thing I’ve...” Bob hesitated, and then said, “Actually, now that you mention it, that sounds disturbingly familiar.”

“Sorry,” said the bartender, “you can’t say the word ‘disturbingly’ here. Some people don’t use that word.”

“Take a hike,” growled Bob.

“I’m sorry, hiking is outlawed here. Some people...”

Before he could finish the statement, Duke punched his lights out. “Sorry, hombre,” he drawled, “but since most people don’t like getting walloped, I figgered I’d better do it.”

“Thank you, Duke the Duke,” said Gandarph. “That was thoughtful of you.” Looking around the bar, he said, “There doesn’t appear to be any prune juice in the vicinity. Ah, well. We might as well make haste to the Amazon River.”

Due to the impossibility of doing anything or nothing in Kathmandu, Gandarph and his intrepid band simultaneously left and stayed. How they managed to board the boat on the Amazon was a mystery, as boats, boarding, and the Amazon were all outlawed in Kathmandu.

The Amazon was a muddy little stream that seemed more or less stagnant. “So this is the Amazon,” said Bob, observing the shoreline crawling sluggishly by.

“Indeed,” said Gandarph. “It will take us directly to Paris. Once we pass the port of Paris, we will head to the Paris Nursing Home.”

Pilsbury’s eyes widened in alarm. “Oh, no!” he gasped.

“What?” said Gandarph. “What is it?”

“The passports!” said Pilsbury. “We forgot to get the passports!”

Gandarph stared in surprise. “Well, bless my soul,” he said. “So we did. Goodness, how are we ever to pass the port, then?”

“Could we go back to Kathmandu and pick some up?” asked the King. “It’s not far.”

“No, I’m afraid not,” said Gandarph. “Passports are illegal in Kathmandu.”

“Hey, ain’t Melbourne somewheres between Kathmandu and Paris?” asked the Duke.

Gandarph nodded. “Why, yes, Duke the Duke. You’re right. Perhaps we could stop there and pick up the passports. Brilliant thinking!” Pointing ahead, he said, “On to Melbourne!”

VIII: The Puce Primrose
or
Man, I Have No Idea What Puce Is

Melbourne, much like Houston, wasn't actually there. It consisted of a dusty plot of ground, a few rocks, and a lone sagebrush. There were a few people milling about, though, pretending to open doors, sidestepping imaginary traffic, and tripping over things that weren't there. Afraid he'd get some comment about how there wasn't enough budget to build a set for Melbourne, Bob refrained from asking about it.

At least, he thought, there were no bars.

"Ah," said Gandarph, pointing ahead. "There is the Office of the Passer-On of Passports."

He led the way toward a slightly pudgy man who was standing near the sagebrush. He paused briefly a few yards away from him, pretending to open a door. "Ah!" said the fat man, apparently seeing them for the first time. "Welcome, welcome. What can I do for you?"

"We are in need of passports!" said Gandarph.

"Well, you're in the right place, then! Where do you want to go today?"

"Anywhere but there," replied Gandarph. "Actually, we're on our way to Paris."

"Oh!" The Passer-On of Passports shook his head. "I'm afraid we're all out of passports to Paris."

"What?!" Gandarph looked crushed.

"It's true. A couple of girls bought the last ones just yesterday."

"Blast!" said Gandarph. "How soon will you have more?"

"We're supposed to get a shipment in next year," said the man, "but with the rate of robberies along the highway, they're likely to never arrive at all."

"Double blast!" said Gandarph. "Well...what's the closest city that might have some?"

"That would be Tarshish," replied the Passer-On of Passports.

"Tarshish!" said Gandarph. "But that's the other end of the world! No one between here and there has them?"

"No one, I'm afraid."

“Triple blast!” said Gandarph. “Is there any way to get into Paris without a passport?”

“No, not that I’m aware of,” said the man.

“Quadruple blast!” said Gandarph. “Does Tarshish, by chance, have facsimile service?”

“No,” said the Passer-On of Passports. “Sorry.”

Gandarph opened his mouth, but then paused, a confused look coming over his face. He looked at Bob. “Uh...what comes after quadruple?”

“No idea,” said Bob.

“Oh, well. Anyway, sir, thank you for your time. Come, stalwart companions—an alternate plan must be made!”

As they all trooped out of the ‘building,’ they were intercepted by a tall man wearing foppish 19th-century clothing. “I say, my good fellow,” he said to Gandarph, “I couldn’t help but hear that you’re trying to get to Paris.”

“That’s right,” said Gandarph despondently. “But there are no more passports.”

The stranger looked around conspiratorially. “And what, my good man, would you say,” he asked, “if I told you I knew a way to get into Paris *without* a passport?”

Gandarph pondered that for a moment, and then said, “Well, I’d probably say, ‘You do? How?’ in an excited whisper.”

Dropping his voice a little, the man said, “I know a way to get into Paris *without* a passport.”

“You do?” Gandarph whispered excitedly. “How?”

“I will show you,” said the man, “in exchange for a favor.”

“What favor? Who are you, anyway?”

“My name is Sir Pursey Blacknee,” said the man. “But I am better known as the Puce Primrose. And the favor I ask of you is dangerous, so be warned.” He looked around again to make sure no one was listening in.

“Go on,” said Gandarph.

“I’m on my way to Paris myself,” said Pursey. “I need a few stout lads to accompany me, however. I seek to rescue the heir of the throne of France, the Dolphin, from the clutches of Citizen Rogue Spear, and I cannot do it alone.”

“Gandarph,” Pilsbury said nervously, “that sounds dangerous.”

“Indeed,” said Gandarph. “But it seems it is our only way to get into Paris. Very well, Pursey. We will assist you in return for your help in entering Paris.”

“Excellent!” said Pursey. “We leave at first light!”

The following morning they waited near the boat for Pursey, but by the time the sun was well up the Puce Primrose was still nowhere to be seen. The only other person there was a gnarled old crone sitting on the dock fishing. Even though her pole had no line, there were several fish in the bucket beside her.

“Where is he?” Gandarph grumbled irritably. “I don’t want to have to search this whole blasted city for him!”

Bob looked over at Melbourne, which at the moment contained some half-dozen people, all of whom were sleeping on the ground. “Yeah,” he said in a neutral tone. “That’d be tough.”

“Aha!” cried the old woman, leaping up from her seat on the dock and whirling to face them. She flung aside her robes, revealing the pompously-dressed Pursey beneath them. “Here I am! I wanted to see how effective my newest disguise was. Sink me, but it worked swimmingly, what?”

“Od’s fish!” said Gandarph. “Your disguise was masterful, Sir Pursey! I truly had no idea who you were!”

“I’m surprised you didn’t notice the ill-fitting disguise,” said Pursey. “But then, fashion never was your forté—was it?”

“No,” said Gandarph. “So, on to Paris?”

“On to Paris!” agreed Pursey.

Once back out on the Amazon, Pursey explained his plan. “The giant man-eating port that guards Paris has one weakness,” he said. “Only one. I’ve used it before successfully, but it’s not without a degree of risk.”

“Go on,” Gandarph urged. “What’s the weakness?”

“The weakness,” said Pursey, “is Thursdays. The port of Paris is off on Thursdays—he never could get the hang of them. And today, my dear friends, is Thursday.”

Bob frowned. “So what’s the risk?”

“The risk,” said Pursey, “is that on the port’s day off, they call in Chuck Norris to guard Paris instead.”

“Wonderful!” said Pilsbury, throwing up his arms in despair. “We’re dead! Great plan, Pursey!”

“Ah!” said Pursey with a wink. “Not to worry, my dear chap. Monsignor Norris happens to be a close, personal friend of mine. He’ll let us through.”

Again Bob asked, “Okay, but if he’s your friend then what’s the risk?”

“Well,” said Pursey, “as everyone knows, Chuck Norris can travel faster than light, so there’s a small chance he might kill us before he sees us.”

Gandarph nodded soberly. “Well, risk or no risk, we must get to Paris. We’ll have to take the chance.”

IX: It Would Seem Your Friend Is In Distress

or

So Much For French Fashion

After drifting lethargically down the muddy river for a number of hours, Paris finally came into view. “There it is,” whispered Pursey. “The grand city of Paris.”

Bob looked, but didn’t see anything even remotely grand. No Eiffel Tower, no Arc de Triomphe, no Louvre. But then, he reflected, he hadn’t really expected to see any of those things. What he had expected was a bunch of rickety wooden huts.

He was almost right. The huts were, indeed, rickety, but they weren’t wooden. They were made instead of what appeared to be adobe.

“This is where the Port of Paris normally resides,” said Pursey as they approached a dilapidated old pier. There was a big sign a dozen yards before it that read, “*Le Port autonome de Paris est actuellement indisponible. S'il vous plaît tenez votre passeport dessus de votre tête que vous passez ce point afin d'éviter une mort instantanée et salissante. Méfiez-vous des Ranger du Texas!*”

“What does that say?” asked Bob.

“Od’s fish, m’dear, do I look like a walkin’ French dictionary?” said Pursey.

“Now why would they have a sign in French in Paris?” Gandarph wondered aloud.

Bob decided not to answer that. As they drew closer he saw something small under the main text of the sign, and he peered at it. “Courtesy Google Translate,” he murmured.

Evidently Chuck Norris decided to spare them, for none of them became suddenly dead as they docked at the pier and headed into town. “So where’s Chuck?” asked the King, looking around.

“Sink me, but you never *see* Monsignor Norris,” said Pursey. “You only feel his fist, and even then only for an instant. Why, he’s well-nigh invisible, they say. Much like me, in point of fact. I wrote a poem about myself once. Would you like to hear it?”

“No,” said Bob.

Pursey launched into it anyway. “They seek him here, they seek him there, those Frenchies

seek him everywhere. Is he in Heaven, or is he in telemarketing? That..."

"CENSORED!" shouted Pilsbury.

"...elusive Primrose." Pursey beamed. "Smashing, what? You see, I am something of a poet, and..."

"Moving on," Bob broke in.

"Sink me, if you aren't right," said Pursey. "For a change. Now, then, we must make for Rogue Spear's top-secret fortress with all haste, for that is where the Dolphin is being held."

It soon became obvious that the re-mudding of the Paris streets was complete, for the thick, yellowish-green mud was knee-deep. "Nice," muttered Bob.

They soon came upon a woman slogging the other direction. She was wearing the most absurd-looking outfit Bob had ever seen, all lopsided and ragged and covered with useless strips of multicolored cloth sewn haphazardly about. "Pardon me, mademoiselle," said Pursey, "but we are on a mission of utmost secrecy. Can you direct us to Citizen Rogue Spear's hidden fortress?"

"Certainly," said the woman. "It's two streets up on the corner. Can't miss it."

"Thank you, mademoiselle," said Pursey, bowing. "And I must say, your dress is stunning."

"Stunning?" said the Duke, raising an eyebrow. "It looks like she just ran through a twister."

The woman sniffed disdainfully. "Obviously you have no appreciation for culture. This dress is all the rage."

"That's all the rage?" Bob asked. "Why?"

"Because," said the woman condescendingly, "a very famous fashion designer said so."

"But it looks ridiculous."

"Look, kid, if a famous fashion designer says it's good, then it's good! Don't you know anything about fashion?"

"Yeah," said Bob. "No matter how stupid it looks it's 'in' and probably very expensive if a famous fashion designer made it."

"Exactly," said the woman. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go draw black dots on my face." She slopped briskly away, her nose so high in the air she didn't see an oncoming pedestrian until she collided with him.

"This way!" said Pursey, leading them up the street.

Rogue Spear's hidden fortress turned out to be, not surprisingly, some kind of saloon, with the words 'Rogue Spear's Hidden Fortress' emblazoned in non-functional neon lights across the front. "Ah!" said Pursey. "We've found it! Now, for a plan!"

Gandarph, though, was already headed inside. "Wait!" cried Pursey. "I haven't made a plan yet!"

It was too late. Gandarph disappeared through the doors. "He doesn't really do plans," said Bob.

"Well, I suppose we'd best follow him and make the most of it," said Pursey.

Inside, they found Gandarph ordering a drink. "Good," said the Puce Primrose. "It does not appear he has aroused any suspicion."

"Don't worry," said Bob. "He will."

Gandarph took a sip of whatever drink he had ordered, and then turned back toward his friends. "Goodness," he said, his face turning a nasty shade of orange, "this doesn't taste like the lemonade *I* remember."

"Od's fish, your face is..." Pursey paused, and then said, "Anyway, we'd best get to it, what? Come with me."

They stealthily crept up a flight of stairs on the other side of the saloon, and at the top they found a door with six rainbows painted on it. "Aha!" whispered Pursey. "This must be it! Ready, men?"

"Ready!" said Gandarph, whose face was beginning to get hot pink streaks in it.

Pursey kicked the door, but it didn't budge. "Ow!" he cried.

"Here," said the King. "I'll take care of it." Turning the handle, he pushed the door open.

"Many thanks," said Pursey.

They all burst into the room, but to their dismay it was to find that their coming was anything but unexpected. They were immediately surrounded by a dozen men dressed in black body armor and full tactical gear, armed with a wide array of cheap airsoft guns.

"Well, well, if it isn't the infamous Puce Primrose," said a disturbingly familiar voice.

Bob rolled his eyes as the Persian stepped into the room from another doorway. "Not you again," he groaned.

“Silence!” snapped the Persian...uh...Rogue Spear. “Give me a break just this once, okay?”

“Well...all right,” said Bob grudgingly.

Rogue Spear sneered, looking at Pursey. “Your plan was poorly concocted this time, Monseigneur Blacknee.”

“Not at all, Citizen,” said Pursey.

“No?” said Rogue Spear. “And what trick do you have up your sleeve?”

“Allow me to introduce your soldiers,” said Pursey. He looked at the soldiers, and then said, “Uh...oh, blast it all. I forgot the part where I capture all of your soldiers and have my men take their place.”

“Yes,” said Rogue Spear. “And, if you would care to look out that window, you will see even *more* of my Spec-Ops soldiers waiting outside.”

“True,” said Pursey. “But if you would care to look out *that* window, you will see...uh...dang, I forgot to set that part up, too.” He scratched his head. “This is a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

“Get them, men!” shouted Rogue Spear.

Immediately the room was filled with flying plastic BBs as Rogue Spear’s men started firing. Duke drew his pistols and started firing back, and all of the black-garbed soldiers dropped their guns and fled in panic.

“Get back here, cowards!” shrieked Rogue Spear.

The Duke grabbed him by the collar and stuck the barrel of his pistol against his nose. “Talk, hombre,” he growled. “Where’s the Dolphin?”

“He’s not here!” Rogue Spear whimpered. “Honest, he’s not! PETA made me release him into the wild!”

“Sweet, baby,” said the King. “Looks like we’re done here.”

“Not quite,” said Pursey. “There’s still the matter of Madame L’Inglorious Bella Ivanovich Al-Amok von Lieu Chang d’Amourless.”

“Well, we’ll let you take that up with him,” said Gandarph, whose face was now hot pink with white polka dots. “We must be off to the Paris Nursing Home now.”

“Thank you for your help, and oree-vwah,” said Pursey. “Is that right? Those French make

everything so hard.”

X: The Paris Nursing Home

or

The Phantom is M!

Leaving Pursey to interrogate Rogue Spear, Gandarph and his companions made their way to the Paris Nursing Home. By the time they arrived the polka dots on Gandarph's face had turned neon green, and were bouncing about on his face in a mad game of ping-pong.

“Ah,” said Gandarph, spotting the dilapidated old nursing home. “Here we are. Let's nip on in and have a chat with the director.”

They filed into the old building, which by the look of it was about to collapse. There was a small stall inside, with a burned-out light fixture hanging crookedly from it. “I say,” said the director, “looking for a place for your grandfather here? I'd love to show you around.”

Gandarph blinked, and then said, “Uh...no. My grandfather is...well...Actually, I'm not sure I have one.”

“Ah,” said the director with a knowing nod. Looking at Pilsbury, he said, “Mind's slipping already, I see.”

“No, more like ‘slipped,’ actually,” Pilsbury replied.

At that moment the light fixture came loose from the ceiling, falling down and bonking Pilsbury on the head. Maniacal laughter echoed down from above, slowly fading away.

“Oi!” cried the director, looking up at the ceiling. “It's that blasted Phantom again. Sorry, sir. He has this thing for cutting loose lights.”

“Serves you right, Pilsbury,” Gandarph sniffed. Turning back to the director, he said, “Anyway, we're here about the Phantom.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the director. “You're Gandarph?”

“That's right,” the wizard confirmed.

“Thank goodness you've arrived! Things are in an awful state here—awful indeed!”

“Then we'd best get right on it,” said Gandarph.

“Of course. I'll have one of our orderlies show you around.” He grabbed a bell pull and gave it a yank.

The orderly appeared a few moments later. He was very short, very hunchbacked, and had enormous, hairy feet. “Hi!” he said brightly. “I’m Quasifrodo!”

“Quasifrodo?” asked the Duke incredulously. “Are you loco, hombre? You already did a Quasi bit.”

“Well, yeah,” said the author, “but it was such a hit I figured I’d do it again.”

“No!” said Duke firmly.

Quasifrodo disappeared.

“I suppose,” said Gandarph, looking forlorn, “that this means I also can’t do the Captain Petard bit I was planning, since I already did Captain Quirk, huh?”

“Yep,” said Duke. “Sorry.”

“What about Jabba Claus and his hoversleigh pulled by eight tiny banthas?”

“No.”

“But he goes, ‘Ho, ho, ho,’ and I was going to say, ‘I know that laugh.’ It was going to be hilarious!”

“Forget it,” said Duke.

Gandarph frowned. “Who put you in charge of this story, anyway?”

“Don’t mess with the Duke, pilgrim.”

“Can we just get on with this?” said Bob.

“Very well,” Gandarph said. Some of the pink was finally beginning to fade from his face, and the polka-dots were morphing into a muddy orange color. “Where do you think the Phantom can be found, director?”

“In the sewer, naturally,” said the director, “when he’s not lurking about in the attic. If you want to find him, I’d suggest having a talk with the nurse Brunhilda. She’s the Phantom’s equivocal love interest.”

“Where can we find her?” asked Gandarph.

“Well, right now she’s conducting the weekly Tic Talk session in the common area.”

“What’s Tic Talk?” asked Bob.

“Therapy for people with nervous twitches,” replied the director.

The King brightened. “Really? I could use a session or two of that. I have a nervous twitch in

my hips.”

“Well, what are we waiting for, then?” said Gandarph. “Let’s go!”

To the King’s disappointment, Tic Talk had already concluded by the time they arrived. They found Brunhilda gathering up her notes at a rickety podium.

She was probably the most massive person Bob had ever seen. Her enormous arms were covered with tattoos of snakes, skulls, and various weapons, and her hair was in a spiked, multicolored Mohawk. Every spot of exposed tissue in her ears and nose were filled with piercings, with several heavy chains connecting the three appendages. In contrast, she was wearing a frilly pink frock, which was filled to capacity.

“Whoa,” said Bob. “The Phantom has a crush on *her*?”

The King smoothed back his hair. “Let me do the talking.”

“Hey, sorry, the session’s over,” Brunhilda said in a gravelly bass voice as they approached.

“That’s okay, baby,” said the King with one of his lopsided grins. “We’ve got a few questions for you, if you don’t mind.”

Brunhilda stared at him for a moment, and then said, “Do I know you?”

“Sure do, sugar,” said the King with a wink. “I’m the King.”

“Gee, that’s too bad,” said Brunhilda. “I’ve sort of got this habit of killing kings, see?”

The King winced. “Oh. Well...never mind, then. I’ve already had my fair share of that kind of thing.” Turning around, he said, “Pilsbury, my man, why don’t you do the talking?”

Pilsbury, however, was busy trying to remain unobtrusive behind Gandarph.

“You’re kinda cute, though,” said Brunhilda to the King. “Maybe I won’t kill you.”

The King gave her a sickly sort of smile. “Hey, sounds great, baby.”

“So, sweetheart,” she said with a wide smile that revealed a tongue full of piercings, “what did you want to ask me?”

The King took a step backward. “Um...We’re looking for the Phantom.”

“Really?” she said. “I’m not sure I can help you there. You’re probably out to stop him, right?”

“Well, yeah. Don’t you want us to?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I know he’s, like, killed people and stuff, and he’s kind of

creepy, but he taught me how to give injections, so I'm not sure whether I love him or not." She gave him a suggestive wink. "You might be able to convince me not to, though, sweet-cheeks."

The King, beginning to look a little green around the gills, laughed half-heartedly. "Uh... yeah, honey. Sure thing."

Just then a voice, as if from a great distance, began filtering into the room. "Insolent boy!" it rasped. "Ignorant fool! Bah, humbug!"

Brunhilda threw up her hands. "I didn't mean it!" she cried. "I'm not really in love with him! Come on, man, gimme a break!"

"Egads!" cried Gandarph. "What is that voice?"

"The Phantom," said Bob. "Duh."

"But where is it coming from?"

"Check behind the mirror."

Running to a large mirror behind Brunhilda, Gandarph gave it a yank. Sure enough, it swung open like a door, revealing a dark hallway beyond. In the hallway was a decrepit old man in a wheelchair, a long tube from an oxygen tank stuck into his nose. He gave one startled look at Gandarph before whipping his wheelchair around and racing away with surprising speed.

"After him!" said Gandarph. "Come on, men! We've got him on the run...uh...well, sort of!"

"Hold it!" said Brunhilda, slamming the mirror shut again and standing in front of it like a tank ready to fire, "I'm under obligation to defend him!"

"What obligation?" asked Gandarph, bewildered.

"Well, he...uh...well, I don't know. I just am."

"But ultimately you know you'll betray him," said the King.

Brunhilda blinked uncertainly. "I will?"

"Of course you will. You'll realize that he's only been giving you injection lessons so you can help him in his evil plan to unleash his horrible genetically-engineered virus upon the world."

Brunhilda frowned a little. "You don't sound like yourself, honey-bunches."

"I know," said the King. "That was originally going to be the Persian's line, but I'm sort of filling in for him. Anyway, since you know you're going to betray him eventually anyway, why not do it now and get it over with?"

Brunhilda thought that over for a painfully long moment, and then sighed. “Oh, all right.” She stepped out of the way.

“Onward!” cried Gandarph, running face-first into the mirror. He recovered quickly, though, and opened in and ran into the corridor beyond.

Down, down, into the black depths of an unimaginably huge for whatever reason sewer Gandarph led his stalwart band.

“Beware the Punjab lasso!” cried the King as they ran.

“The what?” asked Gandarph.

“I don’t know!” replied the King. “Just hold your hand up in front of your face as you run! No, wait, actually, this Phantom is too short for that. Hold it in front of your stomach!”

“Right!” cried Gandarph. “Okay, everyone, your hand at the level of your gut!”

They encountered no lassos as they ran, however, and soon they were at the bottom of a huge stone staircase. “How’d the Phantom get down this in a wheelchair?” Bob asked.

The Duke frowned, looking back up. “Good question, pardner.”

“Aha!” cried Gandarph. “The Phantom’s lair!”

They had come upon a large stone chamber, though the reason for its existence in a sewer was inexplicable. It had a long table against one wall, which was covered with parts from a *Junior Scientist ‘My First Laboratory’ Chemistry Set*. There was a shrine on the opposite wall, consisting of a photograph of Brunhilda surrounded by candles, incense, and various personal belongings of the huge nurse.

“So this is where he concocted his dastardly virus,” said Gandarph.

“Indeed,” said the sinister voice of the Phantom. At the same time a heavy portcullis slammed down over the room’s only exit.

The Phantom appeared, wheeling into view on the other side of the portcullis. “And now you and your little band are doomed, for within minutes this room will be heated to lethal temperatures by a huge fire hidden underneath it!”

“You’ll never get away with this!” Gandarph cried.

With an insidious laugh, the Phantom laughed insidiously. “Oh, yes I will! And with you out of the way, my virus will spread over the entire world! Everyone will start doing socially

responsible things like running for public office, building schools in third-world countries, and raising taxes!”

“You fiend!” raged Gandarph. “How can you live with yourself?”

“Now, now,” said the Phantom, “there’s no need to shout.”

“I’m not shouting!” Gandarph shouted.

The Phantom held up an iron doorstop in the shape of a cricket. “This,” he said, “is the only way you can escape. Placing this cricket in the dish in front of Brunhilda’s picture will cause the fires to go out. But I’ll only give it to you on one condition—you must first inject yourselves with the virus, which I have left syringes full of on the table beside you. Make your choice—a slow, painful death, or life as an unquestioning servant of the Man?”

“I’ll take the slow, painful death,” growled Gandarph.

“Uh, can we think this over before we make any hasty decisions?” Pilsbury squeaked.

Bob, spotting the stone dish in front of Brunhilda’s picture, said, “So all we have to do to put out the fire is put that cricket on this dish? How does that work, exactly?”

“Simple,” said the Phantom. “The weight of the cricket will trigger a switch that will open a sluice gate, flooding the fire room.”

“Oh. Like this?” Bob put his hand on the dish and pressed down on it.

Somewhere below them, there was a loud hissing noise, and extremely smelly steam began rising from vents outside the room.

The Phantom stared at Bob, his mouth hanging open. “You...you’re...but how? No! No, that’s not possible! You have to use the bug!”

“Apparently not,” said Gandarph smugly.

“It doesn’t matter!” the Phantom shrieked. “You have still failed! By the time you escape I will have already flooded the world with my virus! In fact, I’m going to go straight to my Virus-Spreader-o’Matic right now and press the big red button that will begin an orbital bombardment of the virus!”

“Actually,” said the Duke, “you’re not.” Pulling out one of his pistols, he fired at the Phantom’s oxygen tank, which exploded violently and put a sudden and melodramatic end to the Phantom’s criminal career.

“Nicely done, Duke the Duke!” said Gandarph. “Now we must find a way out of here!”

“Gotcha covered,” said Brunhilda’s bass voice as she appeared from a hallway behind the Phantom’s smoking remains.

Going to the portcullis, she grabbed it and heaved upward. With a harsh grating noise the portcullis lifted from the ground, allowing Gandarph and his companions to slip out of the room underneath it.

“Thanks, there, sweets,” said the King, giving her a wink.

“Don’t mention it, babycakes,” she said, winking back. “Now that the Phantom is gone, I’ve realized that it’s really *you* I’ve been in love with all along! Now we must run away together to begin our new lives far from this dreadful place!”

The King took a step back. “Uh...now, hold on there. Can we talk about this first?”

It was too late, though. Brunhilda grabbed the King and threw him over her shoulder, turning and running. Soon they were gone, the King’s desperate cries for mercy fading in the distance.

“I hope they’re happy together,” said Gandarph vaguely, looking around with a slightly confused look on his face.

Also looking around, Pilsbury said, “Well, the Phantom is dead and his threat to mankind neutralized, so...now what?”

Gandarph was at a loss. “Um...well,” he said, “I’m not sure how this is supposed to end. I lost the manuscript, remember?”

“Well, maybe we could just skip the ending,” suggested Pilsbury.

Gandarph pondered that for a moment, and then shrugged. “Okay.”

The End

THE CREDITS

BOB

BOB

GANDARPH

GANDARPH

PILSBURY

PILSBURY

THE DUKE

THE DUKE

THE KING

THE KING

UNNAMED ACTOR

PHILIP THE RAT

THE PERSIAN
MADAME GYRIE
INSPECTOR CLEW-SEW
ROGUE SPEAR

AN EXTREMELY LARGE PERSON

BRUNHILDA

VARIOUS LITTLE PEOPLE

EVERYONE ELSE

SPECIAL THANKS

RUPERT
JOHN
FRANK
MARGARET
BILLY
PIERS
JAMES
EUNICE
LARRY
PHIL
AMY
MOE
TINA
GEORGE

AND LOTS OF OTHERS WHOSE NAMES I'M TOO LAZY TO WRITE.

THE PART AT THE END OF THE CREDITS

“I’ve been thinking about another sequel,” said Gandarph.

Pilsbury rolled his eyes. “Not another one! Hasn’t the world been punished enough?”

“But there were so many great ideas we didn’t get a chance to do! And besides, after the wild success of the first two...”

“Wild success?” Pilsbury demanded incredulously. “How many people read them—like, three?”

“That’s beside the point,” Gandarph said irritably.

“No,” said Pilsbury, “that kind of *is* the point, isn’t it?”

“Whatever.”

“Besides, don’t you think it’s about time you sent Bob back home?”

Gandarph, looking a little guilty, said, “Well...um...about that...”

With a groan Pilsbury said, “You can’t, can you?”

“Well, not really. Not safely, anyway.”

“Safely?”

“I could try,” said Gandarph. “But there’s a pretty good chance it won’t work.”

“How good? And what happens if it doesn’t?”

“Well, there’s about a 50% chance he’ll go home, a 30% chance he’ll go berserk and try to kill everyone, and a 20% chance his head will explode.”

“Wonderful.”

“So about that sequel...”

“Forget it, Gandarph. If he’s stuck here, the least you can do is let Bob live out the remainder of his days in relative peace at the Denver nickel arcade.”

Gandarph sighed. “Oh, all right. I guess this is it, then.”