

Revolt of the Sugar Plum Fairies

by Mike Resnick

Arthur Crumm didn't believe in leprechauns.

He didn't believe in centaurs, either.

He also didn't believe in ghosts or goblins or gorgons or anything else beginning with a G. Oh, and you can add H to the list; he didn't believe in harpies or hobbits, either.

In fact, you could write an awfully thick book about the things he didn't believe in. You'd have had to leave out only one item: the one about the Sugar Plum Fairies.

Them, he believed in.

Of course, he had no choice. He had a basement full of them. They were various shades of blue, none of them more than eighteen inches tall, and possessed of high, squeaky voices that would have driven his cats berserk if he had owned any cats. Their eyes were large and round, rather like they had been drawn by someone who specialized in painting children on black velvet, and their noses were small and pug, and each of them had a little pot belly, and they were dressed as if they were about to be presented to Queen Elizabeth. They looked cloyingly cute, and they made Mickey Mouse sound like a baritone -- but they had murder on their minds.

They had been in Arthur's basement for less than an hour, but already he had managed to differentiate them, which was harder than you might think with a bunch of tiny blue fairies. There was Bluebell, who struck Arthur as the campus radical of the bunch. There was Indigo, with his Spanish accent, and old Silverthorne, the arch-conservative, and Purpletone, the politician, and Inkspot, who spoke jive like he had been born to it. Royal Blue seemed to be their leader, and there was also St. Looie Blues, standing off by himself playing a mournful if tiny saxophone.

"Well, I still don't understand how you guys got here," Arthur was saying.

Now, most men are not really inclined to sit on their basement stairs and converse with a bunch of Sugar Plum Fairies, but Arthur was a pragmatist. Their presence meant one of two things: either he was quite mad, or his house was infested with fairies. And since he didn't feel quite mad, he decided to assume that the latter was the case.

"I keep telling you: We came here by inter-dimensional quadrature," snapped Bluebell. "Open your ears, fathead!"

"That's no way to speak to our host," said Purpletone placatingly.

"Host, schmost!" snapped Bluebell. "If he was our host, he'd set us free. He's our captor."

"I didn't capture you," noted Arthur mildly. "I came down here and found you all stuck to the floor."

"That's because some of the Pepsi you stored leaked all over the floor," said Bluebell. "What kind of fiend stores defective pop bottles in his basement, anyway?"

"You could at least have carpeted the place," added Silverthorne. "It's not only sticky, it's cold."

"Now set us free so we can take our grim and terrible vengeance," continued Bluebell.

"On me?" asked Arthur.

"You are an insignificant spear carrier in the pageant of our lives," said Royal Blue. "We have a higher calling."

"Right, man," chimed in Inkspot. "You let us free, maybe we don't mess you up, you dig?"

"It seems to me that if I _don't_ let you free you won't mess me up, either," said Arthur.

"You see?" said Indigo furiously. "I tole you and I tole you: you can't trust Gringos!"

"If you don't like Gringos, why did you choose _my_ basement?" asked Arthur.

"Well, uh, we didn't exactly _choose_ it," said Royal Blue uneasily.

"Then how did you get here?"

"By inter-dimensional quadrature, dummy!" said Bluebell, who finally succeeded in removing his feet from his shoes, only to have them stick onto the floor right next to the empty shoes.

"So you keep saying," answered Arthur. "But it doesn't mean anything to me."

"So it's _my_ fault that you're a scientific illiterate?" demanded Bluebell, grabbing his left foot and giving it a mighty tug to no avail.

"Try explaining it another way," suggested Arthur, as Bluebell made another unsuccessful attempt to move his feet.

"Let _me_ try," said Silverthorne. He turned his head so that he was facing Arthur. "We activated the McLennon/Whittaker Space-Time Displacement Theorem, but we didn't take the Helmhiser Variables or the Kobernykov Uncertainty Principle into account." He paused. "There. Does that help?"

"Not very much," admitted Arthur.

"What difference does it make?" said Royal Blue. "We're here, and that's all that matters."

"I'm still not clear why you're here at all," persisted Arthur.

"It's a matter of racial pride," answered Royal Blue with some dignity.

Arthur scratched his head. "You're proud of being stuck to the floor of my basement?"

"No, of course not," said old Silverthorne irritably. "We're here to defend our honor."

"How?"

"We've mapped out a campaign of pillage and destruction and vengeance," explained Royal Blue. "The entire world will tremble before us. Strong men will swoon, women and children will hide behind locked doors, even animals will scurry to get out of our path."

"A bunch of Sugar Plum Fairies who can't even get their feet unstuck from the floor?" said Arthur with a chuckle.

"Don't underestimate us," said Bluebell in his falsetto voice. "We Sugar Plum Fairies are tough dudes. We are capable of terrorizing entire communities." He grimaced. "Or we would be, if we could just get our feet free."

"And the seven of you are the advance guard?"

"What advance guard? We're the entire invasion force."

"An invasion force of just seven Sugar Plum Fairies?" repeated Arthur.

"Didn't you ever see The Magnificent Seven?" asked Royal Blue. "Yul Brenner didn't need more than seven gunslingers to tame that Mexican town.

"And Toshiro Mifune only needed seven swordsmen in The Seven Samurai," chimed in Bluebell.

"Seven is obviously a mystical number of great spiritual power," said Purpletone.

"Besides, no one else would come," added Silverthorne.

"Has anyone thought to point out that you're neither seven swordsmen nor seven gunfighters?" asked Arthur. "You happen to be seven undersized, pot-bellied, and totally helpless fairies."

"Hey, baby," said Inkspot. "We may be small, but we're wiry."

"Yeah," added Indigo. "We sleet some throats, watch some feelthy videos, and then we go home."

"If we can figure out how to get there," added Silverthorne.

"We tried invading the world your way and look where it got us," said Bluebell irritably. "On the way home, we'll take the second star to the right."

"Thass an old wives' tale," protested Purpletone.

"Yeah?" shot back Bluebell. "How would you do it?"

"Simple. You close your eyes, click your heels together three times, and say 'There's no place like home'," answered Purpletone. "Any fool knows that."

"Who are you calling a fool?" demanded Bluebell.

"Uh ... I don't want to intrude on your argument," put in Arthur, "but I have a feeling that both of you are the victims of false doctrine."

"Okay, wise guy!" squeaked Bluebell. "How would you do it?"

Arthur shrugged. "I haven't the foggiest notion where you came from."

"From Sugar Plum Fairyland, of course! How dumb can you be?"

"Oh, I can be pretty dumb at times," conceded Arthur. "But I've never been dumb enough to get stuck to the floor of a basement in a strange world with no knowledge of how to get home."

"All right," admitted Bluebell grudgingly. "So we got a little problem here. Don't make a federal case out of it."

"Be sure and tell me when you have a big problem," said Arthur. "The mind boggles."

"You stop making fun of us, Gringo," said Indigo, "or we're gonna add you to the list."

"The list of people you plan to kill?"

"You got it, hombre."

"Just out of curiosity, how long _is_ this list?" asked Arthur.

"Well," said Royal Blue, "so far, at a rough count, an estimate, so to speak, it comes to three."

"Who are they?" asked Arthur curiously.

"Number One on our hit list is Walt Disney," said Royal Blue firmly.

"And the other two?"

"That choreographer -- what was his name -- oh, yeah: Ballanchine. And the Russian composer, Tchaikovsky."

"What did they ever do to you?" asked Arthur.

"They made us laughing stocks," said Bluebell. "Disney made us cute and cuddly in _Fantasia_, and Ballanchine had us dancing on our tippy-toes in _The Nutcracker_. How are we expected to discipline our kids with an image like that? Our women giggle at us when they should be swooning. Our children talk back to us. Our enemies pay absolutely no attention when we lay siege to their cities." The little fairy paused for breath. "We _warned_ that Russkie what would happen if he didn't change it to the '_March_ of the Sugar Plum Fairies'. Now we're going to make him pay!"

"I don't know how to lay this on you," said Arthur, "but all three of them are dead."

St. Looie Blues immediately began playing a jazz version of "Happy Days Are Here Again" on his saxophone.

"Stop that!" squeaked Bluebell furiously.

"Whassa matter, man?" asked St. Looie Blues.

"This is nothing to celebrate! We've been robbed of our just and terrible vengeance!"

"If they were all the size of this here dude," said St. Looie Blues, indicating Arthur, "you wasn't gonna be able to do much more than bite each of 'em on the great toe, anyway." He went back to playing his instrument.

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Bluebell in a plaintive whine. "We can't have come all this way for nothing!"

"Maybe we could kill each of their firstborn sons," suggested Purpletone. "It's got a nice religious flavor to it."

"Maybe we should just go home," said Royal Blue.

"Never!" said Bluebell. "They still perform the ballet, they still listen to the symphony, they still show the movie!"

"In 70 millimeters, these days," added Arthur helpfully.

"But how can we stop them?" asked Royal Blue.

"I suppose we'll have to kill every musician and dancer on this world, and destroy all the prints of the movie," said Silverthorne.

"Right!" said Bluebell. "Let's go!"

Nobody moved.

"Arthur, old friend," said Purpletone. "I wonder if we could appeal to you, as one of the potential survivors of our forthcoming bloody war of conquest, to get us unstuck."

Arthur sighed. "I don't think so."

"Why not?" asked Royal Blue. "We've told you everything you want to know, and you're not on our hit list."

"It would be murder."

"Definitions change when you're in a state of war," responded Purpletone. "We don't consider ourselves to be murderers."

Arthur shook his head. "You don't understand. They would murder you."

"Preposterous!" squeaked Bluebell.

"Ridiculous," added Silverthorne.

"Do you have any weapons?" asked Arthur.

"No," admitted Bluebell. "But we've got a lot of gumption. We fear absolutely nothing."

"Well, that's not entirely true," said Purpletone after a moment's consideration. "Personally, I'm scared to death of banshees, moat monsters, and high cholesterol levels."

"I'm terrified of heights," added Royal Blue. "And I don't like the dark very much, either."

Soon all of the Sugar Plum Fairies were making long lists of things that frightened them.

"Well, some of us are hardly afraid of anything, with certain exceptions," amended Bluebell weakly. "And the rest can be bold and daring under rigidly defined conditions."

"If I were you, I'd pack it in and go home," said Arthur.

"We can't!" said Bluebell. "Even if we knew how to get there, we can't face our people and tell them that our mission was a failure, that we never even got out of your basement."

"I know you've got our best interests at heart, Arthur," added Silverthorne. "But we've got our pride."

"So now," concluded Royal Blue, "if you'll just help free us, we'll be on our way, leaving a modest trail of death and destruction in our wake."

Arthur shook his head. "You're going about it all wrong."

"What do you know about cataclysmic wars of revenge?" demanded Bluebell.

"Nothing," admitted Arthur.

"Well, then."

"But I do know that killing a bunch of people, even if you had the power to do it, wouldn't keep

Fantasia from getting re-released every couple of years."

"That's what _you_ say," replied Bluebell with more conviction than he felt.

"That's what I _know_," said Arthur. He paused. "Look, I don't know why I should want to help you, except that you're cute as buttons" -- all seven of them growled high falsetto growls at this -- "and I don't think I really believe in you anyway. But if it was _me_ planning this operation," he continued, "I'd break into the Disney distribution computer and recall all the copies of _Fantasia_. I mean, it beats the hell out of going to every theater in the world looking for a handful of prints."

"That's a _great_ idea!" said Royal Blue enthusiastically. "Men, isn't that a great idea? Simply marvelous!" He paused for a moment. "By the way, Arthur, what's a computer?"

Arthur explained it to them.

"That's all very well and good," said Silverthorne when Arthur had finished, "but how does it prevent the ballet from ever being performed?"

"I would imagine that Ballanchine's notes -- the play-by-play, so to speak -- have been computerized by now," answered Arthur. "Just find the proper computer and wipe them out."

"And Tchaikovsky's music?"

Arthur shrugged. "That's a little more difficult."

"Well, two out of three ain't bad," said Inkspot. "You're an okay guy, Arthur, for someone what ain't even blue."

"Yeah, Gringo," added Indigo. "My sombrero's off to you. Or it would be, if I could find a sombrero in my size."

"OK, Arthur," said Royal Blue. "We're primed to go. Just set us free and point us in the right direction."

"We're a long way from California," said Arthur as he began freeing each fairy in turn. "How do you plan to get there?"

"The same way we got here," answered Silverthorne.

"In which case you'll probably end up in Buenos Aires," said Arthur.

"A telling point," agreed Purpletone.

"We could fly," suggested Silverthorne.

"Great idea!" said Purpletone enthusiastically. Then he paused and frowned. "_Can_ we fly?"

"I dunno, man," said Inkspot, flapping his arms. "If we can, I sure don't remember how."

"I'm afraid of heights anyway," said Royal Blue. "We'll have to find another way."

"Maybe we could reduce our bodies to their composite protons and electrons and speed there through the telephone lines," suggested Bluebell.

"You first," said Purpletone.

"Me?" said Bluebell.

"Why not? It's your idea, isn't it?"

"Well, I thought of it, so it's only fair that someone else should test it out," said Bluebell petulantly.

"Maybe we could hitchhike," suggested Indigo.

"What do you think, Arthur?" said Royal Blue. He looked around the basement. "Hey, where did Arthur go?"

"If he's reporting us to the authorities, I'm gonna give him such a kick on the shin..." said Bluebell.

Suddenly Arthur appeared at the head of the stairs with a large box in his hands.

"I got tired of listening to you squabble," he said, carrying the box down to the basement.

"What's that for?" asked Royal Blue, nervously pointing to the box.

"Get in," said Arthur, starting to pry them loose from the floor.

"All of us?"

Arthur nodded.

"Why?"

"I'm shipping you to the Disney corporate offices," answered Arthur. "Once you're there, you're on your own."

"Great!" cried Royal Blue. "Now we can wreak havoc amongst our enemies and redeem the honor of our race."

"Or at least get a couple of gigs at Disneyland," added St. Looie Blues.

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It was two weeks later that Arthur Crumm returned home from work, a bag of groceries in his arms, and found the seven Sugar Plum Fairies perched on various pieces of furniture in his living room.

Bluebell was wearing sunglasses and a set of gold chains. Indigo was smoking a cigar that was at least as long as he was. Silverthorne had a small diamond tiepin pierced through his left ear. St. Looie Blues had traded in his saxophone for a tiny music synthesizer. The others also displayed telltale signs of their recent excursion to the West Coast.

"How the hell did you get in here?" said Arthur.

"United Parcel got us to the front door," answered Royal Blue. "We took care of the rest. I hope you don't mind."

"I suppose not," said Arthur, setting down his bag. "You're looking ... ah ... well."

"We're doing well," said Royal Blue. "And we owe it all to you, Arthur."

"So you really managed to stop distribution of Fantasia?"

"Oh, that," said Bluebell with a contemptuous shrug. "We found out that we were meant for better things."

"Oh? I thought your goal was to destroy every last print of the film."

"That was before we learned to work their computer," answered Bluebell. "Arthur, do you know how much money that film makes year in and year out?"

"Lots," guessed Arthur.

"Lots' is an understatement," said Royal Blue. "The damned thing's a gold mine, Arthur -- and there's a new generation of moviegoers ever couple of years."

"OK, so you didn't destroy the prints," said Arthur. "What did you do?"

"We bought a controlling interest in Disney!" said Bluebell proudly.

"You did what?"

"Disney," repeated Bluebell. "We own it now. We're going to be manufacturing Sugar Plum Fairy dolls, Sugar Plum Fairy t-shirts, Sugar Plum Fairy breakfast cereals..."

"Carnage and pillage are all very well in their place," explained Purpletone. "But marketing, Arthur -- that's where the real power lies!"

"How did you manage to afford it?" asked Arthur curiously.

"We're not very good at dimensional quadrature," explained Royal Blue, "but we found that we have a real knack for computers. We simply manipulated the stock market -- buying the New York City Ballet and all the rights to Ballanchine's notes in the process -- and when we had enough money, we sold Xerox short, took a straddle on Polaroid, and bought Disney on margin." He looked incredibly pleased with of himself. "Nothing to it."

"And what about Tchaikovsky?"

"We can't stop people from listening," replied Bluebell, "but we now own a piece of every major recording company in America, England, and the Soviet Union. We'll have the distribution channels tied up in another three weeks' time." He paused. "Computers are fun!"

"So are you going back to Sugar Plum Fairyland now?" asked Arthur.

"Certainly not!" said Royal Blue. "Anyone can be a Sugar Plum Fairy. It takes a certain innate skill and nobility to be a successful corporate raider, to properly interpret price-earnings ratios and find hidden assets, to strike at just the proper moment and bring your enemy to his financial knees."

"I suppose it does."

"Especially when you're handicapped the way we are," continued Royal Blue. "We can't very well address corporate meetings, we can't use a telephone that's more than 20 inches above the floor, we can only travel in U.P.S. packages..."

"We don't even have a mailing address," added Purpletone.

"The biggest problem, though," said Bluebell, "is that none of us has a social security number or a taxpayer I.D. That means that the Internal Revenue Service will try to impound all our assets at the end of the fiscal year."

"To say nothing of what the S.E.C. will do," put in Silverthorne mournfully.

"You don't say," mused Arthur.

"We do say," replied Bluebell. "In fact, we just did."

"Then perhaps you'll be amenable to a suggestion..."

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Three days later Arthur Crumm & Associates bought a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, and they added a seat on the AmEx within a month.

To this day nobody knows very much about them, except that they're a small, closely-held investment company, they turn a truly remarkable annual profit, and they recently expanded into Sugar Plum Fairy theme parks and motion picture production. In fact, it's rumored that they've signed Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Shwarzenegger, and Madonna to star in Fantasia II.

-- The End --