

Purple Prose and Red Herrings, But Definitely No Blue Jokes

Prinz Gestetner von Herpes

Episode eight of *Zool*, in which a plot is discovered by the author but is quickly repossessed by the Atari video game corporation.

“But then again, it’s not my problem.” Harkonnen smiled at his listeners, then sat down, only just disturbing his carefully blow-dried hair and innate dignity. Suddenly the Narrator appeared, carrying a list of things every reader of *Zool* should know. “You might be wondering who I am,” he said patronisingly, secretly hoping they wouldn’t notice his necklessness. “Piss off!” replied the assembled cast. The narrator sniffed indignantly and then winked out of existence, mumbling under his breath, “Fine, but don’t come running to me for a *deus ex machina*.” He left the list behind, which Gestetner picked up.

“A message from the author,” began Gestetner in an uncertain accent. He read out the list, which contained the plot (including purple prose, red herrings and blue jokes), the names and addresses of the villains and details of the senses-shattering conclusion to *Zool*: “. . .and they lived happily ever after,” finished Gestetner.

A chorus and two verses of objections to this came from all (especially Korb, who didn’t like the bit where he sold his motorbike for a Salvation Army tambourine). A vote was taken and it was decided to discard the plot.

“Right — where were we?”

Meanwhile, the Council of Five (six, if you include the word processor) were conspiring.

“A cunning ploy that was,” Poor Nell was saying, fingering her personal defence weapon (a copy of *Jannissaries*). “Too long have the hated Milford Mafia ruled SF fandom, claiming — like disgusting bleeding-heart liberals would — that fandom has to be segregated from the Real World by their ‘benevolent’ protectorship. Ptui!¹⁴ By stealing the *Crap Nebula* and the *Kevin* away from them with our neuromancy, *we* have the power now! Fandom should be grateful! Who knows what terrible thing would have replaced our gibbon in emergence.”

The others weren’t listening. Asnoplots was reciting a review of the first volume of his autobiography, *In Memory Yet Obscene*, to an imaginary audience. Ursula K. was silently discussing Franz Kafka’s work with an intellectual pile of rocks. Mr Sri Lanka was photosynthesising beatifically. The gibbon was working on a sequel, tentatively titled *Blade Runner*.

Poor Nell continued. “With possession of the *Crap Nebula* and the *Kevin*, we can now instruct our secret agent, Prinz Gestetner von Herpes, whom we blackmailed into our service when we caught him reading Salman Rushdie in a public toilet, to lead the massed hordes of O.U.S.F.G. in escape from Zool and wreak havoc across time and space, burning every SF book we don’t approve of, purging fandom of its isolationists and breaking the ghetto walls down, so that our jihad will not only consume the accursed Milford Mafia, but the entire universe in an irresistible conflagration of our egos!”

“You realise we know that already,” said Asnoplots to the wild cheers of his imaginary audience.

¹⁴See p.194, *Dictionary of Spitting Noises*, by Shackle and Brock (OUP, 1982).

“Sorry,” apologized Poor Nell, straightening her shigawire wig as she got down off the table. “Bad habits are hard to break.”

“I thought we were going to take over sub-plot space,” said Mr. Sri Lanka, who was disappointed that nothing had happened when he got up to 9,000,000,000. “Well, it’d be pretty useful. Just think what it would do to our storylines. . .” His voice died away. The others sighed — it was clear his childhood was not yet at an end.

Ursula K., who preferred being a penguin to a cockroach, kept silent. She knew that if she did nothing for long enough her passivity would render her fellow councillors helpless before her. She fell asleep again. Her mind was empty, as it had always been.

Poor Nell started to gnaw her fingers, in keeping with her survivalist training. “Well, it won’t be long now before our Starsheep Troopers help Gestetner take care of Jane Howarth and her friends,” she said between chews. “*Nothing* can stop us now.”

All of them agreed with this except the word processor. “What about Cordwainer Bird?”

“Bird. Cordwainer Bird,” the dwarf spat into the intercom on another part of the page. The door slid open to reveal a room, bare except for two chairs. In one of them sat Admiral Hardloin.

“Come in, Bird,” said the Admiral, his stitches twitching. Bird came in and slouched provocatively on the other chair, his feet several inches off the floor. “Got a job for you.”

“Better be quick,” Bird said. “I’m late preparing a book of my excuses for putting off publication of *The Last Dangerous Visions*, and Jefty hates waiting. That ticktockman will send a deathbird to shatter me like a glass goblin along the scenic route (on the downhill side) at the mouse circus, adrift just off the islets of Langerhans, if I’m late.” He took a sharp breath.

“Starsheep Troopers,” said the Admiral, and Bird tensed visibly, “Need your help. The roads must roll. Only common sense can save the universe from all you zombies.” The Admiral paused as the shocking news was digested by Bird. “By his bootstraps, the man who sold the moon will build a crooked house and travel in elephants.”

“No!” cried Bird in astonishment. “Seeing Hitler painting *Roses*, Mom would do it for a penny. With a kiss of fire, Knox can drink the strange wine of an early life, furnished in poverty, in the fourth year of the war.”

The Admiral understood his amazement, but Bird had yet to hear the worst. “The number of the beast,” he whispered darkly.

“Django! The beast that shouted love at the heart of the world?”

The Admiral nodded. “I will fear no evil.”

“O.K. chief,” said Bird after a long silence, “I’ll do it.”

“Good man. It’s up to you.”

Bird leapt off his chair and out of the room, mouthing his terrifying battle cry, “I have no mouth and I must scream!”

Back on Zool, there was cause for concern.

“You are all going to die,” Gestetner told Jane and her allies.

“I knew — hey, wha-what?”

“My masters have been revealed, my disguise seen through, the plot is in shreds,” he said, holding a multi-syllabic weapon. “Cax,” he commanded, “disarm them.”

Cax looked at Gestetner and then at Thur, paralyzed by indecision. Should he remain loyal to his libertarian principles and allow Gestetner to lead a reassembled O.U.S.F.G. in the service of the

Council of Five, or should he be seduced by Thur's Ti-kli-do and Jane's looks of helplessness? No contest really.

"Let go of me!" shouted Gestetner as Cax held him down and Rasputin removed a small furry sphere from his pocket. "No! Not my soul..." With the soul removed, Gestetner was rendered dumb, no longer able to maintain the balance of his fundamental dichotomy. Someone knocked him unconscious with a ceremonial vessel.

"We haven't any time to lose!" cried Jane, lacing up her Doc Martins. "We must summon the O.U.S.F.G. for an emergency meeting!"

By a remarkable coincidence, all the members of the O.U.S.F.G. happened to be in the immediate vicinity of the ship. They were all assembled in a cramped room, where heated arguments had created a minor rainstorm because of the humidity. Jane could barely make herself heard above the thunder. The tension in the room was palpable. With their enemies revealed to be the dreaded Council of Five, the starsheep approaching, the fate of the Universe and Radio 4 at stake, they eagerly listened to the bitter exchange between Jane and another Zool inmate/O.U.S.F.G. member, nicknamed 'Flat Bread':

"Star Trek!"

"Blake's 7!"

"Star Trek!"

"Blake's 7!"

Discussion meetings always ended this way. In one corner of the room, Harkonnen was holding a microcircuit out to tempt the Stainless Steel Hamster from under a bed. Cax was lowering his blood levels through sheer force of will. Rave was reading the entry on Anthony Perkins in a Filmgoers' Companion at hand. God was wondering if the Pope would consent to taking part in a custard-pie fight in St Peter's Square with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Ayatollah. Doctor Death was designing a killer bacterium and Cutlass was constructing a weapon of mass death. Some were wrestling, others looking for a door. Through the tangle of hair and glasses, occasional cries of "the lighting's wrong!" could be heard. In the hands of these, the future of all existence lay.

"Can you hear something?" asked Thur generally as she secured Gestetner to a chair. The hubbub of noise died down quickly as everyone listened to the dull thumping in the distance.

"Something's trying to get in!" shouted someone.

"We're too late, they've..."

The roof buckled inwards and the terrified assembly looked up into the glowing eyes of several hundred flying sheep.

"Thok!" cried Korb as he leapt onto his motorbike and raced up the walls, crossbow in hand.

"Barry, Barry, we want Barry!" returned the sheep.

"Catman!" replied Cordwainer Bird, swinging into action as he arrived.

Battle was joined as the Starsheep Troopers dived towards their enemy.

"I wonder," mused God as he watched the titanic struggle, "if we might not all grow out of this in a few years."

"Hold this," said Cutlass, handing him the end of a laser bazooka.

To be continued...

- Will Sally tell Karen the identity of the father of Mrs Jacob's son, John?

- Will Kelly fight Crusher Derek in order to make enough money to pay for his mother-in-law's electrolysis?
- Will Senator Bob pay the blackmailer or will he face humiliation and scandal in the papers?
- Will someone put the story out of its misery?