

Doctor Jones and the Lawless Lords of Logomycin

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(Unable to draw his real foes into the open, Doctor Jones crosses swords directly with a Sinister Logological Entity which threatens the financial health of his entire Medical Empire.)

When Laura found old Billy Trimble's outsize wart among her pickled walnuts, she knew at once that something was bothering her husband. The Doctor, after a moment's blank stare, took up the jar lovingly.

"But——somebody might have eaten it! It's irreplaceable."

"What's making you absent-minded? Is it the Infection?"

"No. I don't know. Something I can't put a name to. An elusive syndrome."

She gave him an understanding peck, ruffled his iron-grey hair and left the Surgery. Life in Logomycin was always a bed of roses, the thorns stuck in your bandages whichever way you rolled. There was so much to contend with: the climate, the Government, the diseases . . . The sultry mephitic atmosphere. The hugely magnified face of Kolossal Kindman, present puppet ruler of the Lawless Lords, sneering down at you from every hoarding. *Kolossal Kindman Loves the World*. And, thought Dr. Mendabones Jones grimly, the Flesh and the Devil. But he didn't say it aloud. Words, in Logomycin, like people, could be unhealthy. There were so many diseases.

There was, for example, the Fungus, *Dolichomyces*, that gave the region its name. Deliberately cultivated by authority as an alleged aid to defence, its proliferations concealed the true size and form of things, made little men seem big in a disgusting spongy way, turned their petty emptiness of speech into polysyllabic high-sounding bombast. For the Lawless Lords, in every respect, *were* little men: even Kolossal Kindman was a hideous misshapen dwarf. But Truth was not the official Image.

Doctor Jones, like everyone else in Logomycin, had learned to live with the Fungus, indeed he hardly thought about it any longer. Longer! H'm. After all, words didn't die of it, it wasn't a verbicide. They just ribboned out, quite horribly, like tapeworms. Logomycin, he suddenly realised, was sentenced to ribbon development. He made a mental note to tell Laura that one.

"You're a cop?"

The patient paused in his rebuttoning. "Well, actually a General Outside-Activities Official in the Antiburglarisationalistics Bureau at the Criminological Investigation Department of——"

"A tec then. You've got the Fungus, that's all. A mild case of macrologosis. I'll send you some micronym mouthwash. Next!"

It wasn't always the Fungus, of course. There was verbigeration, which he treated with an alterative, and logorrhoea, needing its quarter-hourly bolus of cotton-wool. Sometimes a logospastic compositor on the *Logomycin Daily News* would come in complaining of "Staff shake-up slams calm. Joe quit over pay-rise boob. Doc gives lowdown." —a clear case of headline fever. A poet might be suffering from ulceration of the alliterative, a self-styled wit from chronic obtuse paronomasia (the cause of such terrible groaning among his aural contacts) or an official propagandist from politicodrivellquack or Gobbledegook's Disease in galloping form. Or it might be yet another case of the Infection. Doctor Jones treated them all.

The Infection was nothing very deadly or epidemic, merely an increase in the number of cases of quite ordinary staphylococcal distempers, causing inflammation at various sites. The Doctor had thought to have it well in hand with his anti-phlogistics, his antibiotics and other counteragents. True, words as well as people could be affected, and when he clapped a boiling bread-poultice on old Mrs. Redrump's suppurating anus, the heat of her comments fair frizzled his whiskers. A douche of cold logic soon ended *that*.

No, it wasn't expelling the inflammation, but understanding the remarkable secondary effects that bothered the Doctor. These were something quite foreign to his experience, and he suspected a try-out of some new military virus from the Logotoxin Research Establishment, planned by his enemies for the purpose of discrediting him. These secondary effects were most curious. Why, for example, had Kolossal Kindman, one of the earliest victims, swelled like a fleshy balloon during his convalescence and begun to harbour even more ridiculously insane visions of power than was normal to him? Such fantastic Nephelococcygian nightmares! Why, when another of his patients, the hairdresser Giuseppe Cesole, was well on the road to recovery, had the man's Italian-screaming parrot begun to mope? Why had skinny little 'Contrary Mary,' as they all called her, not only become noticeably plumper with regained health, but started to develop an incongruously mature bust? Little Mary was extremely proud of her new grown-up appearance, but—at six-and-a-half! Her parents were horrified. And why—and this was different—were prices now rising steeply everywhere, draining away his precious little fund of hard-earned capital, threatening to impoverish them both?

"I just don't understand it," Laura said one afternoon, setting down her nearly empty shopping-basket. "Everything is suddenly so expensive. We shall be bankrupt if this goes on." Her smile quivered briefly over depths of unease. It was not reassuring. Troubled, the Doctor returned to his logomicroscope, peering in vain for the glint of an evil eye among the massing verbiage. He felt muted; he hoped an attack of logoplegia were not in the offing.

He need not have worried. Two days later the mutes came off with all the glorious éclat of an Archimedean trouvaille. In her kitchen, Laura, who had

miserably switched off the radio newsreader's depressing forecast of total economic collapse if the inflation were not halted, jerked upright to listen.

"Out!" she heard her husband's raised voice from the Surgery, but with such evident good humour in the ring of it that her eyes shone. "Out, you rotten diseases, you gut-gripings, ruptures, catarrhs, loads o' gravel i' the back, lethargies, cold palsies, raw eyes, dirt-rotten livers, wheezing lungs, bladders full of imposthume, sciaticas, lime-kilns i' the palm, incurable bone-aches—out with you! Come along now, get going! I have work to do!"

She flew to the Surgery just as he was closing the door behind the last of the amazed morning rabble of hypochondriacs, malingerers, free-medicine cadgers and time-wasters generally.

"Mendabones, they don't know their *Troilus!* They'll think you're mad!"

"Sane, my dear, sane!" Flinging an arm round her, he encircled with the other the skeleton he commonly used as a hat-rack, and the three of them gyrated a few steps of a grotesquely gay dance.

"Stop it, you fool! You've found it then. What is it?"

"I've found it. MMA."

Laura's brow rumped. "What's that? Master of Malicious Arts? Or is it some dreadful fungoid macrologism?" She thought. "Malignant Micrologoscopical Ankylomycosis perhaps."

"No, just MMA, it hasn't any other name. It's—well, a sort of logological entity, can't put it more plainly, something akin to a recessive gene or word-virus. Can't exist in the free state." Her perplexity was evident. Gesticulating, syllabiphone in hand, he tried to explain. "It works through the Infection. The inflammation, once the patient no longer has it, must go somewhere and—through some gimmick of the Logotoxin boys—splits up into MMA and inflation. The latter is usually absorbed by the national economy. The MMA, like a nascent gas or chemical radical, combines with anything handy."

"Such as?"

"Well, consider that cretinous subhuman emetic, that nauseating homunculus KK." Laura frowned and put a warning finger to her lips. "The freed inflation blew him up like a bladder, while the MMA turned our dread man into a dream madman. DreaM MADman. You see? Or take little 'Contrary Mary.' We all tend to forget her real name, which is Mary Glands. Yes, Glands. Hence her development into a surprisingly early example of maMMARY glands. While our Italian parrot, from being *alato*, winged, became *ammalato*, sickly. Twig?"

Laura looked worried. "But—can anything be done?"

"Oh, I think so! Not quite sure yet, but understanding the problem is halfway to a solution." He grinned and gave one of her shapely buttocks an optimistic pat. "Off with you now, and leave this to old M."

A solution, however, was not easy to find. A quick dip into the reference books for a suitable counteragent spun itself out into hours of poring over the word-virus sections of the many tomes on logopathology, days of delving into the enormous multivolumed *Antilogotoxicopoeia*. He had to try things, scrap his failures, modify, make do. But gradually, with experience, he gained the upper hand.

"An oxygen-tent," he said cheerfully to Laura one day at lunch. "That's my latest dodge for trapping the inflation. And a ham."

"What on earth's the ham for?"

"The MMA turns it into a *hammam* or Turkish bath, and this, under the oxygen-tent, helps the patient to sweat out the remaining inflammation."

On another occasion:

"Little Mary's lost her buffers. They had to buy her a dolls' tea-set to compensate, but she's quite happy now and so are her parents. I managed to transfer the MMA to her mother, which made no difference of course. Mary's Ma became her Mamma. And Giuseppe's squawker is OK too. I got him to teach it a few words of Logomycinian, so it's no longer an *Italian* parrot."

Or it might be:

"I went to see KK this morning. Still a bit of inflammation, so I hung limp children's balloons all round his bed and covered him with sheets of modern poetry and lettuce leaves before applying the antiphlogistic."

Laura's eyes were round. "How did that work?"

"The balloons took all the inflation, so the treatment left him looking as small as ever, which didn't particularly please him, I can tell you. The rest was for the MMA. The lettuce—a *cos*—became *commas*, and these naturally went into the poetry which, being modern, was unpunctuated. Cute, eh?"

One day it was:

"You remember the Rouper widow, flat-chested Rosie, who still runs Stonycrop Farm? She's over her bout of Infection, and I've certainly gone up in her estimation, so with luck it'll be cream on Sundays for quite a while. I put the inflation back into her deflated old bellows and, oh boy, what an improvement! As for the MMA, I turned some old roots that were lying on the floor into room-mats and an antiquated wicker chair—an efficient creaker, if ever there was one—into an equally efficient cream-maker! She'll find a use for both."

"And," said Laura happily, "prices have stabilized at last. You've beaten the inflation."

The Doctor grinned. "They'll be glad on the Stock Exchange. They had ulcers with their inflation worries. The MMA turned their stocks into *stommacks!*"

"What ever do you mean?"

The Doctor's grin widened. "Bad stomachs! Still, all's well that ends well. One more round to Mendabones and his Medical Empire."

But the next day:

"Here, what's this?" he demanded, slapping a glass jar down on the kitchen table. "It was in my cabinet of pathological exhibits."

"Just a pickled walnut." Laura's face was alight with mischief. "Have you forgotten how it all began?"