

# SANDRA & THE SAUCER OF DOOM

by John Linwood Grant

## PART THE TWOETH

The expedition was lead by a reluctant Mr Bubbles. He wasn't reluctant to go into the darkening woods. The guides, however, chattered and whistled incessantly, demanding frequent stops for a slug of gin or to go wee-wees.

Whateley Wood was close to being a forest. It had trees which shouldn't be there, an unlikely number of sacred groves and sacrificial stones, and a lot of brambles. It also held Britain's only colony of whip-poor-wills, birds which in their native America were reputed to guide the souls of the dead.

As the motley group entered the woods, some of the birds called out in their haunting fashion, hopeful that they might soon have work to do. Most of them had chest infections, so it was not a pleasant sound.

"Mary-Sue, take your troop north and east, and check the fringes."

"Shore will, ma'am. Easy as shuckin' corn."

Sandra winced.

"Emily, you stick with us. Send the others south. Maybe they can intercept these little chaps before anything horrible happens."

Emily saluted.

"She has promise, that little girl." said Sandra.

Mr Bubbles muttered something rude, and began to force his way through the undergrowth. The undergrowth, faced with a somewhat psychotic pony who had muscles on his muscles, gave way with good grace.

Sandra had chosen the most dangerous route for the three of them. Her Remington pump-action shotgun was loaded, and she had rubbed herself and Emily with camphor. It wouldn't protect them at all, but some of the nightmares deep in Whately Wood were decidedly nifty.

This was the territory of Shub-Niggurath, the Black Goat with a Thousand Young. Not the actual monstrous and ancient evil Herself, but many of Her spawn and adherents. A visiting academic had suggested that the membrane of reality was so thin in certain pockets of the Wolds that almost anything could break through, even televangelists.

Emily pulled at Sandra's combat trousers.

"I founded a trail. An' it is slimy an' wettish."

"Good. Let's follow that."

Ivy and brambles gave way before Mr Bubbles' broad chest.

"Good horsey." said Emily.

"Please don't say that." Sandra caught the slightly psychotic gleam in one of the pony's eyes. He hated being called a horse.

There was a wet trail, as if someone had dragged a net full of jellyfish through the trees. It smelled of vanilla, as far as she could tell through the camphor. Much like Mr Sr.

"It's them, and--"

The nightjack which leapt down from an oak tree was as surprised as Sandra, though for different reasons. She hadn't expected the wiry creature to appear; it hadn't expected a shot-gun blast to take its head off. The three-eyed bristly lump rolled a few feet, leaving the rest of it the nightjack kicking at Emily's feet. Ever the opportunist, the freckle-faced nine year old hauled a fish-gutting knife from her waistband and put an end to the kicking.

“S good money, them's feet,” she said. It was true. Credulous Goths at festivals would pay for the clawed feet, even though they were never told the nature of the original owner.

“Scrawnies.” said Mr Bubbles, looking around. “Bad news.”

It was. The nightjacks would be getting bolder as the sun went down, and in numbers they could even give Mr Bubbles a fight. Sandra had Emily and the two aliens to worry about.

“Push on,” she said, making sure she had a cartridge in the chamber.

Whip-poor-wills shrieked and coughed excitedly, and various underpowered members of the wildlife community could be seen heading in the opposite direction. A wild boar urged its piglets past them, casting a wary glance at Mr Bubbles.

They relied on the pony in the gloom cast by towering hemlocks and an unpleasant stand of elm trees. He could smell the trail of the probe-buds. His hooves lashed out once to crush a nightjack, but he kept moving forward...

“Bugger.”

Mr Bubbles halted abruptly. Before them lay a space between the trees where only yellowed grass made a living. At least thirty nightjacks crouched or capered there, poking sharp sticks into a couple of dirt-encrusted blancmanges. One of the blancmanges was making a faint whimpery noise.

“Worse coming.” said the pony, his head high again.

Sandra listened. Beyond the small shrieks of the nightjacks, she could hear a lumbering crunch like trees being pushed aside.

“Emily – you and me grab the squishies. Mr Bubbles-”

“Yeah. I know.”

With an annoyed whinny, the pony threw himself into the clearing, kicking out in all directions. A nightjack left too many of its limbs on display, and they disappeared between the pony's large yellow teeth. He spat them out, and slammed one hoof through another one's forehead. The creature fell dead, but others clambered on his back as Sandra and the guide scooped up the probe-buds.

“This is no good,” said Sandra, managing to get off a few more rounds even with a dripping alien stuck to her chest. “Run.”

With cover from a violently bucking Mr Bubbles, the girls charged back the way they had come, Emily pausing every so often to ululate. Sandra welcomed the gesture, but none of the guides were equipped to deal with these things. The vicar called nightjacks “the unholy spawn of Satan's teats”, which she thought a bit rude.

Father had always said that they were the inevitable hybrids caused by Euclid forgetting what he was doing and Shub-Niggurath sending out foetid waves of her own insanity into the area. But he knew more about Great Old Ones than almost anyone.

“Iä! Shub-Niggurath!” shrieked one of the nightjacks, as if reading her thoughts.

“An' the same to you, wiv nob's on.” Emily stuck her knife in the creature's head. Sandra managed one more shot, but there was no way that she could reload. The alien was squirming in her arms now. Poor thing, she thought, it must be very confused.

“An' where's...” Emily gasped as they fled, “Where's the horsey goned?”

“Pony,” said Sandra. “He'll be coming.”

She felt bad, knowing that her best friend must be beleaguered by nightjacks behind her. He would make it. Mr Bubbles always did.

Mary-Sue appeared from the bushes, took one look and whistled her troop on. The four guides fell on a nightjack ahead of its fellows and managed to pin it down. A wet gurgle announced that there would be plenty more feet for sale at the next festival.

The trees were thinning out. Sandra could see Cooper's Field in the dusk, looking more inviting than usual.

The two girls ended up on their knees next to the spaceship, gasping for breath.

Sr, still in the rounded entrance, opened multiple ocular patches in surprise.

<Horrible horrible horrible,> moaned Yr, the larger probe-bud, sliding out of Sandra's grip.

<Inside, quickly.> Sr slid from the entrance, letting the probe-buds flow into the vanilla-scented darkness within.

“Do you... do you have weapons?” Sandra took a deep breath. “Defences, anything like that?”

“No. We are a peaceful race. When we're not at war with anyone.” he added, feeling he ought to be truthful under the circumstances.

“You'd better leave then, get out of here. More trouble's coming.”

She glanced at Emily, who was looking for a suitable rock for throwing at nightjacks. You couldn't fault the local Girl Guides. Not on endeavour and potential for violence, anyway. She reloaded the Remington.

“I can't impulse in this state.” The alien was shuddering with fear.

“Then get inside with your buds and lock the door.”

The guides emerged from the woods in ones and twos, bedraggled and yelling to each other. Sandra fired at a movement in the undergrowth, and waved the gun barrel to pull the guides back. Lucy Smuthers, a bright girl who was not normally allowed matches, had brought a home-made petrol bomb and was lighting the fuse.

“To the left, Lucy!” Sandra shouted.

Two nightjacks went up in a flare of burning fuel, which provided enough light for Sandra to see Mr Bubbles break from the trees, a horde of hissing creatures not far behind. The pony was scratched, torn and mad. He reared, slamming his iron-shod hooves into the mass of nightjacks, and then turned to head for open ground again.

Could the nightjacks damage the alien craft? She didn't know. They could certainly damage her and the guides.

“We is in trubble,” said Emily, weighing a stone in each hand. “An' them stinkies is still comin'.”

The guides fell back automatically to gather round Sandra and Mr Bubbles.

“Tactics, boy?”

Mr Bubbles snorted, his blood-stained hooves trampling the marshgrass.

“Kill them,” he bellowed. “Kill them all!”

Oh dear, thought Sandra. He was in one of his moods.

It was almost dark, and they could see nightjacks creeping from the woods. They hissed to each other, focussed on the girls gathered on either side of the pony.

“Excuse me.”

Sandra looked down.

“Mr Sr? I told you to lock yourself in the ship!”

The jelloid alien had changed colour, and he was now the colour of the broccoli smoothies which Mother made for the hens.

“We should all move backwards,” said Sr. “Not too quickly, please. They need to be out in the open, away from these woods.”

It was no worse a suggestion than anything Sandra had, but hardly solved the problem.

“But why-”

“Please?”

She could hear the whip-poor-wills having fits in Whateley Wood, over-excited by the thought of a massacre. They were sweet little birds, but they took their job seriously.

“Alright.”

Whispering instructions to the guides, they backed away, Mr Bubbles grumbling.

“You are not to charge them on your own,” said Sandra. “If we have to attack, we do it together, right? Mr Sr has a plan. I think.”

A derisive snort, but the pony took a few more steps back. The nightjacks hissed and jeered, capering on to Cooper's Field. They had never eaten a Girl Guide, but clearly saw the possibilities tonight. Only twenty yards separated them from their dinners...

“An' I weed myself.” said Emily, sounding less enthusiastic than usual.

Sandra took her hand.

"We won't let them get you, darling. Mr Bubbles will-"

Light, blinding light, flooded Cooper's Field. Blinking, Sandra looked to the alien ship. It wasn't that. Some of the guides squeaked in surprise. From one side of them came a deep grinding noise, machinery waking from its slumber.

"I am an impulser." said Sr, wobbling back and forth. "I make thing move and work."

Old Aggie's combine harvester rolled forward, its floodlights trained on the nightjacks. Animals at heart, however disgustingly re-arranged by monstrous forces, the creatures stared at the lights, rabbits caught in the beam of a poacher's torch. They froze, out in the open and now potential meat for a deeply inedible pie.

Mr Bubbles gave a wild neigh, and the guides readied their weapons, but there was no need. The combine harvester was gathering speed, more speed than it had ever had in its life. Gears which had never worked meshed faultlessly, and the great blades whirred. Down Cooper's Field it came, deafening the girls, cutting through gorse and marshgrass, a grim reaper which didn't need to borrow a scythe...

The result was almost unpleasant. Even Mary-Sue halted her American profanities as Old Aggie's combine rolled into and over the paralysed nightjacks. With shrills cries and eldritch curses, the nightjacks disappeared inside the machine, a process which sprayed blood across the field.

Sandra, somewhat shocked, watched as spidery limbs went everywhere, most of them without a body attached any more.

"Like it," said Mr Bubbles.

The guides began to cheer, and it took some effort to stop them pursuing the few surviving nightjacks back into the trees. Whateley Wood was awake, and was best left to its own device, this night at least.

"Gee-whillickers, we shore whooped their asses!" cried Mary-Sue.

"Yes, dear." Sandra counted heads, relieved that they still have everyone with them. The field stank of nightjack, a cross between rotting sheep and cheap vinegar.

"I am an impulser." Sr was flowing around Sandra's feet in a motion which was surely triumphant.

"You certainly are. And a very good one."

There were things to think of. The guides were scouring the field for bloody keepsakes and anything still saleable; Mr Bubbles, caught between exhaustion and bloodlust, was trotting up and down the field kicking things.

"What will you do now, Mr Sr?"

He had already faded back to his normal cardboard colour.

"We leave. Yr and Te do not wish to scout anything else. I do not think that they want to be probe-buds any more, somehow. I d not think any of us will be coming to your planet again, either."

Sandra nodded. "I don't think the whole planet's like this. I told you, the Wolds are a bit different."

"Different." Sr wobbled. "An interesting use of the word."

He extended a portion of his plasm. Sandra took hold and shook it gently.

"Well," she said. "Nice to have met you."

The alien's ocular patches slid round, taking in the sight of Mr Bubbles, the Girl Guides dismembering nightjacks and the gore-spattered combine harvester.

"Um, yes."

As she watched the aliens' craft disappear behind its cloaking shields, rising into the night sky, Mr Bubbles trotted to her side.

"Bored now," he said. "What's happening?"

Sandra glanced to her own scouting party. Emily was almost asleep with her back to the harvester, clutching a bag of nightjack feet like a bloodied teddy-bear. Sandra looked up, but the spaceship had disappeared.

"Everybody," she said with relief, "Is going home."

**END**