

Henry Grotesque¹

Henry Grotesque slid down Snail Ridge to the Palace of Freckles where he hoped to find the Emergency Alarm for Life. One of his arms was fat, and one was thin, for the left side of his body binged whilst the right side dieted. At two corners opposingly, a mouth rose or fell knowingly. Known to the Folk of the Flok both as pleasant and disagreeable, his state resolved dependent on the direction he was approached. To the Hopeful Multitude of the Ivory Moonglow, he was a two-faced bastard. His eyebrows were doubly jaunty and his peaked cap crooked. He wore half a full suit of armour, and wore fully half a smart tailored suit, so that his sartorial position remained cruelly ambiguous between historical warrior and businessperson. The Nus gleamed brutally off friendly weaponry smithed in finest paper.

Let us consider him at greater than arm's length; perhaps any faults in his character may be forgiven. After his father had killed himself with Deadly Lightshade, and his second father by running onto the flaming tracks of the Dragon Train, and his third father by flinging himself from the Pier of Blighton into the Sea of Drudgery, you might have thought his family problems would have ceased. But his half-uncle disrobed in the Vampire Huts, while his half-sister shot his half-brother for killing his half-aunt. His mother remained a paragon of virtue, embalmed in Time Slime for eternity. To hug her now would be to embrace an infinity of motherly love, too cloying for mortals to bear. He had done without affection.

Of the rest of his intrepid past, his adventures have been written in enormous tomes, so heavy that novelists were crushed to death and librarians permanently sickened at their carrying, and sung in songs so sweet that minstrels had their tongues cut out for less, and fair ladies fainted at the very mention of the intention to perform them. Singing of ladies, many had let him chase them, and some had chased him, and some had let him be with them, and some had let him sire new romances with them that he knew nothing of until months later, and even then remained suspicious whether they had really existed in the world. His first wife hated him, his second wife hated him, and his third wife hit him, so he hated her. Nothing had lasted. A small armada of those gayly persuaded gathered where he courted hoping that the latest court would prove his last of a lady, and thusly, abandon himself gaily, but cruelly, it was not to be.

Why did he descend the Ridge of Snails?

Henry's latest adventures derived from an argument about messy food. The Quentarbian Wrap, open at both ends and leaking profusely like a chemical gate to another dimension, is a tunnel of pungent sauce; the closer the bundle is brought to the tongue, the more explosive the eruption, and the more at risk your dining companions. To hold such a wrap is to initiate a riot. Someone had

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raised a spoon, and someone had drawn a fork, and in the ensuing mayhem, Henry had lost a friend.

Who was Henry's friend?

C'live, a Tortor from Puris, had selected such prandial exhibitionism in an attempt to overcome his chronic shyness. He had worn ridiculous garments made from the skin of fashion students, but still, clothing he had wished to keep and wear another day. Now, where his brain had once thought it fitted in, he wore an ugly gap. It was a regurgitateable incident, a right mess in the mess, for which Henry sought Vengeance, if he could but identify the Caustic Cook whose actions had led C' astray from live. Yet there were so many Celebrated Chefs that Henry could not be sure which variation of the recipe had done for C'live.

Now, at the base of the slimy slope, where snails would fizzle out on the salinated flats, Henry did not fracture stride, but drove on to the Very Walls of Arrival, where he called tomorrow's password and let himself in a week next Tuesday. In narrative fashioned from purest incongruity he, and then he, which led him to the Palace. Dismantling a footman, squashing a frogman, knifing a butler, and disarmingly simply, into the Throne Room he swept. Surprised, Emperor Clarke stepped nobly forwards, then fell over a tassle of his magnificent tinsel gown.

This did nothing to improve anyone's temper, so the AutoTuner was summoned, and after the sovereign and guest had been quantized to more acceptable categorical perfection, they spoke of the things of which they discussed when so exactly Aristotelized.

'I had not thought to see you here for many nuss', the Emperor slurped, in a radiant rush the like of, if you were but a faunphant or syco, the world had never seen before. Henry replied more modestly 'Your magnificence, not mine, forestalled too early a return to such splendour'.

'It would seem though that you have now come seeking something? Like so many men before you, you could not resist the thought of pulling the escape cord, and whistling away from this reality to one more suited to your dreams?'

'It crossed my mind, and then it crissed, and at another crossing, I knew I had to get here, or worry at it ceaselessly, as if an earworm was feasting on my middle ear and, post-ossicles, would rummage into the soft fluid cochlea with disgust at my taste in frequency content.'

'You are amongst the most charming of my occasional courtiers, and never one to speak simply when a simile could pass the time.'

'Yes', shaking his head contrarily, he gave assent, refusing wine being brought to him from far across the enormous reception chamber. A waiter was saved a long scurry, and so walked back and disappeared, and at a later point, brought hors d'oeuvres from a side passage much closer to the protagonists. By this point:

'Which is why I arrived so late.'

'You are errant, so I must give you a quest, sir. You have a taste for the macabre, and the strange, so this quest will tickle you I'm sure, if it doesn't upleft kill you.'

'Mention it'

'Then let it be, Henry of War by Sea, Henry of Butexudeh's Theosophy, Henry Glamour and Grotesque, I set you orders at Risk of Necks.'

They were very strange orders indeed, as you might have guessed had you written them yourself, or peeked ahead, or inferred from the stylistic quirks of the paragraphs so far.

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In a distant land, he mused on the sequence of coincidences and happenstances that brought him hence. Or he may have, if last week was not so hard to remember, and if the next corner did not present a thousand times the allure. For he was a person that dwelt at much greater length on the future, which seemed more pressing and more surprising, more rich and sickly and freshly puking consequence, more full of morish more. In a cabin, inside rotten and insect ridden, as distant to here as the day is more massed than the electrical charge on a well-lit and hot mole of SI unit specialists, he kept some choice memories and mementoes for a rainy day, in case they should ever prove worth sifting through for old time's sake, though old time had not asked the boon of him yet. Instead, he found himself, not in a scene unvisited, but a stranger wood, full of actors pretending to be trees, and trees pretending to be people, and the trees doing a more convincing job than the wooden portrayals of the human liars, who were after all not even major role amateurs and certainly not fully trained in the use of the pregnant pause at drama academies... but this thought broke off in favour of the next.

His quest was assuredly a wretched and metaphysical one, difficult to accomplish to anyone's satisfaction; any critic worth their cliché would find spacious grounds to argue against a claimed solution. Academic discourse on the conditions for quest termination could stretch on ad infinitum, and if that was not long enough, until the impossible end of ordinals, somewhere far past the Halting Problem. Trapped by a sticky stipulation, in a ponderous plight, an anemic alliteration altered fuck all.

It wasn't worth being too unhappy for long. Where some people changed at the behest of psychologists every seven years, Henry could change profoundly within seven minutes under the control of conspiring set theorists. Misguided application of the Axiom of Choice had made him the man he was, though Power threatened to multiply his personality most horribly, and Union to make a new man from the members of his subconscious subsets. His changeability was not to the greater credit of his trustworthiness, but you could believe malleability fundamental to his character.

To reveal the orders seems apposite: Emperor Clarke had bid him find the Elixir of Memetic Immortality, an idea so potent that it would rattle in human heads forever. Physical immortality wasn't good enough, it seemed, and had too many traps. People would dig deep inescapable pits for a self-healing immortal to go mad in. General Relativity, Pickwick, circumcision, cat flaps, toasters; none of these were secure enough. He had to find something so fiendishly unforgettable, so self-preserving a brain virus, so apparently great that it could not fail to be communicated, taught, shared and damn well kept around. He suspected, annoyed, that it would actually have to be useful to survive, the product of terrific engineering and design, and emitted a curse that caused an ineffective actor to ham up unconvincingly on the spot. A cypress reflected on whether its time would have been better spent learning another language.

There was nothing for it, but to drown his clichés in sorrow, and what did he cliché up ahead — after all is said and cliché the best place to cliché — but a Public Hearse, a real dumhinger of a funeral party bus, beblackened in finest deck, a pumping sound system of stifflingly dwindling puffs of air, and a slow hatted driver overtaking no-one but those actors committed enough to stay stationary against the Vehicull's vacuous path.

It didn't really matter that this had happened now, but holding a sharpened quill to the throat of narrative, it was so. 'There is no use crying over spilt ink,' opined an oak. A willow burst into clichés.

Drumming a whyski and sado, Henry hunkered up to an orator and a tarota. The tarota only flicked through a card of packs, pausing at death, but the orator had more to say. This storyteller explained the lesser-known shaggy cat story, wherein, after a length of words that damped his brain to a mash of muddle, Henry found that she didn't care about her victims and was only playing with them before their inevitable demise. Somehow, he survived, good luck he attributed in no small way to his ownership of a powerful handsword where the orator only had words to hand.

This was getting him nowhere. 'You are wasting my time!' he raged at the universe, which chose to turn the other dimension. The blood of oration on his conscience, he near vowed an oath of silence, but since that wouldn't help him on the morrow, when his path would take him to the Land of The Demanding Conversationalists (whose voluminous cocktail hours may well contain the Meme), he foreswore silence and swore four lies hence.

The Emperor, Ideas Rest His Soul, had threatened him with children, when he wanted none, and a life of bureaucracy, when he wanted little, and a sinecure, when he wanted to keep his hatred of trigonometry. If that wasn't motivation, The Emperor had threatened to release nanotech bugs, to penetrate the inner ear and play advertising jingles on a loop. Since the Emperor held the monopoly on anti-virus cochleoids, and had made a deal with Aliens from he knew what world, to scorch the sky with advertising blurb only meaningful to their tourists, this was a man with the power to hurt him many times under.

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Through various shades of unbelievable, he dutifully quested. Finding the Meme had only been simple once he had it in his head and couldn't remember the time of not knowing it (a state which would look better in capitals as The Time Of Not Knowing It, so mythical had it become). Committed to memory, and committed to paper in case his memory failed, and committed to memory stick in case his paper failed, and committed back to his own memory in case his memory stick failed, he found that he couldn't forget it if he tried, which he did try, until he gave up and let it skulk there.

The carriage was too cold, which made him really angry and he got too hot. All the carriages were over-populated, with more than one customer per box, and in some cases, per seat, an unforgivable invasion of traveller privacy. The lack of marked seat reservations was also the customer's own fault, so a booming and distorted announcement long ago recorded in head office made clear. A squadron of professional mockers jiggled through the carriage, mocking those who had forgotten their railcard, or were travelling in the wrong section, or whose face they found amusing. Fans of Bedlam followed soon after, noisy as they liked in the quiet areas, disturbingly sneaking through the main carriages, pointing to unattended luggage. 'We should burn fat people to keep thin people warm', joked a Harlot with a nearby seat window. 'We should line up thin people to make rope bridges and human domino sets for more well-rounded passengers', a companion retorted. 'We're so desperate to be entertaining, we'll say any old thing for a rise,' they agreed.

At a table stacked with provisions, a crowd of student archaeologists knocked back shots of the stale and chesty beerage Thesis Advisor. 'Death by archaeology!' they fuggawed. 'Sound like a great title for a book by the crime writer Viking Sturm... hey, there could be a massacre of crime writers! There could be a morgue scene with Agatha Christie and a necrophiliac... there could be...'

Other Ideas jostled for permission. One nun, bored with marriage to Christ, contemplated a return to Hellenic ways. She found herself plotting the Hades debt collection agency; big bruising men stealing Charon's coin from the dead before they could hotboat it out of dusk to dust. A nanny worked on a children's tale: the superstitious ghost ('Most ghosts go boo but I avoid confrontations. [Fails to knock wood]') and the girl with the ridiculous thoughts, all reputable scientific facts: 'let's communicate over great distances' (The other characters pity and bully her in unequal measure). A buff-fi sci finds herself contemplating intelligence jamming and morphing intellectual models, AIs as sampling fodder, someone trying to get back their own intellectual property lost to a simulation: continually facing themselves as objecting to their own return! More crime, ever potent, more horrible, as Bedlamists steal a wheely luggage at Toxeter. Heroic Carers look after murderers, devils, and assorted scum, simultaneously completing the job's huge cabinets of administration. Uncaptured killers pursue a man-date to enrich society by making it more interesting (full of gory detail).

This provides a contrast to normalcy, where normals go cinemawards to see horror films of people tortured for fun.

He didn't approve. Henry did approve of the independentminded soul who had turned up dressed to the tens, a fashionista running a two day installation in the train toilets; thus, entirely exempt from responsibility under the Laws of Art, Section 45.6, Paragraph K. The artist announced, 'I've come here to turn on the life (I'll use the life switch of course),' which would have been perfectly intelligible but for the sudden battering interruption of another exhortation from the train manager for everyone to list stations and check their own tickets for inaccuracies.

'This is a cautionary tale of laughing at yourselves,' Henry admitted to the artist, who shook his feet and returned 'Bad Luck with that.'

As the sections shortened, and the impatient turned away, Henry contemplated his conclusion. Had it already happened, two years ago, and the rest been an awkward postlude? The Meme, which was Nothing in particular, seemed as important as ever, and is worth quoting at length: