

Polywater

by Tevildo

Neville saves the world!

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Chapter 1 of 1

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One of London's most interesting pubs, the Punch Tavern on Fleet Street, bears a name that reflects a former role as the favourite watering-hole for staff members of the famous humour magazine. Although no longer filled with hacks desperate to obtain each other's exclusives, it is still frequented by journalists, who find it a convivial location to meet their contacts. One day, Giles McPherson, a columnist on a respected national daily, was sitting at a secluded table in the lounge bar, waiting to meet a friend of his, Hermione Granger. His laptop was open before him as he finalized his latest article, although he still mourned the passing of his trusty mechanical typewriter - no batteries to go flat, no interminable boot sequence; you didn't need a degree to work the thing...

Hermione entered the bar, and sat down next to McPherson, who was glaring at his screen, where an animated paperclip was looking at him in a decidedly patronising manner. "'To save your current workspace, choose File > Workspace > Save.' What does that mean, 'choose'?" Hermione smiled, and pointed to the menu bar. Muggle computers seemed to be simple devices to operate, yet so many of her acquaintances found it impossible; how they'd cope with Professor Snape's directions for a Polyjuice potion, she didn't like to think.

McPherson turned to her. "Ah, Hermione, thanks for coming. What's this story of yours?"

"A friend of mine contacted me last night; he tells me..."

The door was suddenly flung open, Hermione and Giles staring up at the noise. Framed in the light of the public bar stood a figure; a pudgy, short figure, topped by a dark-brown mop of hair. His dramatic entrance ended as the door swung back against his arm, causing him to drop the packet he was holding. He bent down to recover it, and looked towards Hermione for confirmation that he was in the right place.

He walked up to her, the padded yellow envelope in his hand. "This is *it!* I have tried to isolate the main component, and I believe I have been successful."

Hermione turned to McPherson. "Giles, this is Neville Longbottom. He - works with me, and he has some information that I know you'll be interested in."

Neville sat down, his eyes glittering. "A Mug..." Hermione coughed, giving Neville a swift kick to the shin. He continued, more cautiously. "An American scientist has managed to obtain samples of a substance that our organization once developed, one that could imperil the planet. I have reported the theft to..." Hermione coughed again. "...the authorities, but they have not responded. We need to stop him in another way!"

McPherson raised an eyebrow. "This substance - what does it do?"

Neville took a deep breath. "It will solidify any water it comes into contact with! One drop could freeze the oceans of the world!" Neville pulled what seemed to be a speck of dust from the envelope, and dropped it into McPherson's beer.

Almost instantly, the liquid solidified, shattering the glass into a myriad of fragments. The beer had turned into a gelatinous mess, resembling nothing more than a blob of

silicone grease - a blob that pulsed and quivered, absorbing the glass fragments into its mass. The gel changed colour, sliding over the scored wood of the tabletop, its outline becoming more distinct, individual bright-yellow hairs growing from it, its tongue starting to drip saliva...

Neville blanched. "Ooops - I failed to neutralize that aspect."

The puffskein leapt up onto McPherson's shoulder, purring affectionately. He trembled, sweat pouring from his face, his body paralyzed with terror. "Get it off me! Stop it! What *are* you?" Hermione quickly grabbed the furball, stuffing it into the envelope, eliciting a muffled mew. "You're an alien? A wizard?" McPherson scabbled for his cellphone.

Neville quickly got to his feet, and raised his arms above his head, glaring into the horrified man's eyes. He drew a deep breath, and slowly declaimed - "*Ignoratio Elenchi!*".

There was a pause. Neville's cheeks began to turn a familiar shade of pink. Hermione raised her eyes to the ceiling, and hissed in Neville's ear, "*Ignoratio elenchi* is arguing for one thing as if it proved another thing. The spell is - *Obliviate*." The terror instantly faded from the journalist's face, to be replaced by mild bemusement. "Neville - sit down," Hermione whispered. "Giles, as I was saying, this young man has evidence of a terrifying risk to the world - that he's going to *tell* you about."

Neville's story was repeated, the envelope staying beneath the table this time. McPherson quirked an eyebrow at the scientist's name. "Dr Allen? *James* Allen?" He smiled, remembering a conversation he'd had in the very same pub with a journalist from The News Of The World, a drunken diatribe on "perverts" to be found in respectable employment. "I think I can help you..."

The subsequent media descent on Dr Allen's home, the lead story on Fox News with the headline "Morally Degenerate Scientists - What Is To Be Done?" and his rapid emigration to Thailand, formed an amusing, if unedifying, episode in the American scientific community. House Science Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr, issued a two-word press statement after hearing the news: "I'm speechless". Dr Allen's research was naturally cancelled, the funding being diverted to the refurbishment of the faculty parking garage. Two weeks later, Neville's form FC/R/223/17 Rev C-2 emerged from an in-tray in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office; it was dropped into the "Actioned" file, and quietly forgot.

References:

Stephen Jay Gould, "The Lying Stones of Marrakesh"

Paint Shop Pro 7 manual

Ian Rankin, "Black And Blue"

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy

John D Barrow, "The Constants of Nature"