

AT LAST!!!
THE LONG AWAITED

TWO MILLIONTH ANNIVERSARY EPISODE OF
WARWICK COLVIN JUNIOR'S
CORSAIRS OF THE SECOND ETHER
AS TOLD TO MICHAEL MOORCOCK

CASCADIA!!

1. Are We The Gamers Or The Game?

"SOUP," SAYS LITTLE Rupoldo, convinced. "But which alphabet?" He puts the bowl to his helmet, listening carefully. "There must be a thousand characters. What do they expect me to say?"

His perfectly round head creases in a frown.

"Do your best," advises Missee Massie, elevating the control chair to take her peculiar length. "Do you think lime suits me? It's silk of some kind. Worms?"

"It's the diet." Pliny Younger hitches his gunbelt. Clearly he is disappointed with his dinner. "I was telling you how I crossed the Delaware. Just below Trenton. It doesn't do to cross the Delaware. Powerful tribe. The current took me further than I planned. It's how -" He was settling into anecdotal mode. Captain Billy Bob Begg wondered if she should intervene, but she didn't like the way he was fingering the mother-of-pearl handles of his twin retrievers. She was allergic to almost all shells, including her own. Thoughtfully, she reached inside and scratched her tender, wrinkled pit. "—I came to join up with my brother Cole and go down to Missouri to see how Jesse was doing. It was like this..." He settled firmly into his control chair. Billy Bob saw her chance and depressed the appropriate lever. Pliny sighed discretely and went to find her ration chips. The sound of White Stripes, muted to an unnatural shape, emerged from the G-tube. The rest of the crew sensed her discretion and wondered about it. Only a few short episodes before, her arch-enemy Kaprikorn Schultz, respected banker to the Homeboy Tong, had gone down to Oblivion Dick, caught in the last split second before his own extinction. But what or who would he displace? This was Billy Bob Begg's chief fear of the moment.

"Poison," murmured Pliny Younger down the omniphone. "Is that you, Frank?"

But Old Frank Force is already aboard the Boomwapper, cycling into nothingness with every chance of immediate self-discovery. It was a risk you took, he thought. Ultimately, emerging as near-infinite vastness from the Other Side, he would relocate the Original Insect and challenge the Spammer Gain in the Grey Fees.

"I'm not entirely," he reports, "sure."

2. Without Paradox, What?

CAPTAIN HORACE QUELCH picked up the message and knew instantly why he had chosen this quadrant. Or did he?

"Look at this, sweet JPJP," he ejaculated. "Don't tell me your Quelchy's lost his touch. Instinct wins. Intellect consolidates. Context defines. This is what stand-up is all about. *Porquoi?*"

"*J'exporte des magnétoscopes,*" quoted John Paul John Paul, desperate for a beatification he would never receive. "Very true, sir."

"*Le cocque sucre? N'invitons pas les 'scopes. Si?'*" Quelch sniffed sadly. "I have only so much room in my heart to hate. I must take them a few thousand at a time."

"Trust me on this one." John Paul John Paul let his eyes do the begging. "*Le Singularité. Il est moins intéressant...*"

Against all his instincts, temporarily enamoured as he always was by romance languages, Captain Quelch complied. He could sense trouble in his bones, even as the words left his phone. There was no time to change.

"Hold your lever!" rasped the gaunt master, swinging down strap by strap to the larboard platform and, with one arm curled around the handrail, taking a look through his glass. "I thought so. I have brought us down too close to Wimbledon. And look at that weather. It isn't even tennis season."

"Who, then, sir? Mike Batt?"

"Worse. I'll swear it's Turpin and King. Haven't seen 'em since Texas. Can't get off these rails now." Grumbling he ran back along the aisle between the polished wooden seats. "*Division travaille plus lentement que declension, eh ?*"

"The song of the brass." John Paul John Paul became nostalgic. "Edith Piaf, ain't it? Don't you miss it, sir?"

"What the farp do you take me for?" Quelch swung forward to check his instruments. His eyes were crazed, panicked, unhappy. "Zed equals Zed squared and there's no point in ignoring the fact any longer." He sighed. "I'm a schoolmaster, not a farping ticket inspector!" He peered through the tram's steaming windows, pushing the mortar board to the back of his sharp head. "Go and talk to the passengers upstairs. Give them 'The Day The Earth Stood Still' if you have to. Who's idea was it to start taking fares? This is the inevitable consequence. I must learn to trust my instincts again. Though what chance I get I fear I'll never discover."

Naturally, nobody answered. Quelch unslung his pouch and ticket punch. Outside a barker exploded into the anti-ether and Turpin's familiar authoritative voice ran out of the gathering darkness. "Throw down your lever!"

They were surrounded by plane trees and cropped broom. Discarding the comfort of mathematics, Quelch peered through the window, his hand on the head of his shivering grigg. "And Moll Moonlight's with him." Quelch groaned. There she was, masked and wigged like a man, two massive horse pistols in her dainty hands. No prettier lass had ever taken the tricorne and prowled the Brass Toby. "First the Rose and now the Thorn. I should have stuck to piracy. Damn! Damn! Damn! Fermi's Balls! Fermi, Fermi, bloody Fermi!"

The grigg, ludicrous in his Eton collar, looked up at him with gathering horror.

The massive Fullerton shuddered to a halt, its engine whirring. It would be some time before they saw Kingston. The overhead power rail puzzled and snapped and the powerless pedals gave the occasional whine, a muted but impatient melody, as if the Fullerton, too, understood she wouldn't see her home sheds this side of dawn.

Quelch realised there was little point in putting up a fight. He watched sullenly as John Paul John Paul, his pale hands shaking, unscrewed the big brass and ebony lever and threw it out of the cab down to the grass. Tom King, recognised by his pale stallion, White Wilhelmina, trotted forward, leaned down in his saddle and picked up the instrument. Holding it across his pommel, he tipped his tricorne to the impotent driver and grinned. Quelch hated King the most. He was convinced that, if it wasn't for King, Turpin would have ceased these South London hold-ups years earlier.

"Let's have your pouch first, Captain Quelch!" called Moll.

With a thump, the leather purse of coin landed beside blossoming gorse.

The top deck passengers were craning at the windows, rather flattered to be the victims of the most infamous pack of mobsmen in the Newgate Calendar.

3. Night Or The City ?

FALOMIR FRIPP, FILL of the Reamin' Jab, put hands on eyes to swear the Oath of Ability, knowing she had little to offer the court at this stage, but was looking forward to the next trial. The accusing counsel had promised her regular engagements for two seasons. But first she had to prove – 'the latitude of self', she murmured.

The Reamin' Jab remained in the gloom, toying with his gargantua. It was time to get back to his own ship. Captain Billy Bob Begg was having a hard time reshaping her new shell. Another voyage would determine the routes through the Grey Fees for another twenty thousand Blue Years. There was a rig out there with Jab's name on it. How much longer could he lie to the Homeboy Tong, especially in these terrible circumstances? Again he quelled his fear.

He cast an eye above him, to the wonderfully arched oak of the roof. He sniffed the law, if law it was. For a moment it occurred to him that the arches had woodworm. What was he inhaling, then? Not his ancestors, after all?

Young Motherly Otherly was enjoying her first exposure to legal life. She was anxious to impress her father who puffed on a jelly organ, one doting eye on her, the other closed, at rest. She sat in the dock rhythmically tapping it with her gavel. With every blow a fresh cloud of dust left the arches and drifted down to the eagerly sniffing Jab.

"Very well," she said, pointing a thousand tentacles in every possible direction. "Where and

what did you last see the Merchant Venturer, Pearl Peru?"

"Gobbled up, your ladyship. Absorbed in an instant." He felt his eyes begin to shift and concentrated on the roof once more. "Gobbled, ma'am, I swear."

"By gum!" groaned Buggerly Otherly, fully attentive. "What's to be done, our Motherly?"

4. Making And Becoming

IT TOOK FOUR hours for the peelers to drag Quelch's ship back through Extra Space and out to the Ruby Field where the Rose was waiting for him, her twin-hulled craft, the glorious *Either/Or* riding at anchor on roiling clouds of scarlet and amber.

"How many scales was it this time, Horace?" she wanted to know. "Do you understand what a trip to KPG costs these days? Everything's so upmarket there now. It isn't the same as when you were still smacking little fifth formers on their little red botties and threatening them with a dose of galloping dick when they squealed." She knew she had to remind him of his other life.

"Really, Rose." He was embarrassed. "Really." He made an effort to explain but she was already polishing down her aft tubes and winking at her Showme. A tremble of outlines and she was prepared to start scaling. He knew he had to hurry if he wanted to keep her as a partner.

"That Turpin took everything," he said bitterly. "I lost my bosun and a whole cargo of minor existentialists. The *Derida Derider* had promised me a fortune on delivery of my Heideggerettes alone. She can sell them on, I know, for much more. But that's never been my market. Instead, you find me *destituto*. Not to mention *agitato*." He tried to hide the complete works of Haydon Wood in his already overstuffed sidepockets. It was all that lay between him and Billy Bob's unnatural vengeance.

The Rose sighed. Sometimes she wondered why she had ever partnered with him. She thought back to the early years at Las Cascadas where, as a teenager, she had been flattered to become his blood-sister. She had known nothing of his grey friars or the fat boy, his eternal nemesis. She was determined to make this their very last expedition. When had she ever had anything against any of the other Chaos Engineers? Now Zack Clacket was twirling forever down the long, lazy chains of the Grey Fees, her own private V-star. Whenever she felt depressed all she had to do was tune him in. It had been expensive to tape him up to an

omniphone but it was worth it to listen to his screams whenever it suited her. He had become quite a figure on the public V.

Rose had never been able to understand how Quelch always failed to get the joke.

5. The Spirit of Seriousness

LITTLE RUPOLDO RELAXED behind the wheel of the *Now The Clouds Have Meaning*. Early Cramps were reinvigorating the main engines and there was little for him to do except watch for any stray bog band egging the lateral tubes.

With his free hand Little Rupoldo plunged the articulator and sent the ship in a gaudy arc down the Known Scales towards Yawing Mountains. It was time for the Rendezvous. All the Captains would be there, even Quelch and his renegades. He slipped some old Radiohead into the starboard *compartement* and peered disbelievingly into the V. "Is that a Universal Transport tram?"

The red, gold and white of a *Number Nineteen* had materialised against the throbbing royal blue of Estermann's Blimp. From the leverman's cab glared the weeping face of Quelch recognisable through the tramwayman's domino and tilted tricorne.

"Where's his mortar board?" mused 'El Rotunda'.

For a second Little Rupoldo stared at the scene. Then he reached forward and turned the ironing wheel.

6. The Ethics of Ambiguity

CAPTAIN BILLY BOB Begg completed the Immelman Spin and brought the *Now The Clouds Have Meaning* into the conference position in a crescent with the *Mandy's Rice* on one side of her and the *Golden West That Never Was* on the other. Immediately in front of her the benign grace of *The Spammer Gain*, configured with all her tentacles stretched forward in a gesture of peace, filled the screens. Pink, pale green, eggshell blue and yolk-yellow predominantly, *Spammer* radiated an astonishing sense of intelligent tranquility. And far below her they could detect the vicious outlines of *The Original Insect*, larger than a universe, offering cold, uncompromising pre-oblivion.

The *Insect* refused to move closer, aware of his vulnerability so near to Estermann's Blimp. Only the *Number Nineteen* tram orbited him, its bell ringing faintly over their omniphones.

On the *Insect*, no longer visible to the others, Pliny Younger had left the ship and was pushing

through the crowd around the big table at the Terminal Café. The machinoix were coming in which meant big stakes and high winnings. Some losers would return in the machinoix meat boats. The excited chittering almost drowned the babble of the slots.

Pliny Younger was seeking out the hard boxes along the far wall, busy with tentacled pods whose ability to read the machines was legendary and much resented by the owners.

At last Pliny found his brother Cole, his stetson pulled down over his eyes as he dealt cards.

"Quelch is ours," Pliny murmured. "He's in the *Insect's* gravity at last."

Cole got up from the table and led the way out to the deck. A few yards away the Biloxi Fault rumbled and whimpered, sending up broad belches of Colour as she consumed universes.

"You'd be surprised how New Orleans has changed. I always think this thing's going to blow," said Cole. "What would happen do you think, if all those universes came bursting back out again?"

But Pliny was wrapped up in his own concerns. "Tu viens ? Eh ?"

7. Being-For-Others

ABOVE BILLY BOB Begg's ship the Rose's twin-hulled *Either/Or*, glaring white, muttered unhappily to herself utterly absorbed in an argument concerning Sartre and the meaning of story.

Sam Oakenhurst blinked his handsome black eyes. Recovering in the *Either/Or*, he tried to steady his mind against the ship's repeated statements, but he had been confronting Wittgenstein and at present spoke no known language, or so he told himself without comprehension. He had several times, in several dialects, including the machinoix *patois*, tried to prepare himself for the Rose's attentions but he was too weak. It had only been a fortnight since he had been released back into the community and he remained fascinated by the correspondence between his own freshly pressed uniform and the distant *Number Nineteen*. Did he belong there? Was he in thrall to the Original Insect? If not, how had he been saved?

Sam looked around for his old friend Jack Karaquazian but saw nothing he recognised. Was he in thrall to the Original Insect? If not, how had he been saved? Was that an echo?

He looked for the Rose as memory returned, carried on the main themes of the Adverts' *Wolfman Lover*. There were occasions when

subtlety was actually a disadvantage. Her exhausted, she was able to make her usual sweet high notes. Oakenhurst smiled. He had forgotten.

"*Nieu blow?*" asked Little Rupoldo over the omniphone. "We've been to Scotland, I think."

On the *Number Nineteen* the roof had been railed in brass and Captain Quelch stalked this extemporary deck, giving a good appearance of a man in charge of his own destiny. This, at least, got him the applause of his one-time peers.

"*Ou est les seigneurs de la Balance ?*" he asked bravely. His mortar board was again on his head, his black gown covered his old uniform. There was a telescope glittering under his arm.

Coming up beside him, the Rose shook her beautiful head. "I'm sorry, dear Horace. I don't think we're ever going to find your mother."

He put on a brave show, but Little Rupoldo, far away, thought he detected a tear.

Sam Oakenhurst turned his back on the conference. He wanted no one to guess his jealousy.

"Sombre." He addressed the splashes of distant colour, each a different scale. "*O, les étoiles! O, les universes. Comprendes tu les reverses?*"

In some haste, Rose gave the order to back up. Gracefully, she acknowledged her fellow captains. They parted to allow her to join their crescent.

There was a pause. A brief period of wondering.

Moments later, only Quelch remained, leaning into the intellectual wind, his scrawny body open to the *Insect's* careless embrace.

"*Ainsi soit-il! Quoi qu'il arrivé !* So be it."

[TO BE CONTINUED...]

