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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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# Cavalier Treatment

A Column by Lee Speth

## The First Mr. Bultitude

"On a certain Monday evening late in January, 1881, Paul Bultitude, Esq. (of Mincing Lane, Colonial Produce Merchant), was sitting alone in his dining-room at Westbourne Terrace after dinner." Mark him well, for he is the original of C. S. Lewis's memorable bear in That Hideous Strength. He is also about to exit his bourgeois Victorian home to enter something akin to the Twilight Zone.

This Mr. Bultitude, the original Mr. Bultitude, is no bear but a suitably pompous middle-aged English man of business, a widower, a father, a man who believes in the sensible things, who undoubtedly votes Tory. And the novel in which he is engulfed by preternatural catastrophe, the first paragraph of which I have quoted in opening, is no Hideous Strength, but a genial recreation by the great, nearly-forgotten F. Anstey. What both novels have in common is magic.

Magic in Anstey is not, it must be owned, mythopoeic. It is a device to create stupefying predicaments for the conventional. Nowadays, one's likeliest exposure to Anstey is to see the movie The Brass Bottle, a modernization and Americanization of one of his novels. The comedy feature came out, I think, sometime in the early '60's, with Tony Randall as the flummoxed architect who acquires the unwelcome and unquenchable services of a genie (played by Burl Ives). But good as the original novel of The Brass Bottle is (the movie, by the way, is fairly true to it), I don't think it's as good as Anstey's tale of Mr. Bultitude, Vice Versa, or A Lesson to Fathers.

F. Anstey, (pseudonym of Thomas Anstey Guthrie) brought out Vice Versa over a century ago, in 1882, when Victoria reigned in widow's weeds and Chester A. Arthur occupied the White House. Its popularity outlived its day, and my edition is dated 1929 ("Forty-seventh impression"). I don't believe it's now in print, however, which is a pity, for it is about the nastiness of the young, the forgetfulness of the old and the haphazard nature of formal education, all eternal human themes.

"I never heard you speak of Anstey," wrote C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves on February 1, 1917, "but you should read him certainly: this book [The Talking Horse] is fantastic & almost as ridiculous as 'Alice' tho' of course in a more ordinary way." (They Stand Together, p. 162)

Not, I think, an apt comparison, though I haven't read The Talking Horse. Anstey isn't a nonsense writer, and there's none of Lewis Carroll's elaborate abstract joking in him. His satire is humane and rooted in everyday life, his comedy is Comedy of Manners in its way to becoming Situation Comedy. His kind of fantasy was perpetuated at a lower level by Thorne Smith; his style of writing deeply influenced P. G. Wodehouse (whom Lewis also rightly loved). "He wore big round owlish spectacles, and his pale broad face and long nose, combined with a wild crop of light

hair and a fierce beard, gave him almost as incongruous an appearance as if a sheep had looked out of a gun-port." That could, with a little paring, be a Wodehouse sentence; it's from Vice Versa. Wodehouse's only overt fantasy (that I know of), Laughing Gas, uses the idea of a boy and a grown man involuntarily switching bodies, the central contrivance of Vice Versa.

When Mr. Paul Bultitude (whose surname seems to compress "bulwark" and "rectitude") utters the ponderous wish, the wish of a platitudinous parent who has forgotten that youth is not carefree, that he and his schoolboy son could change places, he does not anticipate the force within the Garuda Stone, the curio sent by his brother-in-law in Bombay, the curio in his hand as he verbally wishes what his selective adult memory little grasps.

The result of the horrifying interchange that the Stone obligingly effects is not just a satire on English schools, but on all schools everywhere, and a brilliantly achieved rendering of the rigors, complexities, and abstruse politics of juvenile life as a trapped adult mind is forced to experience them. Lewis called it "the only truthful school story in existence" and could recite Herr Stohwasser's German lesson (one of the highlights of the book) from memory (Hooper and Green, pp. 26, 287).

It was probably the stodgy complacency of the original Mr. Bultitude, Anstey's Mr. Bultitude, that led Lewis and his brother to apply the name to a bear at Whipnade Zoo. There is a reference to that bear in the Letters (C. S. Lewis to Warren Lewis, June 4, 1932), "Bultitude was still in his old place" (p. 153). It was a short step for that bear to be transferred in imagination to Ransom's menage at St. Anne's, to be pampered by the Company of Logres, prophesied over by Merlin and to provide a solid nemesis for the befogging Mr. Wither.

Yet Vice Versa deserves to be remembered as more than just a "Lewis source," even as Plutarch is more than a "Shakespearean source." It is witty, well-written and true to human nature. If the entertainer who wrought it was not a Great Victorian Novelist, he was a master in the field he defined for himself, and anyone who can locate Anstey's best work should account himself blessed.

It will be remembered that, besides the bear, Ransom also kept a raven. The first Baron Corvo is better known today than the first Mr. Bultitude, but I may have something to say at another time about that peculiar figure.



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