

Phineas T Phrump Looks into the Mirror

As he did every morning, Phineas T Phrump completed his solitary laps around the interior of the Oval Office, before taking a seat behind his desk and calling for his Press Secretary.

The office door opened wide and Rose Ruby entered: “Good morning, Mr. President.”

“What’s so good about it?”

“There’s a problem, sir?”

“Of course there’s a problem, Rosie!”

She took a seat opposite the President holding her pen and a notepad in her lap. “Do you want to talk about it, sir?”

“I don’t want to talk about! I want to do something about it!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where’s Lockjaw?”

“Mr. Lemon is preparing for the daily briefing of reporters. Shall I get him for you?”

“Yes!”

“Right away.” She exited the room.

The President swiveled round in his chair. The sun was shining brightly through the window that looked over the South Lawn, and he thought he caught a reflection of his image on the glass. He squinted to sharpen his focus. He was unsure of what he saw. There was a mirror he had had framed and set off to one side of his desktop facing the President. He

always wanted to be reassured that his hair was in place whenever there was a visitor. He turned round and gazed into it, tilting his head back. Despite his gray pompadour beginning to turn white, he thought he still looked justifiably imperious.

“Sir?”

Rose Ruby reentered the Oval Office with his Chief of Staff.

“Sit down!” They complied. *They sensed the man’s dander was up!* “Now, how did this get in the newspapers?!” He tossed a copy of Washington Post onto the desk.

Lockjaw picked it up. “I didn’t realize you read the papers, sir. I thought you only watched TV for the news.”

“Lockjaw! Look at that photograph!”

“Yes, sir. It is from yesterday’s cabinet meeting.”

“And what do you see?”

“Uh, well, I see you, sir. You look like you’re resting your eyes.”

“Of course, I was resting my eyes! But this picture makes it look like I was asleep!”

“Look at that Rosie! You were there. Who took this picture?!”

“I guess it was one of the reporters you allowed in, sir.”

“*I* allowed in?! *You’re* the Chief of Staff!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Lockjaw, how did they make it look like I was in never-never land?”

“Well, sir, you had dozed off, I’m afraid!”

“What?!”

“Sir, you were snoring.”

“I DON’T SNORE!”

“No, sir. But you made a noise that sounded like it, so we nudged you, sir.”

“Nudged me?! You *nudged* me?! Who’s WE?”

“Well, I was standing behind you and . . . I did, sir.”

“Did I ask for that?!”

“No sir, but you were, uh, well, we thought it best to help you stay alert during the report from the HHS Secretary . . .”

“That gravel-throated misfit! No wonder I . . . I needed to rest my eyes. He was going on about how some acid-dopamine or rather is driving kids crazy. That man drives ME crazy! I was really resting my ears! Why did you allow him in there anyway?!”

“Sir, it was a cabinet meeting, and he is a member of your cabinet.”

“That’s not a good enough reason to force me to listen to that man! He sounds like he’s about to cough up all the marbles in his head! What there is left of them! What’s so important about that report anyway?”

“Mr. President, he is making very strong claims that are directed at one company’s product. It wasn’t dopamine, sir, it was acetaminophen.”

“What the hell’s that?!”

“Well, it’s a kind of aspirin.”

“There’s nothing wrong with aspirin! I take it several times a day. Keeps my blood thin. And I’ve got great blood! What’s his name?”

“You mean Secretary Rufus Goodman?”

“Yes, I remember now. Rufus. Well, from now on keep this Rufus away from me. He gives me the creeps.”

The President rose from his seat and walked over to a picture of Warren G Harding that he had just had framed in gold and hung on the wall near his desk. He smiled at the photograph.

“Ya know, he was a good man who didn’t get much credit for his Presidency. He’s the only other President who came directly from business. He was an engineer. And a true businessman. He understood—just like me—how important it is to do what’s right for business. Damn all these regulations and taxes and public handouts! And they accused him—just like they accused me—of ‘*misanthropic*’ policies! I looked that word up! It’s a lie! A conspiracy against me! Why, President Harding was—just like me—a man of the people!”

Lockjaw and Rosie looked knowingly at one another, shaking their heads behind his back.

The President turned to face them. “Well, go on. Tell me what else happened at the cabinet meeting?”

“There was some concern about your decision to

rename the Smithsonian, sir.”

“I don’t remember that! Lockjaw, what’s wrong with ‘*Phrump World*’? I mean once we finish redoing all of the exhibits in that ‘*Smiths-oleum*’ to show America as it really is. As Phrump’s America!” He arched his back, smugly gazing at the ceiling.

“Mr. President, sir, I’m due in the Press Room for the daily briefing.”

“OK, but I’m wantin’ you to tell those reporters that any more pictures like this one and they will be banned from the building! What’s it called?”

“What’s what called, sir?”

“This damned building!”

“Oh. Uh, the White House, sir.”

“Yes, the ‘White House’! And tell them that I wasn’t asleep! And that I DON’T snore! And you might as well inform that I’m not finished with my renaming of the buildings in this town! And right now, I’m trying to decide on a new name for this ‘White House,’ and I’ll be announcing that just as soon as we finish the Big Beautiful Ballroom. You can tell them that too!”

Lockjaw rose from his seat and left Rose Ruby to her fate with the President still in a frothy mood.

“How about ‘The Phrump House’? What do you think, Rosie? Or ‘The Phrump Golden Palace’? No, I don’t think I should call it a ‘Palace’.”

“No, sir. It’s supposed to be the ‘People’s House’.

“Oh, the people don’t live here! I think just ‘The

Phrump Building’. But I want to get the word ‘Gold’ in there. Nothing is more important visually than *gold*. I’ve already proclaimed this to be the ‘New Gilded Age of America.’ And you can’t have gilding without gold! I want to emboss the windows of this place with gold leaf! Make it really stand out! I want to be remembered! Yes, I think I’ll call it ‘The Gold Phrump House and Ballroom!’”

President Phrump returned to his seat behind the desk. “Rosie, make a note of that. I don’t want to forget it. I mean, I don’t want my moments of inspiration to be forgotten. Of course, *I* won’t forget. I don’t forget important things. I just don’t want *you* to forget.”

“I’ll make a note.”

“OK, now, remind me where were we?”

“The cabinet meeting?”

“Oh, I don’t want to be bothered with that. I don’t listen to any of them. You know that.”

“Well, sir, I . . .”

“Rosie! Yesterday there was a news report on the television calling me an octo-genesis or some such thing and questioning whether I’m able to carry out my duties. How ridiculous! And the name-calling! Did you see that?”

“Yes, sir. They were referring to you as someone in his eighties.”

“That’s ridiculous! I’m only 70 . . . I don’t know . . . 70-something! And I have the body of 50 year old!

Maybe even a 40 year old! You know that! Everyone knows that! My mind's as sharp as ever!"

"Yes, sir. Of course, it is."

"When Lockjaw is done with the press today, tell him I want it stated flatly that I have the body and mind—don't forget the mind!—of a 40 year old in the prime of life! Got it?!"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"OK. Good." He leaned back in his chair, and took a deep breath, touching the fingers of his left hand to those of his right, as was his habit when feeling a sense of satisfaction: "I need you to find something out for me, Rosie."

"Yes, sir?"

"In that same clip on television—I think it was that one. Well, one of them. They showed me standing on the balcony with a woman beside me. "

"Yes, sir?"

"She had long legs."

"Sir?"

"The woman! She had long legs."

"Oh."

"Tell me Rosie, do you know who she is?"

"Sir . . . ?"

"Yes?"

"Sir, she's your wife."

"Really?!" He grinned. "Ah, I knew I'd seen her before. What's her name?"

"Greta. Greta Phrump."

“No, she can’t be my wife. That doesn’t sound like an American name.”

“Well, she wasn’t born here, but she was able to come here and get a green card and eventually she became a US citizen.”

“You don’t say?” He looked admiringly at himself into the mirror. “You mean she’s an American now?”

“I believe the phrase is a ‘naturalized American’.”

“Well, tell her she’ll have to change her name. There’s nothing ‘natural’ about an American named ‘Greta’.”

“I don’t know if she’ll want to do that, sir.”

“Rosie, that was not a request. If she wants to be an American, she’ll have to have an American name!”

“And if she refuses?”

“Just remind her of that lawyer who worked for me before I became President. What’s his name? You know the one in jail?”

“Sir, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Did I ask you for your opinion? Of course, it’s a good idea! All of my ideas are good ideas!” He looked back at his image in the mirror. “I plan to live forever, you know. I wasn’t given my genius for it to be allowed to wither away. Just look around you! And when I’m done, you’ll see my name everywhere. It’s a reminder so that you will never forget who I am. And neither will I.”

Milton H Marquis