

Something Annoying This Way Comes

by J Linseed Grant, author of 'Sandra's First Pony'

Hurray!

Sandra's cousin Mary would be staying with them for the Christmas holidays, and Sandra was so looking forward to it. It was not that she didn't like the rest of her family, but it was always nice to have someone of her own age around. They would share secrets and have bumper midnight feasts, and maybe paint each other's toenails – all the little things which made the holidays extra special.

Father had changed his plans yet again and was now doing something unspeakable in Sumatra, but he had sent her a lovely big present. Unfortunately her mother had insisted that it should be X-rayed first. Sandra's father had a habit of sending various shrunken objects, and Aunt Agatha had been hospitalised by the sight of last year's present. This year he had been instructed to stay strictly above the waist when it came to gifts.

It was a bright, clear morning, so Sandra walked down to the village station to meet her cousin. The rail service had been officially discontinued in 1963, but a series of threatening letters from the Girl Guides had ensured that there were still four stopping trains a week. The local guides were somewhat feral, and were rarely ignored, even by Transport Ministers.

Mary was waiting by the station entrance. Sandra didn't do squeals of excitement, so she gave her cousin a cheerful punch on the arm. He staggered, almost dropping his stylish pink satchel, but recovered his balance quite well for a boy.

He was dressed in his usual white cotton blouse and pleated skirt, with a simple black jacket. The skirt was a lovely green, if perhaps a little short for the season. At least this year he was wearing sensible flat shoes, thought Sandra. His experiment with stilettos had not been a success.

They hugged and exchanged gossip. Mary's first term at sixth-form college had been a great success, and there had only been three fatalities, though the Latin master was still missing. As for Sandra, she told her cousin all about Mr Bubbles' silver cup at the Ripon Gymkhana and Meat Pie Show.

“And we won the bronze rosette for dressage the week after that. We're going to try barrel racing next year.” said Sandra.

“Are barrels very fast?” Mary asked, looking dubious.

“Idiot. You go round the barrels, like an obstacle course.”

She explained that her prize-winning pony would not be joining them on any adventures this holiday, as he had contracted an unknown disease again. He was confined to the stables until he stopped oozing yellow-green phlegm. And certain other things which Sandra didn't ask about.

In the nearby woods, Yorkshire's only colony of whip-poor-wills cried out hopefully in case the pony didn't make it. They took their duty as the conductors of dead souls very seriously. Sadly for them, Mr Bubbles usually got over these things quite quickly. He had recovered from dengue fever in less than a week by putting a towel over his head and inhaling Friars Balsam.

“I have a new friend this year.” said Mary.

Sandra sighed. “Not another offer of marriage?”

“Honestly, just because I iron the pleats in my skirt properly. People have some funny ideas. No, I met Mr Linseed Grant coming off the train.”

J Linseed Grant was a dour old recluse who lived in the abandoned rectory beyond the village. He kept to himself usually, writing such scandalous tales that the village post-woman was

paid extra to deliver writs and summonses. He also bred albino penguins to annoy any passing shoggoths. He was renowned for wandering the woods at night with his dogs, shouting "Teke-bloody-lili, come on out, you squishy bastards!".

"He's your new friend?"

"No, look." Mary pointed at a long-legged, brindled animal which seemed to be watching them from a doorway. It was probably a dog, but seemed to have quite a lot of marsupial in it. "He's a lurcher, called Bottles. Mr Linseed Grant said I could borrow him for the holidays."

His cousin stared. "Are you sure he's a lurcher? I would have said that a daddy dog and a mummy kangaroo met, and they loved each other very much, so..."

Mary whistled. "Come, boy."

Bottles looked around in panic, and then rushed over to cower next to Mary's bare legs.

"He's a bit nervous." said Mary.

"You might need dry socks." said Sandra.

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Down in the village it was quiet. Most people were preparing for the annual Winter Solstice procession through Whateley Wood. This was always a jolly event, with bunting and a carnival atmosphere, and a big party at the end.

During the procession the Old Gods would be propitiated or taunted, depending on whether or not the vicar was there. As a highlight, the Womens' Institute always sang a selection of dubious folk songs before leaving an offering of home-made produce on the Moon Stone, that Cyclopean edifice which sulked in the very centre of the woods. It was said that the blasphemous things which inhabited the area could be seen spitting out raspberry jam for weeks afterwards.

Sandra and Mary said hello to Mr Quilling, the village pervert, who was in his front garden, putting the last touches to his snowman. The fact that there was no snow, and that the vicar's wife had been quietly sick at the first sight of the construction, didn't seem to be hampering Mr Quilling's endeavour.

"I didn't know you could get underwear in that size." said Mary as they wandered past.

"He's had to make it himself since Miss Thornton gave herself unconditionally to some abominations. Poor chap. He's absolutely dreadful with a needle and thread."

At the end of the main street they met a man hauling a small trailer laden with logs and old branches. A few villagers were watching him, muttering among themselves.

"That's a fine collection." said Sandra, glancing into the trailer. The man was obviously not from the village. He had the carefree look of one who had never lived between Whateley Wood and the Grimspike Moor.

He smiled. "The wife insisted on one of those wood-burning stoves. So I came out here to get some logs."

Sandra and Mary looked at each other.

"I don't suppose," said Mary, "That you've been in those woods over there?" Mary waved a slim arm in the direction of Whateley Wood.

Another smile. "That's right, young lass, er, lad. I'm surprised more of you haven't taken advantage of it. There's fallen trees all over, lots of good burning, and-"

"I should put it back if I were you." said Sandra. She looked into the trailer. One of the logs was oozing, and that didn't look like sap coming out of it.

The smile faltered. "Now look here, I'm just-"

"It's probably too late anyway. Come on, Mary."

A group of villagers now stood between the man and his fancy four-wheel drive. In a rare act of solidarity, some of the larger and more aggressive ducks were patrolling around the vehicle. The ducks had enough problems with things trying to use their pond for orgiastic spawning ceremonies. They didn't need trouble from the woods as well.

Woof. Bottles glanced hopefully at a duck, and then changed his mind when he saw the red

gleam in its eyes. So he peed on the visitor's trailer.

The two cousins left the man to his fate.

Something worrying might be coming their way, and the farmhouse was very near the trees.

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Back at the farm, mother was up on a stepladder, arranging rowan branches outside the front door. She was also swigging from a bottle of Old Suzy, a local brand of gin distilled with seventeen herbs, three of which were unknown to medical science.

“Oh, hello, my dears! You look nice, Mary.”

She looked with vague disapproval at Sandra's combat jacket and fatigues. Sandra's mother always welcomed Mary's visits. A fine young man, she would say, very popular with the village girls. And much prettier clothes than... some.

“Is Great-Uncle Aleister here yet?” asked Sandra, hoping to change the subject.

Her mother considered the gin bottle, then the hammer in her other hand. After a moment's hesitation she nailed up another branch with the correct implement.

“He's in the police cells at York for importing mescal, darling. The lawyer says that as Aleister's a brujo, it counts as part of his religious paraphernalia. He'll be out by Christmas Eve.”

So a brujo was a South American witch, thought Sandra, and not a cooking pot for treating maize with slaked lime. That cleared that up.

Her mother made her way down the step-ladder, a process which took some time.

“There's cold ham, a pork-pie, hard-boiled eggs and fresh lemonade in the kitchen, dears. And Mrs Womersley has baked something which may be bread. Help yourselves. Mummy's going for a lie down.” She looked up at the cloudless sky. “But it looks like we'll have no snow this Christmas. How disappointing.”

Sandra smiled as her mother disappeared inside. Mother was a dear, despite her affection for Old Suzy. And it was the holidays.

“Crikey.” Sandra suddenly remembered the stranger and his incautious wood-cutting.

“Come on, Mary. Let's load up.”

“On hard-boiled eggs?” asked Mary hopefully, but he knew what was coming next. Pump-action shotguns all round, and a trip up the lane to Whateley Wood. He glanced towards the stables.

“Are you sure Mr Bubbles can't help us?”

A resounding cough from inside, followed by some choice swear words, answered him.

“We do have Bottles.” said Sandra.

The dog tried to scratch where his jewels had once hung, and fell over.

“You have to keep at least three legs on the ground, boy.” said Mary with affection, stroking the dog's head.

They went into father's study, and unchained two of the Remington 870s from the gun cabinet. Given some of the things which came down from Grimspike Moor, her father believed in having a well-stocked gun cabinet. Her mother had the same view about the drinks-cabinet, for much the same reasons.

“Oh well.” Mary adjusted his skirt and took a box of ammunition from his cousin. “I don't suppose that we ever will just play Monopoly at Christmas.”

A whip-poor-will cried out in the distance. Mr Bubbles might be in recovery, but there was always hope of a fatality when someone meddled. The sound would have been more ominous, but the bird had a worm caught in its throat, and its eerie call ended in a choking fit.

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Sandra and Mary, accompanied by a skittish Bottles, made their way through the outskirts of Whateley Wood with shotguns at the ready.

Hemlock trees, presumably from whip-poor-will droppings, competed with birch, ash and

sullen pines, while holly bushes lapped at their feet. Here and there patches of Spanish moss struggled with mistletoe to win the best parasite award. Rhododendrons, the result of an incursion by spectral Welsh hounds some years ago, had died in protest at such globalisation and now stood dry and twiggy at every turn.

Except for its extensive size, the wood might have been a deranged arboretum planted by someone who had no idea which continent he or she was on.

They made their way deeper into the gloom, trying to keep off the Old Straight Path. This clear, easily-negotiated track had been widened in the seventeenth century by the local squire. Not only did it interfere with the Ley Lines, it still held the remains of early mine technology and a number of bear traps. The squire had been lynched by his own gamekeepers in 1684.

"There's something over there." said Mary, pointing to an ivy-festooned stump. "Behind that ivy. And that stump."

"You'd better come out, whoever you are." Sandra worked a shell into the chamber, and raised her gun.

Henry, the local charcoal-burner, appeared from the undergrowth.

"Oh, hello." said Mary. "Sorry about that. Have you seen-"

"Shh, it's coming this way." said Henry, wiping smudges from his already dark face. "I'm hiding."

"You should get back to the village." said Sandra. "Tell them that we'll sort this out."

Henry narrowed his eyes.

"But where's Mr Bubbles?" he asked.

Sandra felt peeved. Just because she was a girl!

"He's sick, actually. But I'm sure we can manage the problem, Mr Ndoah." she said rather sharply.

The charcoal burner shrugged, and slipped back the way the two teenagers had come, casting occasional dramatic glances at the trees. A failed Nigerian businessman, he had taken to charcoal burning and coppicing with remarkable enthusiasm, finding it infinitely more enjoyable than trying to sell televisions in Lagos.

Except when this sort of thing happened.

Mary looked at Sandra.

"What are we trying to manage? It's about time you told me."

"Well, given that oozing bit of wood in the man's trailer, it's probably one of Shub-Niggurath's Dark Young."

Bottles shivered and peed himself again. Mary felt the same urge.

"Er... Shub-Niggurath? The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young? Isn't that rather... dangerous?"

"Not at Christmas. They're quite slow at this time of year." Sandra gave him a confident smile, although she wasn't so sure in herself. She could hear a crashing in the woods which sounded like something very large on the move.

They crouched low, advancing under cover of the bushes. The sounds ahead grew louder, accompanied by a stench which evoked the open grave, a few weeks after its occupant had been in residence.

"Phew!" Mary wrinkled his nose. "Smelly socks."

"You wish."

And there it was, pushing down a silver birch to break into the open. Writhing, ropy tentacles the colour of bathwater lashed at the trees, making way for a sort of body which shone with grey-green slime. Two thick legs crushed the undergrowth, and it howled.

"That's a Dark Young." said Sandra, pleased that she had got it right. That would be another tick in her I-Spy Book of Eldritch Horrors. One more than Penny Collins, the sixth form swot.

"What does it do?" asked Mary, checking that his shot-gun was loaded.

Sandra thought.

"Well, it devours the innocent with its obscene, puckered maws and spreads the worship of

Shub-Niggurath, its unholy mother. Everything else it strangles or crushes. Generally speaking.”

“Oh.”

Somewhere in the dense woods, a badger threw up.

She pointed to the monstrosity.

“See – one of its legs is shorter than the others. That chap in the village must have hacked at it by mistake. It was probably trying to hibernate.”

And it was true. The Dark Young, whose legs were stumpy and much like tree trunks, was definitely hobbling along. If it hadn't been twenty foot tall and using its tentacles as well, it might have been at a disadvantage.

As it came to within twenty yards of the two teenagers, they raised their shotguns and fired.

Nyuuurgh! The Dark Young shrieked, sending a charnel waft their way, and lashed at the trees. But the shots seemed to have little effect on the slimy bark which formed its skin.

“And again.” said Sandra.

Dutifully Mary pumped the shot-gun and gave it his best. The creature paused, but then carried on towards them, dripping ichor as it went.

“Run away?” asked Mary, watching Bottles disappearing into the distance.

“Strategic withdrawal.” said Sandra.

They legged it.

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Back at the farm, Sandra went straight to the stables to find Mr Bubbles. The pony was laid on a pile of straw, licking a fetlock. He coughed - mainly for effect, she thought - and stared at her with one watering eye.

“Feel ill.” he said.

“I know.” Sandra ran her fingers through her short hair. “But there's a Dark Young on its way, and it doesn't want to stop.”

“Sick.” Mr Bubbles spat out a lump of matted hair. “Not my problem.”

Sandra played her secret weapon.

“It's coming straight for us. It'll trample right over the turnip clamps.”

One of the pony's ear shot up. Sandra knew that Mr Bubbles was particularly partial to mother's turnips. There was three months worth stored in the earthen clamps by Upper Meadow. His next cough was less theatrical.

“Dark Young. Like trees.” He took a deep breath. “Burn.”

“They like trees? Oh, I see what you mean. They're sort of woody.”

“Still sick.” said the pony, and closed his eyes.

Sandra ran out to where Mary was comforting poor Bottles. The oddly-shaped dog was alternately eyeing the woods and the wide lane which led well away from here.

“It's an adventure.” said Mary. He crouched down and stroked the worried animal. “We always have adventures when we come to stay with Sandra.”

Bottles gave him a look which suggested that future visits might be short.

“We need to set fire to that thing.” said Sandra.

“Can't we just give it that bit of its leg back and apologise?”

“Don't be a chump, Mary. It's far too cross now.”

Mary sighed. “I have a large box of matches. I was going to make a scale model of a Heinkel bomber with them.”

His own mother was a Royal Air Force test-pilot, and regularly made Mary identify the outlines of obsolete German aircraft. It was another good reason for not being at home for Christmas. That and the obligatory Boxing Day assault course.

“We'll need more than matches.” said Sandra. “And father's flame-thrower is in for servicing, along with the lawnmower.”

Mary listened to the less-than-distant crashing from the woods. It wouldn't be long before

the Dark Young was out into the open and heading over Upper Meadow. The farmhouse was directly in line with the village.

“Didn't you use the school howitzer when those fungus things wanted Mr Cafferty's brain last year?”

St Botolph's Mixed Infants was proud of its howitzer, donated by the Women's Institute after a frenzied bidding session on e-bay had gone rather wrong. Edith Partington, who frequently forgot her medication, had been determined to buy a fruit-cake large enough to cater for the WI centenary. It turned out that she had not investigated the listing for a “twenty-five pounder” in quite enough detail.

But Sandra had already dismissed that idea. If Mr Bubbles was right, they needed to burn the Dark Young, not make holes in it, and due to the Education Authority's interference, St Botolph's no longer stocked white phosphorus ammunition. The gun would be useless.

“Old Suzy.” said Sandra decisively.

Mary looked puzzled. “I don't think I'm allowed to drink gin.”

“You are wet sometimes, Mary. We shall make some Molotov cocktails, of course, and jolly well show that thing.”

They dashed inside the farmhouse. Under the huge Christmas tree in the dining room were several bottle-shaped parcels, all labelled 'With love from Mother' and all addressed 'To Mother'. It was a family tradition, and the way in which Sandra's mother ensured that she, at least, had a very merry Christmas.

“You unwrap them, Mary, and I'll make some fuses.” Sandra grabbed an old tablecloth and began tearing it into strips.

Mary dutifully ripped off the yards of badly-sellotaped wrapping paper. He frowned at the contents. Only 53% proof.

“I don't think this gin will burn well enough. We should soak the fuses in the gin, but fill the bottles with petrol. And maybe some washing-up liquid to make it stick more.”

Sandra grinned.

Mary always came through in the end. He was her favourite cousin.

“Good show. There's a can of petrol in the outhouse. Father's getting tough with the whitefly next year.”

In five minutes they had a bucket full of gin surplus to requirements, and four improvised petrol bombs.

“So,” said Sandra, taking two of the bombs and a box of matches. “We hurl our bottles at the Dark Young and then get out of the way.”

The dog, who had been listening intently, ran under the dining-room table.

“Not you, Bottles.” said Mary. “Silly dog. She means the gin and petrol ones.”

Outside, they could see the hideous writhing of the creature's tentacles as it limped its way into Upper Meadow. A stiffening breeze brought the stench of its body to them, and unholy shrieks issued from six or seven purple lipped mouths.

What the two plucky teenagers hadn't expected to see was Mr Bubbles, standing on top of the largest turnip clamp. Wrapped in mouldering horse blankets, his eyes and muzzle running with phlegm, he looked almost as appalling as the creature in the field.

“I say, Mr Bubbles. Do get back!” shouted Mary.

The pony turned his head.

“My turnips.” he said grimly.

The ghastly spawn of Shub-Niggurath, Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young, stared at the pony.

The pony stared back.

A few seconds passed, and then the creature changed direction. It began to head straight for the farmhouse. Either it didn't like the look of Mr Bubbles, or the fact they were both dripping mucus made the Dark Young feel a certain kinship with the ailing equine.

“We need to turn it away from the house!” shouted Sandra. “Mother wouldn't like me to

burn that down as well.”

They tried to divert it with the Remingtons, but without success. A couple of blasts from the shotguns made no difference, as before, and it seemed oblivious to their yelling. Sandra was about to risk using the petrol bombs, and hope that the creature fell the right way, when a brindled bundle shot out from behind Mary's legs.

“No, Bottles!” cried Mary.

But it seemed that the dog's deep chest harboured a mighty heart after all. It was also possible that Bottles was frightened out of his wits.

With a keening howl, he charged the Dark Young, dashing under those flailing tentacles and closing with it. At the last minute, the lurcher hauled himself up and, with a bravery which could only be born from sheer terror, cocked his leg.

A spray of nervous pee hit the Dark Young's wounded limb, and it shrieked. Twisting its lumpy body, it tried to reach for the dog with its tentacles, but Bottles was off again, running east - away from the farmhouse. And the Dark Young tried to follow.

“Good dog!” yelled Mary. He struck a match and lit the fuses, first his and then Sandra's.

The two cousins dashed closer, weaving about so that a stray tentacle didn't hit them. The Dark Young, confused by things coming at it rather than fleeing, lost the plot and thrashed violently in protest.

Whumpf! The first petrol bomb fell between its upper limbs and foamy fire spread down its side. Mary's second throw missed, but Sandra had won seven teddy-bears on the hook-a-duck at the last village fete. Both her throws hit the monstrous being dead on, and then its body was aflame. The added washing-up liquid seemed to affect its coating of discoloured mucus, accelerating the fire.

“Gosh!” said Mary, staggering back to a safe distance.

The bark-like surface of the Dark Young's body flared and crackled, and it tottered madly, shrieking. The stench of burning meat and wood was almost unbearable.

“I was at a barbecue like this once.” Mary coughed and held his nose.

At last the monstrosity's screeching voice fell silent, and with a final flail of its tentacles, it died. Assuming that it had ever been alive, in the normal sense.

A twenty foot inferno raged in the middle of the Upper Meadow, and the creature's unnatural corpse was beginning to fall apart. The wind fanned the flames and carried greasy fragments of Dark Young high into the air.

Bottles came panting back to Mary's side.

“What a good dog, yes you are.” said the delighted boy, scratching the dog's bottom. “I shall tell Mr Linseed Grant to give you a whole penguin for this.”

“They taste disgusting. Like chicken in diesel oil.” said Sandra.

But she had to admit that things had gone rather well, all things considered. In the distance, Mr Bubbles spat and staggered back to the stables. His turnips were safe, that was what really mattered.

“Coo-ee!”

They turned to see Sandra's mother standing at the farmhouse door with one arm round the bucket of discarded Old Suzy gin. The bucket appeared surprisingly light.

“How clever of you.” she said. “A festive bonfire, all on your own.”

She looked up as thick white flakes of charred Dark Young floated down.

“And look, my dears, it is snowing after all! Merry Christmas, everyone!”

Then she fell over.

“I think I might go to Auntie Marge's in Dunwich next year.” said Mary.

Woof, said Bottles.

THE END